

Trusting God: The Sovereignty of God

If you want to start a fight among Christians, just bring up the controversial issue of the sovereignty of God. This particular issue has been the source of immense discussion, controversy, debate, and anger for many centuries.

Although good people have discussed and argued about this doctrine for many years, and although good people have different views on this issue, there can be no doubt that the Bible asserts very clearly that God is the sovereign of the universe. We must uphold and defend the sovereignty of God.

This is the third message in our Summer Sermon Series, which I've titled Trusting God: God's Sovereignty in the Affairs of His People. I'm following Jerry Bridges' book of that same title.

Last time, I talked about God's providence, which I defined as God's continuous work of upholding, directing, disposing and governing all things to the end for which they were created. Providence is a way of describing God's involvement in creation. God is able to uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all things because he is sovereign. Sovereignty has to do with God's nature and power; providence has to do with God's work in the world.

One of the main reasons we can trust God is that he is sovereign. If he were not sovereign, it would be unreasonable to trust in God. If God were not able to do what he intends to do, then God would not be trustworthy/reliable.

But God is sovereign and is thus worthy of our trust. We trust him because he is sovereign. It's sad that so many people deny or degrade God's sovereignty.

I'd like to read from a selection from one of Spurgeon's sermons in which he both asserts the sovereignty of God and bemoans the fact that so many today deny it.

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 more earnestly to contend 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. On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldlings, no truth of which they have made such a football, as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the Sovereignty of the infinite Jehovah. Men will allow God to be everywhere except on His throne. They will allow Him to be in His workshop to fashion worlds and make stars. They will allow Him to be in His [treasury] to dispense His alms and bestow His bounties. They will allow Him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of heaven, or rule the waves of the ever-moving ocean; but when God ascends His throne, His creatures then gnash their teeth. And we proclaim an enthroned God, and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as He thinks well, without consulting them in the matter . . . then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on His throne is not the God they love. But it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon His throne whom we trust.

Spurgeon saw a direct connection between God's sovereignty and trusting in God. We trust God "upon his throne." God's sovereignty gives us good reason to trust in God.

As we consider this great topic, let's begin with

I. Definitions of God's sovereignty

A. Texts

Job 42:2 I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.

Ps 103:19 The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.

Psalm 115:3 But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Psalm 135:5-6 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.

Isaiah 14:27 For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

Isaiah 46:9-11 ... *I am God, and there is no one like Me, 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'; Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.*

Daniel 4:35 ...*[God] 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?'*

B. Formal definitions¹

1. The word “sovereign” has as its root the verb “reign,” meaning to rule. The prefix “sove” is derived from “super,” meaning over or above. To say that God is sovereign is to say that He rules over all.
2. He is the “God of gods” (Deut 10:17), the “King of kings” (1 Tim 6:15, Rev 17:14, 19:16), and the “Lord of lords” (Deut 10:17, 1 Tim 6:15, Rev 17:14, 19:16).
3. Sovereignty means “control.” To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is in control.

Quote: This is the essence of God’s sovereignty; 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.²

4. By virtue of the fact that He has created all things, God has the right to rule over them (Rom 9:14-21). God does as He pleases with His creation, and nobody has the power to foil his plans.

II. Further aspects of God’s sovereignty

A. God’s sovereignty applies to everything. God is sovereign over--

1. The weather (Job 36:32, Jer 10:13, Jonah 1:4, 4:8, and Mark 4:41)
2. Plants and animals (Isa 46:11a, Jonah 1:17, 2:10, 4:6-7, and Matt 10:29)

¹ Some of this from Scott Estell’s material on the attributes of God. Some of this material also from Scott Williquette’s Systematic Theology One material.

² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 36.

3. Human rulers (Prov 21:1, Dan 2:21, 4:25, Rom 13:1, and Rev 17:17). All human rulers are given their authority by God and are merely instruments in His hand to accomplish His purposes (see Isa 44:28-45:1 and Rom 9:17).
4. Seemingly minor, mundane events (e.g., Ruth “happened” to find her way to Boaz’ field; Luke 12:6-7—birds, hairs)
5. Even the mistakes and failures of ourselves and others are under God’s sovereign control. E.g., the chief butler who forgot about Joseph (Gen 40:23).
6. Likewise, the malicious and evil intents of wicked people are ultimately under God’s sovereign control. E.g., Gen 50:20; Pharaoh; Jesus’ death
7. Good and bad, beneficial events and disasters, are all under God’s sovereign control.

Job 1:21 ... the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

Isaiah 45:7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

Lamentations 3:38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?

The Bible affirms that God is sovereign over everything in creation.

