

“For I know that the Lord is great and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.” —Psalm 135:5–6 (NASB)

In the sphere of social relations, there are few problems as deep-rooted and widespread as rebellion. Ask any parent to identify the greatest challenge he or she faces in the family, the most basic institution of humanity, and the answer most likely will point to the rebellion of the children. Ever since the original sin of Adam, Adam’s descendants have exhibited the reflex of rebellion to any and every expression of external authority.

At the same time, Lord Acton’s adage holds true: “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The greatest atrocities throughout history, claiming the lives of countless millions, happened because of the human abuse of authority. It is the nature of sinners to resist, but it is also the nature of sinners to domineer (Matthew 20:25). The history of man is a never-ending cycle of rebellion, tyranny, and rebellion.

This loathing of authority—due both to the innate propensity to rebel and to experiences of cruelty at the hands of human dictators—is not limited to the sphere of human existence. It is fundamental characteristic in man’s relationship to God. Apart from the transforming power of regeneration, man is nothing more than a “son of disobedience” (Eph 2:2). He is “alienated” from God and “hostile in mind” (Col 1:21). He is an “enemy” in need of reconciliation (Rom 5:10). There is within the sinner an inherent awareness that for God to be God must mean He is absolutely sovereign, but there is a patent unwillingness to submit to this reality. Man would sooner spend eternity in the fires of hell than willingly bend the knee in submission to his Creator.

It is only natural, then, that one of the perfections of God that would incite the greatest scorn from unbelievers would be that of God’s sovereignty. But not even regenerate believers are above this fray. Within many Christian circles the doctrine of God’s sovereignty remains a contentious issue. But such uneasiness with this attribute is not due to God’s abuse of power nor to a lack of evidence for it in His revelation. It originates from the vestiges of Adam’s rebellious flesh carried into the Christian life by the believer. We are still susceptible to the temptation to assert personal freedom at the expense of God’s sovereignty. We even believe it is “virtuous” for God to limit His own authority so that we can enjoy our own liberty. The solution to such folly is to turn a deaf ear to the flesh and listen instead to the Scriptures. In this revelation we see that God’s sovereignty is not some stifling straight jacket. It is for us our very source of hope and security.

I. Definition of “Divine Sovereignty”

A. What *sovereignty* means.

The sovereignty of God refers to His unhindered and absolute control over all that He has made.

Jerry Bridges (*Trusting God*, 36) defines God’s sovereignty as **“His absolute independence to do as He pleases and His absolute control over the actions of all His creatures. No creature, person, or empire can either thwart His will or act outside the bounds of His will.”** A. W. Pink (*Attributes of God*, 49) states it more explicitly: “Being infinitely elevated above the highest creature, He is the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth. Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. . . . Divine sovereignty means that God is God in fact, as well as in name, that He is on the throne of the universe, directing all things, working all things ‘after the counsel of His own will’ (Eph 1: 11).”

Thus, to affirm God’s sovereignty is to affirm that He possess the right and the capacity to ordain, create, sustain, and direct all things **according to His good pleasure**. This sovereignty is necessary considering His *aseity* (He is ultimately free), His *omnipotence* (His power is unlimited), and His *wisdom* (He knows both what is best and how to achieve it).

In fact, **God's sovereignty is necessary in light of all that He is.** As Creator, He *owns* creation and therefore can do with it as He pleases. As omnipotent, He *is able* to rule over all of creation without exhausting His power. As omnipresent, He *never rules from afar*—as one who is distant. As all-wise, He *knows exactly* what ends and means are best. As self-sufficient, His authority *is not derived or contingent*. As righteous, He *rules blamelessly*, and no accusation of injustice or abuse of power can stand. As omni-benevolent, His rule *benefits* creation. As immutable, He *rules consistently and eternally*, never abdicating His throne or waning in interest. As gracious, His rule *gives* what is not deserved—apart from merit.

This sovereignty is explicit even in **the names ascribed to Him** in Scripture. For example, He is “the king of glory” and “Yahweh of hosts” (Psalm 24:10); “the Most High over all the earth” (Psalm 83:18); “the Mighty One of Israel” (Isaiah 1:24); “the King eternal” (1 Timothy 1:17); “the only Sovereign” and “the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:16–17); and “the Almighty” (Revelation 15:3). Only with blurred vision can one look at these titles and suggest that God is somehow limited in His sovereignty.

