



The Sovereignty of God and the Will of Man

*I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give
to no other, nor my praise to carved idols
(Isa. 42:8).*

Patrick J. Griffiths

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An Introduction

Proverbs contrasts two forms of reliance. Divine reliance or human reliance. Divine reliance says, "Trust in the LORD." Human reliance says, "You can figure this out."

First, I would call our attention to Proverbs 3:5-8.

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

⁸ It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.

The intent of the text is to call us to trust or lean or acknowledge God in our hearts **because He is sovereign** and, in His sovereignty, He controls, causes, and influences all of life for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.

Thus, because God is sovereign, we can rest in Him, we can trust Him, and we can lean into Him knowing He is and will guide our paths.

Perhaps we should begin with a definition of what it means to be sovereign. **By sovereignty it is meant "that God as the Creator of all things visible and invisible, and thus the owner of all things, has an absolute right to rule over all things."**

Let us note three thoughts from this initial passage.

We are quite familiar with verses 5 and 6, but I don't think we naturally tie them to verses 7 and 8. The ideas of "trust, acknowledge, and fear," are working synonyms. They are all saying the same thing. Equally, the ideas of "do not lean, be not wise, and turn away from," are working synonyms. There is a

positive, "Trust." And a negative, "Do not." As a consequence, you have two parallel ideas, "He will make straight and it will be healing to your flesh...."

In Proverbs, trusting God is to believe His Word in shaping your worldview and decision making. This is in contrast to your own wisdom or a wisdom that is absent of God's wisdom. The consequence of rejecting God's instruction is catastrophic.

Second, the application of this passage to our current world should be apparent. There is information being dispensed and an interpretation taking place that sits outside of God's wisdom and instruction. That reading of the "world" is catastrophic and will not bring healing or refreshment. The other side of this process is to TRUST GOD, To ACKNOWLEDGE HIM, and FEAR THE LORD. All three say the same thing. Sometimes life does not afford us answers to our questions. It does not "interpret" our moments. But there is one who does understand, who does know, and who can bring healing and refreshment. This only happens when we TRUST HIM.

Finally, in reading this passage and considering our moments, the question isn't, "Can I trust Him?" but rather, "Will I trust Him?" That is where I land each and every day. "Will I trust Him?" This action isn't a "one and done," but rather a walk of faith. Each and every day I affirm, I confess, "Lord, I believe."

In a study of this proportion, my intent is not to divide us or offend you (Prov. 18:19). It is possible to generate a lot of heat, but end up with no fire. Although we will not all agree on the issue of sovereignty, let us not divide over it.

Perhaps we like to think we can strike a balance between two positions. I would suggest to you, however, "there is nothing in the middle but yellow stripes and dead armadillos."¹

In the study of Scripture, we are not neutral. We have bias. My "sails" are set in a particular direction; thus, my conclusions will be colored by my presuppositions. As "balanced" as I hope to be, I will fail. Why? Because my past experiences and present level of

knowledge form presuppositions that will color my process and conclusions.

Yet, in all of this, let us not forget the primary intent of Scripture. It invites us to Trust in the LORD. Again, not can we, but will we, is the question. So, as you read this material, work to enjoy resting in a God who is in control.

¹ In 1998, Jim Hightower wrote a short book entitled, "**There's Nothing in the Middle of the Road but Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos: A Work of Political Subversion.**" James Allen Hightower is an American syndicated columnist, progressive political activist, and author. From 1983 to 1991 he served as the elected commissioner of the Texas Department of Agriculture.

1

The Sovereignty of God and the Will of Man

I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols (Isa. 42:8)

The sovereignty of God is an absolute that all evangelical Christians would claim as Biblical truth. And yet, many disagree on how extensive that rule is. How do we reconcile sovereignty with the problem of evil? Or man's "free" will? How can we say God is love and yet, He sovereignty wills some to eternal damnation? We want God to be "fair" but our experiences often tell us otherwise. How do these issues affect the way we view sovereignty? These are hard questions without easy answers. And yet, God has revealed enough of Himself to us to communicate His all-encompassing sovereignty despite the apparent contradictions with our experiences. What follows are eight observations that form my core beliefs regarding the sovereignty of God.

1. Jonathan Edwards speaks of the sovereignty of God as a "most delightful doctrine." I must concur. I find no greater joy than to believe that God's predetermined will is being flawlessly executed through that which He alone has created.
2. There has never been a point in time when a profession in God's sovereignty lacks flesh and blood in the mind and life of His people. There can be little doubt that human autonomy with the rise of humanism and self-worth has caused us to idolize the individual. In such thinking, "No matter what the cost, man's 'freedom' must be maintained." Theologically and practically, such a thought has too great of a price tag.

3. Many would claim to believe in the absolute sovereignty of God, but place the will or responsibility of man as something that is equally true, thus equally authoritative. Though I affirm both ideas as true, I do not place them on the same level. Man's will is an expression of God's sovereignty. I will seek to unpack the will of man in another point.
4. God's sovereignty is absolute. Nothing falls outside of His control. Such a control on His part can be either direct or indirect (secondary causation). It can be supernatural (miraculous) or providential (natural laws). Regardless as to how one might explain it, God rules in every facet of what He has created. Nothing escapes His oversight and purpose.
5. Often, I hear charges that considering God's sovereignty as absolute places too much emphasis on the control of God. Such an accusation implies that there are areas that God is not controlling. Some will argue that God in His wisdom has delegated away some realms of His creation that He will not directly or indirectly control. I find such a thought repugnant.
6. Such a theology must permeate into the area of evil. The problem with evil is not that it exists, but that God is sovereign in its existence and expression. Though the Scripture speaks of God decreeing and designing evil's existence and expression, it does not make Him culpable or accountable. The very character of God prohibits Him from being either culpable or accountable.
7. Charges of being unfair or unjust have no basis before God. God may do as He wishes with what is His and when He acts it is always right. Such actions, as would constitute our worst nightmare, are a part of His eternally decreed will. Behind all such actions and events stands God.
8. God is loving, merciful, and gracious no matter what happens. Romans 11:36 assures me that all things are working together in such a way that God will be glorified and, in His glorification, there is good to humanity.