B. No one can violate God’s sovereign will.

People can and do violate God’s *moral* will all the time. Most of us have already violated God’s moral will several times today. But no one can violate God’s *sovereign* will. Consider the following verses in this regard:

In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails. (Proverbs 19:21)

There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord. (Proverbs 21:30)

Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? (Ecclesiastes 7:13)

You ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:15)

... What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” (Revelation 3:7)

We sometimes refer to God’s sovereign plan as his decree.

The decrees of God are the eternal plans of God whereby, before the creation of the world, he determined to bring about everything that happens.³

What God has decreed to happen will absolutely happen no matter what. No one can stop or hinder God’s decrees.

E.g., Jesus’ death on the cross—all of human history was moving toward that event.

And God’s control of all things is exactly what encourages us to trust in him. God will fulfill his promises—we can rely on it. We can trust God to do what he said he would do because he is sovereign.

Trans: We are not ultimately victims of random events. Wicked people and even Satan himself work within the limits of God’s sovereignty. God permits what happens to us. God has a plan. We are in the hands of a sovereign God who knows all about us and is working all things for his glory and for our good.

We may well wonder *why* God allows certain things, but we should not wonder *whether* God is in control.

III. Many deny God’s sovereignty.

It’s very common, even among well-meaning Christians, to claim that God is somehow limited in in sovereignty.

A. Some people believe in luck, chance, fate, or random events. Even Christians sometimes use these terms. Accidents, disasters, and various circumstances are simply beyond God’s control. Things “just happen” without any reference to God. Things happen for no reason, randomly, by chance or by fate.

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 332.

B. Others suggest that God limits his sovereignty to maintain human freedom. I heard a guy say, “God is so sovereign that he limits his own sovereignty.” That’s self-contradictory and absurd. But many people believe similar things about God’s lack of sovereignty.

An example: “In creating man with a free will and making him a partner in the rule of the earth, God limited himself. He made himself dependent on what man would do. Man by his prayer would hold the measure of what God could do in blessing.”⁴

C. Some people deny God’s sovereignty because God may not appear to be in control. It does not seem like God is controlling all things; God seems to be inactive or unable to change things.

1. We may seem to be the victims of circumstance. We seem to suffer indiscriminately. We suffer from accidents and from the mistakes and failures of ourselves and others.

E.g., my wife breaking her arm; falling a few weeks ago

a) It’s often difficult to see God working through these events and processes. How are seemingly random events part of his plan? We probably will not know until we get to heaven.

b) Part of this is walking by faith, believing what we do not see.

Heb 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

c) God often works behind the scenes in ways that we cannot see or comprehend. E.g., many events in David’s life; Esther; Ruth—the unseen hand of God.

2. Sometimes it seems as if God’s plans are hindered or prevented.

a) The enemies of God certainly seem to prosper and succeed. Why would God allow that?

Ps 94:3 LORD, how long ... will the wicked triumph?

Ps 73:3 For I [was] envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

⁴ Andrew Murray, quoted in Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 37.

Jer 12:1 ... *Why does the way of the wicked prosper? [Why] are those happy who deal so treacherously?*

Cf. Ps 73—the prosperity and triumph of the wicked is only temporary.

- b) The Bible shows again and again that God's plans will ultimately succeed; nothing can hinder or foil God's purposes.

Genesis 45:8 *So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.*

Trans: Many people today, even many Christians, deny or downgrade the sovereignty of God because they either don't like the doctrine or don't like its implications. But we dare not deny the clear teaching of Scripture regarding God's sovereignty.

IV. The significance of God's sovereignty

- A. This is a significant doctrine because it affects what we think about God's nature and character. Is he in control or isn't he? Is he able to intervene in our lives or not? Is he subject to creation or is creation subject to him?
- B. The sovereignty of God is also significant because so much of the Bible refers to it. This doctrine is not an obscure, hidden, side-issue in the Bible. Just the opposite; many passages refer to God's sovereignty.
- C. Sovereignty determines our level of trust in God. God is trustworthy because he is sovereign. If he were not sovereign, neither would he be trustworthy. We trust God to the degree that he is sovereign.

Quote: Confidence in the sovereignty of God in all that affects us is crucial to our trusting Him. If there is a single event in all of the universe that can occur outside of God's sovereign control, then we cannot trust Him. His love may be infinite, but if His power is limited and His purpose can be [hindered/overcome], we cannot trust Him.⁵

⁵ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 37.