B. What *sovereignty* does not mean.

Some find it acceptable to acknowledge that God is all-powerful but reject the idea that His absolute power necessitates His absolute *exercise* of that power (i.e., sovereignty). Theological deviations therefore begin not in a denial of God's omnipotence, but in a restriction of God's ability and right to exercise that omnipotence. Three movements stand out in this regard:

- **Deism** redefines God's sovereignty by limiting it to the act of creation. It views the current world as operating apart from God's direct control and instead according to impersonal “fixed laws.”
- **Libertarianism**, reflected in such movements as “Open Theism,” redefines God's sovereignty by limiting it to the general details of history but excluding it from the realm of human activity. Man's freedom must be protected at all costs. God merely responds to man's choices by acting in ways that do not intrude upon his freedom to choose and live his life as he pleases.
- **Arminianism** redefines God's sovereignty by extending it to cover everything except man's moral choices. As an act of grace God has freely surrendered control over that aspect of creation. It is argued that God still maintains His status as all-sovereign, because it was an act of His own sovereignty to limit Himself and thereby show grace to His creatures by not interfering with their freedom to choose.

To these and other attacks on God's sovereignty, the response of Horatius Bonar (*God's Way of Peace*, 150) is appropriate:

You are perplexed by the doctrine of God's sovereignty and election. I wonder that any man believing in a God should be perplexed by these. For if there be a God, a King, eternal, immortal, and invisible, He cannot but be sovereign—and He cannot but do according to His own will and choose according to His own purpose. You may dislike these doctrines, but you can only get quit of them by denying altogether the existence of an infinitely wise, glorious, and powerful Being. God would not be God were He not thus absolutely sovereign in His present doings and His eternal prearrangements.

II. Biblical Testimony to God's Sovereignty

God's perfection of sovereignty is one of the most explicitly described perfections in all of Scripture. As Charnock states, “God is sovereign Lord and King, and exercises a dominion over the whole world, both heaven and earth. This is so clear, that nothing is more spoken of in Scripture” (*Existence and Attributes of God*, 2.363). Testimony to this perfection can be arranged in four categories:

- A. **Matchless Sovereignty.** God is not just sovereign—He is incomparably so. All other expressions of authority are inferior—derived from Him and subservient to Him. The biblical writers testify to this by frequently drawing a connection between God's incomparability and the nature of His absolute control.

- Deuteronomy 4:39; 32:29; Psalm 95:3–5; 135:5–6; Isaiah 46:8–9; Jeremiah 10:7

B. **Comprehensive Sovereignty.** It is expressed in everything from God's accomplishment of the purpose for which He created the universe to His orchestration of the smallest details of our daily existence. The biblical writers never find it necessary to put a boundary on either its breadth or the depth.

- 1 Samuel 2:6–10; 1 Chronicles 29:11–12; Job 1:20–21; 2:9–10; Psalm 22:28; 103:19; 135:5–7; Proverbs 16:9; 16:33; 20:24; Isaiah 45:5–7, 23; 64:8; Matthew 28:18; Romans 8:28; 9:18–21; Philippians 2:9–11

This comprehensive sovereignty can be further studied in *four specific realms*:

- 1) God's sovereignty over *the natural world* (e.g., Psalm 33:6–9; 50:10–12; Matthew 8:23–26; 10:29; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3).
- 2) God's sovereignty over *the nations* (e.g., Psalm 2; Proverbs 21:1; Isaiah 40:15; Jeremiah 18:6; Daniel 2:21; 4:17, 30–32, 35; John 19:11; Romans 13:1–2).
- 3) God's sovereignty over *the spiritual world* (e.g., Job 1–2; Matthew 4:10–11; 8:28–34; Ephesians 1:19–23; Colossians 1:15–17).
- 4) God's sovereignty over *the salvation of sinners* (e.g., John 1:12–13; 3:5–8; 17:1–2; Romans 9:15–16; Ephesians 1:11–12; Philippians 2:12–13; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; James 1:18).

C. **Irresistible Sovereignty.** Despite the resistance attempted by sinful creatures, God never experiences failure or frustration in exercising His control. He always does what He pleases.

- Deuteronomy 32:39; 2 Chronicles 20:6; Job 42:2; Psalm 115:2–3 ; 135:5–6; Proverbs 21:1; Isaiah 10:15–16; 43:13; 46:8–9; Daniel 4:35; Revelation 3:7.

D. **Immutable Sovereignty.** God's sovereignty does not wax or wane; nor does He surrender it temporarily in space and time to His creation. It remains perfect and absolute for all eternity.