The above statements have hopefully stimulated your thinking regarding the absolute sovereignty of God. The articles that follow will help unpack some of these ideas further. Enjoy the journey.

2

Ten Reasons Why I Believe the Control of God is All Invasive and Inclusive

“The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these” (Isa. 45:7).

Of all the attributes that God has revealed of Himself to man, few are as comforting for His children to meditate on as His absolute sovereignty. Does the way seem hard? God is in control. Do circumstances seem overwhelming? God is still in control. Do the unjust thrive while the righteous stagger under a heavy load of cares? Still, God is in control. God is good, and there is nothing that can frustrate his design (Rom. 8:28).

How much does God determine and how much does God allow? It is not a question of His ability (because God is able to do all things), but a question of His desires.

The sovereignty of God is clearly taught in the Scriptures but there exists a widespread and long-lasting controversy concerning its pervasiveness in day-to-day living. Beliefs run the gamut from a deist, who believes that God wound the world up like a giant clock and set it loose at creation, to the opposite end of the spectrum to those who believe that God controls what they wear for clothing or to whether or not they add extra salt to the vegetables. Which is correct? And if neither, then where does the balance fall?

Unfortunately, God’s sovereignty is safe to talk about when one is experiencing life’s blessings and when one is “in tune” with God. But the moment a trial or test is experienced, God’s sovereignty is suddenly a painful subject to discuss. Such should not be the case.

God does not base His will on His foreknowledge of man's actions, for men are regarded as nothing (Ps. 8).

One can hardly read a chapter in the Bible without noticing the sovereignty of God jumping off every page. From Genesis [creation] to Revelation [consummation] a constant theme runs throughout: God has a plan and He is in control. Every account in the Bible points to God's glory for a good reason: He designed it that way. There is no "sometimes He is," "sometimes He is not."

In Ephesians 1:11, the inspired author refers to God as "Him who works all things after the counsel of His will." God is in ultimate control of the events and course of creation (Isa. 46:10). God cannot be surprised, countered, befuddled, outmaneuvered, or in any way overridden (Prov. 19:21; 21:30; Isa. 14:26, 27), because He is the Mastermind behind the events of earth. God knows from eternity all His works (Acts 15:18). Whatever the Lord chooses to do, He will do (Ps. 135:6, 7). God is working all things out to accomplish His ultimate plan for the world (Rev. 17:7). God has put into man's heart the purpose that He wants to be fulfilled.

Since all life comes from Him, He rightfully retains ultimate authority (1 Tim. 6:15) and will do what He pleases (Ps. 135:6). He needs counsel from no one, and no one qualifies to give Him counsel (Rom. 9:20). God does not just occasionally raid into our lives; rather, He is intimately involved in the life of each person (Matt. 10:30), and rules the universe completely and perfectly (Isa. 40:21-28). God's sovereignty first points out His position, secondly, it points to His power.

What biblical evidence do we have to say God is sovereign, that God as the Creator of all things visible and invisible, and thus the owner of all things, has an absolute right to rule over all things?

Consider the following ten areas that God controls.

- 1. God is controlling nature** (Pss. 47; 50:1; 89:11; 93; 96; 97; 99; 104; 115:3,16; 135:5,6; Gen. 14:19; 14:22; 24:3; Deut. 4:39; 10:14; Josh. 2:11; 1 Chron. 29:11,12; 2 Chron. 20:6; Neh. 9:6).

Many believe in evolution, thinking that all there is today resulted from random “chance.” Pure logic tells us otherwise. Even modern science is disproving evolution from microbiology to astronomy.

Everything is about God. Every aspect of everything exists because God put it there and because God allows it to be there. Nothing exists outside of His control. But what about “accidents?” What about those situations that seem out of control? Is God still in that? Is God still sovereign in those circumstances? The answer is yes (Matt. 10:29-31). Not even the death of a small sparrow happens apart from the good pleasure of His will. The Lord is not only in control of all that is visible but also, He controls that which is invisible to the eyes of men. God controls the weather, and the patterns of the weather are directed by His ultimate plan. He rules the weather and is in control of it (Exod. 9:23; Job 28:26; Ps. 135:7).

If God controlled all of mankind, but did not control the weather, then in effect how could God place man in the circumstances He desires? Lightning could kill a man before God wanted him to be killed. Floods could occur, causing God to make man alter plans to allow for the consequences of the weather.

God made all and does all. Without God there is nothing.

God’s control of nature also includes the animal kingdom. He is Lord over all.

- 2. God is controlling nations and politics** (Dan. 4:25-35; Job 12:17-19, 21, 23; John 19:10; Rom. 9:17).

God is the source of all power. God rose up certain nations for the purpose of destroying other nations (Hab. 1:6; Zech. 11:16). Consider also how God’s purposes were accomplished through the leaders He placed in power: Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Esau, Cyrus, Herod, and Pilate.

Earthly kings rule for a season, but the Lord is King forever, and the heathen will perish in His land (Ps. 10:16). Even the greatest kings of history did not fully control their own actions. God ordained what would happen and it was so, and God used these events to conform His children into His perfect image.

