

The Sovereignty of God

By Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 pp 441-442

Sovereignty is not a property of the divine nature, but a prerogative arising out of the perfections of the Supreme Being. If God be a Spirit, and therefore a person, infinite, eternal, and immutable in his being and perfections, the Creator and Preserver of the universe, He is of right its absolute sovereign. Infinite wisdom, goodness, and power, with the right of possession, which belongs to God in all his creatures, are the immutable foundation of his dominion. "Our God is in the heavens; He hath done whatsoever He pleased." (Ps. cxv. 8.) "All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan. iv. 35.) "All that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine." (1 Chron. xxix. 11.) "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." (Ps. xxiv. 1.) "Thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all." (1 Chron. xxix. 11.) "Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine." (Ez. xviii. 4.) "Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioned it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?" (Is. xlv. 9.) "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" (Matt. xx. 15.) He "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." (Eph. i. 11.) "Of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen." (Rom. xi. 36.)

From these and similar passages of Scriptures it is plain, (1.) That the sovereignty of God is universal. It extends over all his creatures from the highest to the lowest. (2.) That it is absolute. There is no limit to be placed to his authority. He doeth his pleasure in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. (3.) It is immutable. It can neither be ignored nor rejected. It binds all creatures, as inexorably as physical laws bind the material universe.

This sovereignty is exercised, (1.) In establishing the laws, physical and moral, by which all creatures are to be governed. (2.) In determining the nature and powers of the different orders of created beings, and in assigning each its appropriate sphere. (3.) In appointing to each individual his position and lot. It is the Lord who fixes the bounds of our habitation. Our times are 441in his hands. He determines when, where, and under what circumstances each individual of our race is to be born, live, and die. Nations, no less than individuals, are thus in the hands of God, who assigns them their heritage in the earth, and controls their destiny. (4.) God is no less sovereign in the distribution of his favours. He does what He wills with his own. He gives to some riches, to others, honour; to others, health; while others are poor, unknown, or the victims of disease. To some, the light of the gospel is sent; others are left in darkness. Some are brought through faith unto salvation; others perish in unbelief. To the question, Why is this? the only answer is that given by our Lord. "Even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in thy sight."

Although this sovereignty is thus universal and absolute, it is the sovereignty of wisdom, holiness, and love. The authority of God is limited by nothing out of Himself, but it is controlled, in all its manifestations, by his infinite perfections. If a man is free and exalted, in proportion as he is governed by enlightened reason and a pure conscience, so is he supremely blessed who cheerfully submits to be governed by the infinite reason and holiness of God. This sovereignty of God is the ground of peace and confidence to all his people. They rejoice that the Lord God omnipotent reigneth; that neither necessity, nor chance, nor the folly of man, nor the malice of Satan controls the sequence of events and all their issues. Infinite wisdom, love, and power, belong to Him, our great God and Saviour, into whose hands all power in heaven and earth has been committed.

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A. Over Nature and Weather

Psalms 104; 105:16; 135:7; 147:7-20; 148; Job 9:5-10; 26:5-14; 37:1-24; 38:8-38; Mark 4:39,41. Other texts:

"It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, and brings out the wind from His storehouses" (Jer. 10:12-13).

"Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? Or can the heavens grant showers? Is it not Thou, O Lord our God? Therefore we hope in Thee, for Thou art the one who hast done all these things" (Jer. 14:22).

"And furthermore [declares the Lord], I withheld the rain from you while there were still three months until harvest. Then I would send rain on one city and on another city I would not send rain; one part would be rained on, while the part not rained on would dry up" (Amos 4:7).

B. Over Kings and Nations

Daniel 1:2 (cf. Jer. 25:1-12; Isa. 10:5-14)

"the Lord gave" . . . Ultimately it was neither the sin and weakness of Jehoiakim nor the brilliance and strength of Nebuchadnezzar, not even the impotence or inactivity of God, but the sovereign good pleasure of Yahweh that determined the historical outcome (cf. Dan. 2:20-23). The Israelites "are not mere pawns on a political and geographical chessboard. To be in the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is not to be out of the control of God" (Goldingay, 22).

See also Daniel 2:37-38; 4:25,30,32; 5:18,20,21; Isaiah 10:5-13; 40:23-24

C. Over People and their Hearts

Gen. 20:6; Prov. 21:1; 16:9; Exodus 3:21-22; 12:35-36; 34:23-24; Deut. 2:30; Joshua 11:20; Judges 7:2-3,22; 1 Sam. 14:6,15,20; 2 Sam. 17:14; 1 Kings 12:15; 20:28-29; 2 Chron. 13:14-16; Ezra 1:1,5; 6:22; 7:27; Isa. 45:4-5; Acts 4:27-28; 2 Cor. 8:16-17; Rev. 17:17.

D. Over the Closing and Opening of the Womb

Gen. 16:2; 29:31; 1 Sam. 1:5; Judges 13:3.

E. Over Everything (including evil) in General

Genesis 50:20 (cf. Ps. 105:17); Exodus 4:11 (disease and disability); Job 2:10 (cf. James 5:11); 42:2; Ps. 115:3; Prov. 16:33; 21:31; Isa. 45:7 (virtually all of Isa. 42-48); Lam. 3:37-38; Daniel 4:32,35; Amos 3:6; Matthew 10:29-31; Acts 4:27-28; Eph. 1:11; 2 Cor. 12:7.

F. *Over Life and Death*

Deut. 32:39; 2 Samuel 12:15; James 4:14-15; 1 Samuel 2:6-7.