God does not make up plans suddenly as he goes along. He knows the end from the beginning, and he will accomplish all his good purposes. This should greatly increase our trust in him, especially in difficult circumstances.⁶

V. Practical implications of God's sovereignty⁷

- A. Because God is sovereign, nothing is outside of his control. Everything that happens to us, whether good or bad, comes through the hands of God.
- B. Because God is sovereign, he has a purpose in all that He does in the world. God's intent is to conform us to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). God has a plan for us, and he is able to orchestrate the events of our lives to achieve his goals.
- C. Because God is sovereign, He has the right to tell us what we should do, when we should do it, where we should do it, how we should do it, and with whom we should do it. The only proper response to God's demands is unconditional obedience. This starts with surrendering ourselves to God at salvation (lordship) and continues throughout our Christian life by obeying the commands of Scripture.
- D. Because God is sovereign, we can rest secure in his care. God controls all things. Nothing happens without His permission. There is no "maverick molecule" in the universe. This fact should give us great comfort. We don't have to worry about anything. It's all in His hands. Our only concern is to do what He tells us to do, leaving the results with Him.

Mt 6:31 *Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'*

⁶ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 333.

⁷ From Scott Estell, *Attributes of God*

- E. Because God is sovereign, we should worship Him. Notice how God's sovereignty is the basis for worship in David's statement in

1 Chronicles 29:10–13 ... *David said, Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. ¹¹ Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. ¹² Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. ¹³ Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name.*

- F. Because God is sovereign, the circumstances of our lives are meaningful. If the Lord has commanded it, then we believe there is a purpose for it; there is a reason behind it. God has a morally sufficient reason for anything he does or allows. We often don't know what that reason is, but we believe God has one. Cf. Rom 8:28.

Quote: The sovereignty of God is the one impregnable rock to which the suffering human heart must cling. The circumstances surrounding our lives are no accident: they may be the work of evil, but that evil is held firmly within the mighty hand of our sovereign God.... All evil is subject to Him, and evil cannot touch His children unless He permits it. God is the Lord of human history and of the personal history of every member of His redeemed family.⁸

Trans: We admit that much of God's activity is beyond our understanding (Deut 29:29). We recognize a good deal of mystery when it comes to God's sovereignty. Whatever happens, our goal should be to trust God (Job 13:15) and believe that He is working out all things for His glory and for our good (Rom 8:28).

⁸ Margaret Clarkson, *Grace Grows Best in Winter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), pages 40–41. Quoted in Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 39–40.

VI. God's sovereignty and human actions

The big controversy over the sovereignty of God pertains to how God's sovereignty affects human action. Some claim that if God is sovereign and in control of all things, then we are mere puppets on strings or computers running the program given to us. We could have no genuine freedom if God is sovereign. If we are free, then God must not be sovereign. There are deep ditches to avoid on both sides of this road.

Several things to keep in mind regarding the sovereignty of God as it pertains to human actions:

- A. We are still responsible for our actions even though God is sovereign. God has ordained that human actions are real and significant. God is not the author of sin. It is always the creature, not the Creator, who is responsible for sin (James 1.13-15). We cannot blame anyone else for our own sins or failures. We choose our own behavior.
- B. God's sovereignty should not cause us to neglect our responsibilities. We don't become passive or irresponsible just because we believe in God's sovereignty. Our actions have real results and they do change the course of events. In a way that we cannot comprehend, God's sovereignty works along with our own human will. E.g., Pharaoh, Judas.

One of the main criticisms against God's sovereignty is that it reduces human freedom or human responsibility. I don't claim to understand how human freedom and divine sovereignty work together, but the Bible asserts them both. God is sovereign, and we are responsible; we affirm both.

- C. Prayer changes things. Our prayers do not change God or His plans, but God has ordained to use our prayers as a means of bringing about purposes in the world. Our prayers are part of God's plan and He uses them as tools to accomplish His will.

John 16:24 ... *ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.*

James 4:2 ... *ye have not, because ye ask not.*

- D. There is no such thing as luck or chance. All things happen by God's sovereign purpose and plan. The universe is not governed by impersonal fate or random chance, but by a personal God.

- E. The sovereignty of God should not cause us to sit back and be passive and just wait for things to happen. The sovereignty of God is no excuse for laziness or inaction. We act under the sovereignty of God.

2 Samuel 10:12 Be of good courage, and let us be strong for our people and for the cities of our God. And may the Lord do what is good in His sight.

We readily admit that the sovereignty of God is a difficult, even troubling doctrine, especially when we are facing pain, sorrow, disaster, and disappointment. To know that God ultimately is behind all the events of our lives can be difficult to accept. It's sometimes almost easier to believe that God is not in charge. It might be easier to believe that it was random chance or pure bad luck than that God has brought it or allowed it.

Yet we cannot deny the fact of God's sovereignty. The Bible teaches it very clearly, and without it, God is not worthy of our trust. We trust God because he is sovereign.

Finish with a Quote: We must believe is that God is sovereign. He carries out His own good purposes without ever being [hindered], and He so directs and controls all events and all actions of His creatures that they never act outside of His sovereign will. We must believe this and cling to this in the face of adversity and tragedy if we are to glorify God by trusting Him.... We honor God by choosing to trust Him when we don't understand what He is doing or why He has allowed some adverse circumstance to occur.⁹

⁹ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 52.