3. **God is controlling angels** (Matt 6:10 [thy will be done on earth]).

The Lord Jesus is not implying that God isn't in control of the earth at all times, but rather that the inhabitants of earth should willingly do His revealed will as His heavenly ministers do.

4. **God is controlling Satan and his demons** (Job 1:12; 2:6; Matt. 8:28-34).

5. **God is controlling humanity** (Deut. 2:30; Job 12:10; Prov. 21:1; 16:1).

God works in such a way as to never violate the free choices of man. He will never "force" an individual to act contrary to his desires. God always works in such a way as to "order the steps of a good man" (Ps. 37:23). God decides by His plan what course of action each person in this world is going to take. Such is the case of Proverbs 3:5, 6. Some would argue that God could not be glorified in the same way if the choice were not left up to man. Yet such a thought is unwarranted in light of creation's glorification of God (Ps. 19:1). Creation has never exercised a "free" will, yet it brings glory to God. No person's choice limits God, or constricts Him from His will being accomplished. To ascribe to man "free" will means to be completely independent of any other force. If we give man a free will we will be taking a scary leaning toward deism.

If one thinks that man is the one who does the choosing and has the power to determine His own life, how can you pray for the man who is rebelling against God? If you pray that God overcomes the man's rebellion, then you are ultimately praying that God overcome the choice that the man is making to rebel. You would

be asking God to take away that man's ability to choose for himself. That is to say God does ultimately have control over the man's decision, which He does.

Does man's will and God's sovereignty co-exist and if so, how? The answer is yes and I do not know how. All I know is that my God is sovereign and has given man the ability to make choices, but the choices man makes are subordinate to Almighty God. Man can choose to rebel against God, consciously and willfully sin against God, even reject the Son of God, but man cannot thwart God's eternal purpose and plan by anything he does nor does not do (Prov. 16:9). The Creator is still in control over His creation and always will be. Man is free from a conscious awareness of the ordainment of God in his choices.

The path which every man takes through life is controlled by God (Prov. 10:22), and man does not have the power to change what God has already determined (Eccl. 7:13-14). Every action man attempts is ordained by God (Prov. 20:24), and even every thought man thinks is controlled by God (Prov. 16:1, 9). The bottom line is that the very heart of every man is in the hands of the Sovereign Lord, and He will turn it wherever He chooses (Prov. 21:1, 2). Not only is every earthly aspect controlled by God, but the Lord ultimately determines on whom He will show mercy, and who He will not (Rom. 9:14-24). It is God, not man, who opens hearts to receive Him (Acts 16:14). Man must realize that there is nothing he can do to merit God's favor. God is the one who gives repentance and the opportunity to believe (2 Tim. 2:25, 26). God is sovereign over, in and through man.

6. God is controlling the outcome of providential acts (Prov. 16:33; 1 Sam. 2:7).

God controls the affairs of men. God chooses who will die, who will live, who will be injured, and who will recover (Deut. 32:39). The New Testament believer is guaranteed "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28). God could hardly promise such a thing if He had no control over "all things."

The bad things that happen to us are not out of God's control. Tragedies do not happen because God forgot or was caught off guard (Deut. 32:39).

7. God is controlling circumstances for the fulfillment of prophecy (i.e. the birth of Jesus).

God's fulfilled prophecies show His omniscience and His control over circumstances. God shows His control over prophecies by arranging events in such a way as to bring to pass their fulfillment.

8. God is controlling the preservation of creation (Col. 1:16, 17).

How can God not be in control of a creation that depends on Him for its mere existence! If all things were put together by God, there is nothing He has done that can surprise Him. If He was powerful enough to put His entire cosmos together, is He not powerful enough to keep everything in line with His will?

Speaking of the Lord's hand in even the simple life of a sparrow, Jesus' words are a reassurance that surely if He is involved in the death of an unimportant sparrow, He will also be involved and in sovereign control of the lives of men.

9. God is controlling the redemption of mankind (Jonah 2:9; John 6:44, 45).

Matthew 11:25-30 is reflective of the overarching interaction between the Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility. The entire chapter in its structure, shows how God is sovereign in who comes and yet all are invited to come. I do not know how this works, I only know what is true.

Matt. 11:25-30

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. ²⁷ All things have been

handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. ²⁸ Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Because God is sovereign, we can trust Him. The question is never, "Can you?" The question is always, "Will you?" Will you trust Him?

10. God is controlling sin's existence (Prov. 16:4; Isa. 45:7).

Finite man cannot understand every aspect of God, but we can know that God is in control. There are no accidents in the world. He has ordained everything for the purpose of His glorification. God is in control of each circumstance. God is in control of all things, including both the sinful and good acts of man. This does not mean that God is held responsible for the actions of His creation, but that He is working in and through those actions to bring about His perfect will. Sin must have been included in God's plan for the world, for the Lamb was slain "from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

God does not force anyone against their desires or volition to do or choose evil (James 1:13). God is sovereign and nothing occurs apart from His will. Therefore, sin must be in God's plan, in a way that will ultimately bring Him glory, but the entire responsibility for that sin rests upon the one who has committed it. God is glorified by the redemption from sin and the judgment of it. Sin not good, and yet God uses it for good. Sin did not originate with God, and yet God has it in His eternal plan.

Though God may use sinful people doing sinful things to accomplish His plan, God is impeccable in all actions and intentions, and sovereign in every heart of man. Resisting His will is not going to change what He has already prepared beforehand as to what will take place in the life of each individual.

God is absolutely sovereign but does not act in a way that would negate man's responsibility or accountability ("Give an **accounting**" Matt. 12:36; Rom. 14:12; Heb. 13:17).