G. *Over Destructive Animals*

When the Assyrians populated Samaria with foreigners, *2 Kings 17:25* says, "Therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them."

And in *Daniel 6:22*, Daniel says to the king, "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths." Other Scriptures speak of God commanding birds and bears and donkeys and large fish to do his bidding. Which means that all calamities that are owing to animal life are ultimately in the control of God. He can see a pit bull break loose from his chain and attack a child; and he could, with one word, command that its mouth be shut. Similarly he controls the invisible animal and plant life that wreaks havoc in the world: bacteria and viruses and parasites and thousands of microscopic beings that destroy health and life. If God can shut the mouth of a ravenous lion, then he can shut the mouth of a malaria-carrying mosquito and nullify every other animal that kills.

H. *Divine Sovereignty in Proverbs*

1. *over all our actions and words* (16:1-3,9) - For all its emphasis on common sense, Proverbs exalts faith above wisdom; and for all its emphasis on prudence, man's ways are determined by divine providence.

Note esp. vv. 2,9. "God holds an even balance and critically tests the genuineness of the impulses which motivated the deed. Accordingly, man should not be guided by his own judgment but apply the criterion, how will it be judged by God?" (Cohen, 103).

In v. 3, "works" refers not to those already performed, but "projected actions" or "plans", as in vv. 1-2. See 19:21. "To confide one's projects to Yahweh implies an element of resignation to Yahweh's will, a willingness to give up anything which clashes with Yahweh's resolve and so a quest for attunement and harmony. This is the way for man to proceed if he wishes to ensure that his plans will not be nullified by Yahweh's veto and so fail of implementation" (McKane, 497).

As for v. 9, "a man may plan his road to the last detail, but he cannot implement his planning unless it coincides with Yahweh's plan for him. He is deluded if he supposes that he has unfettered control and can impose his will on every situation without limitation in order to make his plan a reality, for it is Yahweh who orders his steps" (McKane, 495-96).

2. *over the destiny of the wicked* (16:4) - There are no loose ends in God's providential rule of the world: even the wicked are under his oversight. Note well: there is a difference between

making a person to condemn him/her, and appointing a person to condemnation for his/her wickedness. God has appointed all things and all people to their proper end that he might receive all the glory.

3. *over the casting of the lot* (16:33) - The casting of lots was often used in the OT to determine God's will. See Lev. 16:7-10,21,22; Joshua 7:14 (cf. 1 Sam. 14:42); 14:2; 18:6; 1 Chron. 6:54ff.; 25:7,8; 26:13ff; Neh. 10:34ff. See also Matt. 27:35; Acts 1:26. Although the decision is reached by a seemingly arbitrary process, God is in absolute control. As someone said, "Man throws the dice, but God makes the spots turn up!"

4. *over the heart of the king* (21:1) - In much the same way that an irrigator might cut a watercourse in any direction he desires, so God sways the heart of a king, even an unbelieving one. See Gen. 20:6; Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:16; 10:1-2; 14:4-5; Isaiah 10:5-19; 45:1-13; Ezra 1:1,5 (Cyrus, king of Persia); Jer. 25:3-14; Hab. 1:5-11; Acts 4:25-28; Rev. 17:16-17.

5. *over the battle and its outcome* (21:30-31) - See also Ps. 20:7; 33:13-17; Isa. 31:1-3.

6. *over our souls* (24:12c; 18:10; 30:5b)

This is why Charles Spurgeon, the London pastor from 100 years ago said,

"I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes - that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens - that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence - the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche."

When Spurgeon was challenged that this is nothing but fatalism and stoicism, he replied,

"What is fate? Fate is this - *Whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains, must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some great end. Fate does not say that. . . . There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man."

Is God the Author of Sin?

Jonathan Edwards answers, "If by 'the author of sin,' be meant the sinner, the agent, or the actor of sin, or the *doer* of a wicked thing . . . it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin." But, he argues, willing that sin exist in the world is not the same as sinning. God does not commit sin in willing that there be sin. God has established a world in which sin will indeed necessarily come to pass by God's permission, but not by his "positive agency."

God is, Edwards says, "the permitter . . . of sin; and at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted . . . will most certainly and infallibly follow."

He uses the analogy of the way the sun brings about light and warmth by its essential nature, but brings about dark and cold by dropping below the horizon. "If the sun were the proper cause of cold and darkness," he says, "it would be the fountain of these things, as it is the fountain of light and heat: and then something might be argued from the nature of cold and darkness, to a likeness of nature in the sun." In other words, "sin is not the fruit of any positive agency or influence of the most High, but on the contrary, arises from the withholding of his action and energy, and under certain circumstances, necessarily follows on the want of his influence."

Thus in one sense God wills that what he hates come to pass, as well as what he loves. Edwards says,

"God may hate a thing as it is in itself, and considered simply as evil, and yet . . . it may be his will it should come to pass, considering all consequences. . . . God doesn't will sin as sin or for the sake of anything evil; though it be his pleasure so to order things, that he permitting, sin will come to pass; for the sake of the great good that by his disposal shall be the consequence. His willing to order things so that evil should come to pass, for the sake of the contrary good, is no argument that he doesn't hate evil, as evil: and if so, then it is no reason why he may not reasonably forbid evil as evil, and punish it as such."

Why Does God Ordain that there Be Evil?

It is evident from what has been said that it is not because he delights in evil as evil. Rather he "wills that evil come to pass . . . that good may come of it." What good? And how does the existence of evil serve this good end? Here is Edwards' stunning answer:

"It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . ."

Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.

If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . .

So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect.'