- Psalm 33:10–11; 66:7; 93:1–2; Proverbs 19:21; Ecclesiastes 3:14; Isaiah 14:24; Ephesians 3:10–11; Hebrews 6:17–18.

"Not the tiniest molecule, the fiercest tornado, or the wisest thought is outside the control of God. He does what pleases Him and nothing and no one can throw a wrench into His divine plan."

—Joel Beeke and Brian Cosby, *None Else*, 27

"There are no maverick molecules in the universe." —R. C. Sproul

III. What Sovereignty Demands from Us

With such a heavy emphasis on His sovereignty on the pages of Scripture, it is obvious that God intends for this doctrine to occupy a central part in our thinking:

A. **Eradicate all thoughts of resistance.** It is in our old flesh to resist this perfection of God. In fact, we must assume that many of our struggles in the Christian life arise from our old propensity to resist God's authority. As Jerry Bridges acknowledges, "It seems we will allow God to be anywhere except upon His throne ruling His universe according to His good pleasure and His Sovereign will" (*Trusting God*, 36). This is no minor problem. Resistance to God's sovereignty is sin which we must fight with all seriousness.

- Isaiah 45:9–10; Romans 9:20–21

B. **Associate God's sovereignty with His perfection.** God's sovereignty is not something to shy away from, even though many Christians find it controversial. It is an expression of God's perfection—essential to His nature as God. After all, a God who is not ultimately sovereign, who must surrender His divine authority either due to external compulsion or by self-imposed limitations, is no perfect God—certainly one not worthy of all worship. Instead, as the psalmists so regularly do, ascribe to the Lord glory and honor for His absolute control over all things. It is not something to be downplayed, but something to be praised!

- 1 Chronicles 29:10 – 12; Psalm 97:1; 96:9–10; 103:19–22

C. **Rest in His promises and His providences.** God's *promises* are those expressions of goodness and grace that He has pronounced to the needy. He makes them on the basis of His own character, and because He is absolutely sovereign, there is no possibility that such promises will fall short. God's *providences* are His direct involvement in the smallest circumstances of your life, controlling every single detail—even the most painful ones—for your good.

- Promises: **Hebrews 6:17–18**; providences: **Romans 8:28**

Charles Spurgeon explains this so well:

There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought to more earnestly contend to than the doctrine of their Master over all creation—the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands—the throne of God and His right to sit upon that throne . . . for it is God upon the throne whom we trust.

D. **Resist turning God's sovereignty into license.** Many wrongly conclude that if God is sovereign, the Christian is free to throw caution into the wind, to live recklessly, to ignore planning, to stop evangelizing, to give up on prayer, and so on. This is earthly logic. Instead, in the same way that we accept the Bible's testimony regarding God's absolute control, we must accept the Bible's testimony regarding man's responsibility. How those two realities—God's absolute control and man's full responsibility—harmonize may be difficult to understand, or even beyond our capacity to understand. But such a paradox never justifies either the rejection of the doctrine of God's sovereignty or the rejection of full human responsibility.

- **Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7**

John MacArthur summarizes this well: "Although God controls by divine decree and sovereign power everything that goes on in the world according to His own purposes, that does not remove one iota of culpability from those who do evil."

For Further Study

Memorize: Psalm 135:5–6; Romans 8:28

Sing: "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" (*Hymns of Grace* #26); "This Is My Father's World" (*Hymns of Grace* #31)

Pray: Praise God for His absolute sovereignty over all of His creation. Confess your tendency to resist such sovereignty—particularly as you experience it in the day-to-day circumstances of life. Ask God to give you greater joy in resting in His sovereign plan for your life and greater faith in appropriating His promises.

Recommended Reading: *Trusting God*, by Jerry Bridges; *The Sovereignty of God*, by A. W. Pink

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God's "sovereignty."
- 2) Why is it that we have such a hard time with this attribute? Even though we might confess belief in God's absolute sovereignty, where might we come close to denying or resisting it in practice?
- 3) Prayerfully examine your own life. What are the circumstances where you are prone to complain and question God's control of your life? How does this study help you mortify such complaints?
- 4) Explain how the doctrine of God's sovereignty deepens your adoration for God.
- 5) Meditate on Romans 8:28. Share several concrete ways this promise of God gives you comfort.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: November 30 – Fall Fellowship (no meeting on Wednesday, November 23)