In Conclusion:

The one and true God of the universe is a completely sovereign God. All God has ever done is completely right and all He will ever do will be completely right and holy. God makes no mistakes, can do no wrong, and is never surprised. The true God of this universe has never made any mistakes and never will.

When it comes down to it, true believers who search the Scripture have to agree on the sovereignty of God. True, we debate our petty perspectives, but when it gets right to it, we believe that God is in control. We can debate to the *extent* that He governs us, but in the end, it does not really matter. When we get to heaven, we will come to understand what God really meant. Here on earth, we can only hope to catch a tiny glimpse of who God really is and how he runs things. I am just glad I can rest in the knowledge that, not only is the universe in good hands, but my life is too. Too little credit is given to the power of the Lord and therefore too little faith is put in Him. This is not to say that man is nothing more than a robot stuck in a no-win maze of predetermined decisions. He certainly does not cause man to sin.

Man's response to the Lord's control should be one of daily reliance and submission. No plans should be made without the acknowledgment that the outcome is entirely dependent on God (James 4:13-15).

The doctrine of God's sovereignty ought to have a powerful effect on the Christian's daily walk. It should produce humility by the realization that God has done and will continue to do everything. Man can do nothing to repay God. God's sovereignty gives a person the joy of absolute security. His sovereignty supplies comfort in sorrow, it guarantees that one day good will triumph,

and it ought to cause the believer to rejoice and to sing praises unto God for all that He has done.

3

“Grace Living and Divinely Ordained Means”

“Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa. 46:10).

Most people would embrace the idea (intellectually) that God has a plan and that He will (for the most part) accomplish what He sets out to do. Some would argue that much of what happens does so because we make decisions and the outcome of those decisions is what becomes known as history. Others believe that God only knows what will happen after the unfolding of the event. Yet, is any of this thinking biblical?

In this short article, it is impossible to answer all of the questions that might arise in our thinking. However, I do believe it is necessary to lay out what appears to be the clear teaching of Scripture.

First, God knows everything. No detail has escaped His attention. Psalm 139 establishes the truth that no one can escape His presence. If God is there, then He knows what is going on. Matthew 10:29 assures me God knows the details of the sparrow’s death.

Second, God’s knowledge of the event is not simply cognitive but causal. A cognitive knowledge means, “God knows.” A causative knowledge means, “God made it happen.” Many stumble here. Yet if God’s knowledge of the event is only cognitive, then God does not know until the event happens. This places God as a secondary spectator and not a primary participant. Some use such language as, “allow or permit,” yet this would still place God in an apparent bondage to something outside Himself.

Is God more than a mere spectator to that which He created? Is God ever in bondage to that which is His servant? I do not think so. Consider the following verses:

“All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Dan. 4:35).

“Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Ps. 135:6).

“But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:3).

Finally, if God has so ordered the end, He must of necessity, order the means to that end. Prophecy bears this out. As a free moral agent, I thrill at my capacity to be an image bearer. I am so thankful to know that God is working out everything for His glory and my good (Rom. 8:28). I am thankful that what appears to be arbitrary acts and random events are in reality beads on a string of pearls. All designed to enhance His beauty.

How grateful I am to know that He has not left me to myself and that the gyrations of fallen man are but the expressions of His eternal purpose. True, the height, breadth, length, and depth of this truth eludes me, but the outworking of it leaves me breathless. What a joy to know that God is working out His will through the routine and mundane events of my life and that each of the seemingly disjointed pieces of an average life are shouting out the supremacy of God in all things. Join me as I find, celebrate, and declare that He is enough in this life and in the life that is to come.

Oh, what unbridled joy is ours in knowing His grace is a ruling grace. Most assuredly, we can say, “Grace reigns.” Nothing, not even the likes of you and me, can stop His grace from ruling over the hearts of humanity. Grace reigns because God does. Praise His name!

4

“The God of Providence”

“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him {be} the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

We often speak of God “acting through providence” or “working providentially.” What exactly is meant by the expression “providence?” Webster’s Dictionary gives this definition: “God conceived as the power sustaining and guiding human destiny.” Often the idea of providential is used without ever defining the term or understanding its usage. Webster’s definition assures the reader that God is working in and through all things for the accomplishment of His will (Col. 1:16, 17; Heb. 1:3).

William Ames affords us this working definition. . .

“The providence of God is either direct, whereby God, by himself, as the sole cause, provides for things, or indirect whereby he provides through the use of means.”²

In qualifying our understanding of God’s providence, it is important to note, “The providence of God has two categories. The first is called God’s ordinary [or ‘general’] providence and the second is called His ‘special’ providence.”³ The two categories are not separate expressions but only one expression with two actions. They are not working toward two different tangents but are working through various means in accomplishing a singular goal.

Perhaps the easiest way to express this idea is that providential means natural, whereas the opposite of this would be supernatural or miraculous. Our current study is endeavoring to note God’s providential work through natural laws.

In speaking of God as working providentially, we mean that God is working through the natural outworking of events in the accomplishing of His eternal purpose or will. The simplicity of this

statement assures me that all of life is under His watch care and He directs it through secondary causation. God is the God of natural causation. He is directly involved in all of life through indirect means. Though He is working primarily through natural means or secondary causation, this does not mean God is simply standing back and doing nothing.

He never sits as a spectator to that which He has purposed. God is always working.

There is great comfort in coming to this understanding of God's providence. Consider with me four basic thoughts concerning God's providence as it relates to the natural outworking of His purpose.

- **First**, nothing escapes His attention. There is never an overlooked or forgotten detail in all of life's complexities (Matt. 6:25-34).
- **Second**, everything falls under the umbrella of His gracious, merciful, and wise watch care. God is never less than what He is. He is always 100%. The nature of God in His actions is never compartmentalized. In all of His actions He is always gracious, merciful, and wise.
- **Third**, everything has a purpose (Gen. 50:20). Each singular sliver of life is part of a larger master plan. There is no such thing as a trivial act or a wasted moment. Most of the time we see but glimpses of a longer sequence that culminates into a primary purpose without ever seeing how the primary purpose is but a singular sliver of a much larger master plan.
- **Fourth**, we can live life with rest knowing that God is in control (Prov. 16:33). God has not left us in control. He has not abandoned us nor is He expecting us to help Him get His "job" done. God, in His grace, is purposefully using us as tools in the accomplishing of His glorious end.

We will find our rest of soul and peace of mind when we begin to see life from His perspective. We must always strive against the desire to fashion Him into our own image. God is not man.

There remains much mystery in our understanding of how God works in and through providence, but such mystery is not there to confuse us, but to comfort us. God's placement as controller never functions as an excuse for tragedy, but as a comfort in tragedy. As we meditate on these truths, it is my earnest prayer that we will see Him as being "The God of Providence."

² William Ames (1576-1633), *The Marrow of Theology*, #3, 107.

³ <https://reformedreader.wordpress.com/2013/11/01/providence-general-and-special/> Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Ross-Shire, Christian Focus Publications, 2008), 114.

5

“The LORD of Hosts Will Reign on Mount Zion”

“Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, For the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, And His glory will be before His elders” (Isa. 24:23).

Throughout the Major and Minor Prophets, a constant contrast is set forth between impending judgment and future glory; as deep as the depth of destruction so the high of the height of splendor.

A common thread that ties much of this together is built around the LORD of host reigning on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and the eclipsing nature of His emanating glory.

In sixty-six references, Isaiah uses the Hebrew word for “host.” Its meaning suggests “campaign, army, inhabitants” (34:2, 4). The New International Version translates the word with “Almighty.” The King James Version and New American Standard Bible use “hosts.” It is by this name that He is known (Isa. 47:4; 48:2; 51:15; 54:5).

“As for our redeemer, **the LORD of hosts is his name**, the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 47:4).

“For they call themselves of the holy city, and stay themselves upon the God of Israel; **The LORD of hosts is his name**” (Isa. 48:2).

“But I am the LORD thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: **The LORD of hosts is his name**” (Isa. 51:15).

“For thy Maker is thine husband; **the LORD of hosts is his name**; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called” (Isa. 54:5).

As the LORD of hosts, He may do as He desires with what is His and when He does it, it is always right (Isa. 5:16). All things created bow before Him (Isa. 6:3, 5; 37:16). As the LORD of hosts He performs all He plans (Isa. 9:7; 14:24, 27; 44:6).

As the LORD of hosts He rules over all things created. His rule is primarily providential, that is, through secondary means or causation. This does not negate the reality of His rule, only the open manifestation or revealing of that rule.

Yet there is coming a day . . . a day in which His glorious rule will be openly displayed, and it is this day that Isaiah and his fellow prophets foretold when the rule of God will blanket the earth and His glory will emanate from Him in blinding light. “In that day shall the LORD of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people” (Isa. 28:5, 6).

In that day His glorious reign will silence the moon and the sun. They will dull when in His presence. Like all things created, they will bow before their creator. The sun and the moon will pay homage in that day. They will offer up their lesser lights to the light giver.

Oh, what a day to anticipate. In the midst of today’s darkness, we live in hope. In the midst of today’s dull rays of concealed light, we rest in hope. In the midst of today’s veiling fog, we live believing that a day is coming in which the darkness will be banished, the concealed light will open, and the veiling fog will be lifted.

Be encouraged for there is coming a day “[When] the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, For the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem.”

6

“Grace Living and the Will of God”

⁶ “They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; ⁷ and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them. ⁹ A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

(Acts 16:6, 7, 9, 10)

Before Paul ever made it to Thessalonica, he was heading toward Asia. This passage strikes us as odd upon first reading. Twice the Holy Spirit told Paul that he did not wish for his team of church planters to enter into two very needy areas. Just as emphatic, He tells him to go into the region of Macedonia. Why was he told to go into one and not the other? It is impossible for us to know with any level of dogmatism, yet there are several lessons we can learn from this.

- **First**, God’s ways are not our ways.

In our quest to have the world evangelized for Christ there is always the potential of being in danger of not having His mind. Fortunately, even our theological guffaws and communicative bumbling will not stop His eternal purpose from unfolding. Yet the cost to us will be great. I have no desire to be in the place of hardship and anxiety because of miscues, self-centeredness, and arrogant assumptions. God’s way is always best even when it would appear to make no reasonable sense to me.

- **Second**, He is the one who will determine who hears and who does not hear.

We can sow seed, but only God can give the increase. You and I have the distinct privilege of sowing seed. We are to broadcast it everywhere and to everyone. However, Acts 16:14 is clear. Lydia believed because God opened her heart. When God said “yes” to Macedonia He equally said “no” to Asia and Bithynia. In our mission to be a globally impacting ministry, let us never forget that God is the ultimate determiner of who hears and who does not hear.

- **Third**, our choices are the outworking of His eternal plan.

How Paul ascertained the will of God in not going to Asia and Bithynia is not told. Whether it was an audible voice or another vision is unknown, yet somehow, he knew. The vision of Macedonia, however, was “black and white.” Despite all of this, Paul made a choice and the choice he made was the outworking of God’s eternal purpose. Because Paul chose to go to Macedonia we have the letters to the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus.

- **Finally**, the will of God often includes fierce persecution.

In obedience to God’s will, Paul entered the region of Macedonia. It was while at Philippi the apostle was “beaten with rods” (Acts 16:22) and “kept in stocks” (v.24). Yet despite his pain and agony he prayed and sang praises to God (Acts 16:25). He knew God was in control. Often, we have the false impression that God’s will is without hardship. Many of us are resting in Him and yet we find ourselves overcome by trouble. Is this normal? Am I supposed to suffer? Why the struggle? Friend, this is all part of His will for your life. Rest in the truth of His reign.

What can we learn from this?

1. Let us press ahead in evangelizing the lost . . . prayerfully.
2. Let us sow seed liberally; knowing it is God who will give the increase (1 Cor. 3:6, 7).
3. Let us rest in the supremacy of God as we seek to walk in obedience to His Word.
4. Let us understand that our life on earth will be met with sorrow, hardship, burden-bearing, and grief. Yet let us fully

embrace His grace as the fuel for living. May it renew our minds and bathe our spirits in our longing to see Him face to face.

What we read initially in Acts 16:6-10 is not the final chapter in the ongoing saga of God's marvelous will. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3 we read of the seven churches. All seven of those churches were in Asia Minor. Bithynia, however, was never part of a major campaign. Today, Asia Minor and Bithynia form modern day Turkey. Who among us can understand the providence of God in the outworking of His will to gather a group from every tribe, tongue, people and nation? Yet, He will finish His work. We have the joy of being a part of this eternal purpose. May this cause you to rejoice in Him. May you find Him to be your rest in the outworking of your faith.

7

“Sovereignty of God and Evil”

*“Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?”
(Job 2:10b)*

All things created are ordered of the Lord (Gen.2). All things existing are ordered of the Lord. What is the difference between created and existing? God created directly for six days. Most things existing which were not created fall outside of the initial six days. God’s action of creation is direct and immediate (causation). God’s action in existing is indirect and through secondary causation. All things created exist, but not all things existing were created. Sin exists. Sin was not present in the first six days; thus, God did not create sin.

Did God ordain or order sin? If no, then how did it come into existence? Even if we permit sin as an expression of man’s will (which indeed it is) who made the necessary concession so that man’s will could be expressed in rebellion against its Creator? God did order sin’s existence without which sin could never exist. But, is ordering or ordaining the same as authoring? Part of our difficulty lies in what it means, “to author.” To author a work means you did it, you produced it. I think it would be helpful if we contrasted authoring with commissioning. If one “authors” a painting, the assumption is that the author painted the assigned work. If one commissions a painting, the assumption is that another painted the assigned work with the backing of the one commissioning it. God’s not the author of sin. But God did commission its existence into being.

When we consider the theme of God and sin on a grander scale and work down, it is perhaps easier to see. Think of tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanoes, avalanches, etc. Are these actions ordered and controlled by God? Did He create them? No,

but He did order them. If such is not the case, then true chaos exists. Yet in their path devastation reigns, people lose everything they own and multiple lives are taken. Is this part of His plan or does it simply happen?

Think of the various nations that go to war. Is war part of His eternal purpose? I think so – if not, then who controls it?

Is not part of the Christian's comfort in calamity that as a recipient of the evil act, God is in control? Yet what side of the equation is He controlling? If He is controlling the evil act of evil men, can we not say He controls the failures of His people? It is impossible for us to know what is immediate and direct and what is secondary and indirect, yet regardless, God is in control. Our sufferings, inability to conform, and defeat is for our good and His glory. No one escapes the inherit demerit of sin and their responsibility of our words, thoughts and actions. Yet our responsibility does not cancel His sovereignty.

8

“The Sovereignty of God and Obedience”

¹“Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, Keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. ³ For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1-3).

Over the years, numerous students have asked thought provoking questions. Once such question has been, “How does the sovereignty of God mesh with the arena of obedience for image bearing elements?” This difficult question requires us to step back and look once again at the larger issue of God’s sovereignty.

The issue of sovereignty has generated much discussion. I personally believe God is absolutely sovereign in every avenue of man's existence. God did not surrender His will so man could exercise his. God is not on a quest to insure the autonomy of man’s will. To argue that only free moral agents can be held culpable is to argue from silence. To say that God gave man the power of choice or the power to will or volition is one thing. To describe his volition as “free” is another thing altogether. By “free” do we mean such a will is operating outside of God’s control? The control of God is neither culpable nor causal as expressed in violation of His nature.

Everyone who claims to be a believer of Christ has a position on the sovereignty of God. The primary issue is just how inclusive and far reaching is His control? Is His control absolute and inclusive? Or are there areas that God does not control? If so, which ones?

Being a person made in the image of God, man does have intellect, volition, and emotion. The volitional part of man gives him the capacity to choose. Throughout Scripture such declarations are

clearly seen (Deut. 30:19; Josh. 24:15). Humanity can and does make choices. But no one ever made a choice inconsistent with God's eternal plan (Prov. 16:1, 33).

The issue under consideration causes us to ask multiple questions. For example, there is the *robot* scenario. I have heard this often. My response to such a question is simply this, "If when I get to heaven I find that I was only a robot under the master puppeteers control, then so be it." What claim do I have to any freedom of choice? Why do I feel as if I have my rights and not to be able to express "free" will is to violate my person?

To give man a will that is completely free says that he can make a choice that will ultimately contradict God's will. This places God in a position of reacting to man's will. It places Him in a position of bondage not freedom. To say those acts of evil are totally contingent on the expression of man's free will is to make everyone a potential victim of depravity's expression. Let us say you are held at a gunpoint by a crazed killer. His finger is on the trigger. If he is acting of his own free will, then your life is, literally, in his hands. Whether you live or die is entirely dependent on the expression of his own free will. Because God has no plan, what happens will either make Him sad or glad, but He has no control over the situation. Oh, to be sure He could intervene, but there can be no certainty that He will. To give man a will that is entirely free is to embrace a system that puts God as the creator who establishes the course and end, but does not interfere with the daily outworking of His will. This is very close to deism. To grant man such a will opens the way for man to become a god. It opens before him the potential to validate evil as rivaling God in power (i.e., cosmic dualism).

On what basis do we determine the absolute sovereignty of God?

First, God is introduced as the creator of all things (Gen. 1:1; Exod. 20:11; 31:17; 1 Chron. 16:26; Neh. 9:6; Job 26:13; 38:4; Ps. 8:3; 33:6,9; 89:11,12; 96:5; 102:25; 104:24,30; 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 136:5; 146:6; 148:4,5; Prov. 3:19; 8:22-30; Eccl. 12:1; Isa. 37:16; 40:26,28; 42:5; 44:24; 45:18; 51:13,16; 65:17; Jer. 10:12; 32:17; 51:15; Zech. 12:1; Matt.

11:25; Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; Rom. 1:19,20; 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16,17; Heb. 1:2; 3:4; 11:3; 2 Pet. 3:5; Rev. 3:14; 4:11; 10:6; 14:7; 21:6; 22:13). As Creator He has the innate right to will as He wishes and to work according to His will without restraint.

Second, God may do whatever He wishes with what is His (Isa. 64:8; Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:20, 21). As the master potter God may do whatever He wishes with His jars of clay.

Third, God is not answerable to men for His actions (Job 38-42; Isa. 29:16; 45:9; Rom. 9:20). God, being God, is answerable to no one. He is incapable of being responsible or accountable.

Fourth, man is answerable to God for his actions (Matt. 25:31-46; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15). Though the various judgments are very different, the idea of having to give an account before God is the same.

What is one to make of those passages which present man as thwarting God's plan through personal rebellion (Gen. 19:22; Matt. 13:58; 23:37; Mark 6:5)? This is not the only apparent dilemma within the Word. How can an omniscient God remember (Gen. 8:1)? How can an immutable God repent (Gen. 6:6)? Such issues escape easy answers. Yet let us go back to the area of sovereignty.

“Hurry, escape there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there” (Gen. 19:22).

“And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58).

“And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them” (Mark 6:5).

To be sure there is an element of difficulty with such passages. However, I do not believe the answer is to be found in the shortening of God's sovereignty. If God is not sovereign over all things, then is He really sovereign over anything? Perhaps several observations will assist in the clarifying of this apparent dilemma.

First, God's sovereignty is immutable. Nothing can change what God has set out to do. Thus, I see even the acts of sin as part of His immutable plan (Gen. 50:15-21; Prov. 16: 4; Acts 2:22-24). What we deem as evil does work out for His glory and our ultimate good (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

Second, God's will, as declared in Scripture, is often contingent on man's obedience. The free expressions of man's will are in complete harmony with God's eternal purpose. This in no way can negate His sovereignty, but it does place the outworking of His will in the realm of time. We can be assured God has determined the certainty of the end as well as the means. And man's sinfulness is part of His eternal purpose.

Third, there is the element of accommodation. From a human perspective, it would appear as if God remembered or repented or was thwarted. But from a divine perspective, such thought is unbiblical.

This does raise some interesting questions? If God is in absolute control, then can we ultimately make a poor choice? Let us exclude the realm of morality. Let us also exclude the area of His declared will? But just a poor choice? Poor as in the violation of His eternal purpose? I look back at choices I have made. My past and present are riddled by choices that have "irrevocable" consequences. Consequences that appear to be very heavy and at times "wrong." But are they "wrong?" If God is in control, then this is what He wants. I am to receive it from His hand in humility and gratitude (Eph. 5:20). This choice, though appearing "evil," will be meant by God for good (Gen. 50:20). **God's wisdom guarantees that He will use the best means possible to accomplish the highest good.** But what if I never see the good? Does the issue then change? No - I must trust Him. I might never see the good, but I must trust Him (Job 13:15).

How do I mesh an inclusive sovereignty with daily obedience? There is an element of the discussion that I have wrestled with for years and still wrestle with. Some things I do not know and

perhaps will never know. I am content to reach that point and to surrender under the majesty of God's incomprehensibility.

First, I believe all true believers will inevitably bear fruit (Mark 4:14-20). It is impossible to be a fruitless Christian. To be sure there can be a time or period of resisting, but never can the resisting be long term. The work of God in and through the believer will most assuredly be victorious. That which God has begun, He will finish (Rom. 8:30; 1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

Second, the fruit or good work produced in and through the believer is generated by the Holy Spirit. This is why it is called the *fruit of the Spirit* (Eph. 5:22). Imitation fruit can be produced by the flesh (Matt. 7:24f), but such fruit is just that imitation. It is not Spirit generated.

Third, in any act of obedience it must be understood that without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 3:1-4 appear clear on this point. Christ is our life. Without Him, we can do nothing that is pleasing to the Father. It is unfortunate but we often view our works as a means of meriting favor or of gaining approval. Nothing could be further from the truth. Christ forms for us the basis of our acceptance before the Father. It is in and with Him that the Father is well pleased. My obedience is a testimony of God's working in me and through me. For the true believer obedience should not be the issue. Unfortunately, we often try to push people into our own expectations of what they should be like, but this is not our role and it is wrong.

What about disobedience? Disobedience like obedience is inevitable as long as I occupy this body of flesh. But any act of disobedience must be viewed as something I am

- to put off (Eph. 4:22)
- make no provision for (Rom. 13:14)
- abstain from (1 Pet. 2:11)
- confess (1 John 1:9)
- mortify (Col. 3:5)

John is equally clear, however, when he notes how those born of God do not live in continual sin (1 John 3:8-10). Believers have point-in-time sin, but they do not “practice” or continually sin. When a professing believer lives in continual sin there are larger issues at stake.

I would strongly argue that a day of accounting is to take place for the believer (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10). This day is yet future. In that day God will show Himself mighty in our behalf. It will be seen in that day that He has finished the work He Himself begun. Obedience is a glorious truth. As one sees Christ more clearly, obedience moves from being a duty to being a delightful activity.

To see God as having absolute control allows me the liberty to rest in Him. I can live with confidence knowing that He is in control. Nothing will befall me that He has not predetermined. All things that cross my path in life are there by divine design. Oh, what comfort is to be found in a God who is sovereign.

Divine sovereignty guarantees the certainty of what happened. The Fall described in Genesis 3 was not a mistake, error, or alternate purpose. Neither was it a foreseen misfortune. The actions of individuals that seem in direct opposition to His declared or revealed will are a necessary part of His intentional plan. God is never surprised or caught off guard. Whatever happens, happens because God has so ordered it to happen.

It is against this backdrop that human responsibility must be seen, understood, and embraced. God, having fashioned man in His image, invented him with the power of choice. He did not grant man complete nor even partial autonomy. The volitional acts of individuals can never be removed from a full-bodied understanding of divine sovereignty. Man's revelation is neither equal with nor superior to that of God's sovereignty. It is rather an expression of His rule. God is sovereign and such sovereignty as His is revealed in the choices we make. To argue against such an understanding because it eliminates responsibility is to misunderstand the relationship that does exist between divine sovereignty, human volition, accountability, and responsibility.

The Scripture clearly teaches all four elements. Yet each element flows from that which precedes it.

How does this affect our outlook on the next generation of servant leaders for Great Commission living?

God has established in vocational ministry clear instruction as to how it is to take place. Such instruction from a human perspective is a responsibility placed on each individual to become a bridge between two generations. The responsibility is real because the instruction is clear. Yet the rule of God guarantees the certainty of such a process of being fulfilled. God's plan for evangelism and discipleship will be fulfilled. Man's apparent lack of conformity to His revealed will cannot be at the expense of God's rule. Such thought is unacceptable.

Concerning missions and the sovereignty of God I have asked myself several questions. First, is God's plan of global missions entirely contingent on or even partially dependent on the precarious obedience of His people? Second, is the obedience of God's people really tentative or will God complete that which He has begun? Third, is not the means of obedience as certain as the end? Fourth, is it really possible for the people of God not to persevere in obedience?

His love for me and through me is what moves me to love Him through service. Missions is in fulfillment of the great commandment of loving God first and others second. God has so ordered that His people will obey in proclaiming His Word to the world so that His elect whom He will draw through His Word will hear and be saved. In so doing, the preached Word will equally confirm the damnation of the non-elect by showing their blindness of eyes, deafness of ear, and hardness of heart.

The success of obedience is dependent on God. Oh, what joy is to be found in the freedom of serving Him. There is liberation in knowing that God has already won and we, because of grace, are able to participate in His victory.

A Final Word

It is so easy to say we “know” that God is sovereign. We understand it. We want God’s will in our life, but, do we recognize it or do we acknowledge it? Are we simply aware of it, or do we embrace it? Who truly is sovereign in my life, over every detail? Who is in control of my life? Am I? Or am I letting God? These are honest, soul searching questions.

God’s will is not something to be found, but rather to be enjoyed. We are searching for something that has already found us. God’s will is not something that I work for, but something I work from. I am in God’s will. Most of the “stuff” we are wondering if it is God’s will, is God’s will. No one is wondering if committing acts of immorality is God’s will for their life. God clearly provides certain guidelines in the Scripture. This revelation constitutes His declared will. It is plain and clear. Yet God has a larger will that is immutable and is to be enjoyed. We can rest knowing God is performing His will each day of our lives.

In the Proverbs we read these well-known words.

- ⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
⁶In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

The Proverbs “pit” two contrasting and competing theologies. On one side is TORAH, divine instruction, and on the other is the rejection of God’s instruction and a reliance on our own wisdom or intellectual abilities.

The appeal is to accept God’s instruction. The challenge isn’t resolved by one’s ability to “figure it out” or “to fully understand the situation to your liking,” but to simply TRUST IN THE LORD.

The “issue” is whether you will TRUST HIM or trust in your own reasoning or intellect. The promise is, “He will make straight your

paths.” Typically, we end with verse 6, but the complete thought runs from verses 5 through 8. Verses 7 and 8 repeat verses 5 and 6.

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

⁸ It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.

As it relates to God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, if you think you can figure out the minutia of interplay between the two, your soul will “rot.” But if you TRUST IN THE LORD and FEAR THE LORD that He has control over all of life in all of its details and that HE is enough in this life and in the life to come, then your flesh will be healed and your bones will be refreshed.

Our rest comes in affirming His control. Who is sovereign in our life, over every detail? Who is in control of our life? Are we? Or are we letting God? We have only two options. Either He is, or we are. Only one of those choices will give us rest. Whether we “let God” or not, does not change the fact of His control. All it will change is our ability to rest in Him. Our lack of belief or faith cannot make Him less than what He is.

We are not smart enough, strong enough, big enough, or spiritual enough to do what only God can do. We should not want control. We should much rather see Him do His work than try to pull it out of His hands (which is impossible). My prayer for us is that we will find our rest in Him.

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