

Trusting God: God's Sovereignty Over People

Prov 21:1 *The king's heart [is] in the hand of the LORD, [as] the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.*

Our theme in this summer sermon series is Trusting God. God's sovereignty over people should cause us to have a greater degree of trust in God.

I quoted from a Spurgeon sermon last week to emphasize the fact that people are fine with God's sovereignty until it impinges upon them personally. God can be as sovereign as he wants to be, as long as he does not influence human thought or behavior. When God starts intervening in human choices, that's when the opposition to God's sovereignty begins.

People don't want God to insert himself into their own free-will choices. Many today deny that God does that or is able to do that. They claim that God cannot influence the free choices of people, because if he did, humans would no longer be free. And above all, many people want to maintain their idea of human freedom.

The Bible reveals very clearly that God can and does intervene in human affairs. Nothing is outside of or beyond the sovereign power of God, not even the human mind or human choices.

Today I want to consider God's sovereignty over people—human decisions, even human thinking. I believe that the biblical evidence shows that God is sovereign over people and their choices. God has the right and the power to intervene in creation any way that he desires. And at times, for his own purposes, and for the good of his people, God influences human thought and behavior.

If God can intervene in human thought and behavior, we can ask God to do that for us, for our benefit. We can ask God to restrict or reduce evil because God has that ability. We can trust that God can and does influence human thinking and behavior for his own glory and for our good.

Notice several things to keep in mind regarding God's sovereignty over human affairs.

I. God sovereignly influences human thought and behavior.

One primary verse in this regard is

- A. Proverbs 21:1 *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.*

1. Kings in the ancient world were absolute monarchs; they pretty much did whatever they wanted. They were the highest law/authority.
2. The human heart is the center of emotions and decisions.
3. So for the biblical author to assert that “the king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord,” and that God can turn the king’s will “wherever he wishes,” was to say that God had total control over the king’s heart, mind, and decisions.
4. And if God can do that to a king—the highest human authority—then he could do it to anyone.
5. That should give us a sense of trust in God, that he has things under control. If he wants to change things, he can.

App: I often pray that God would change the minds of our rulers. Wouldn’t it be great if the president would change his mind on a few key issues? We believe that God can influence hearts and minds.

We see God’s ability to do this all over the Bible. Let’s look at a few more examples.

- B. We all know the story of the exodus of Israel out of Egypt. Because of the 10 plagues, the Egyptians were ready and willing for the Israelites to leave. We find this interesting passage in Ex 3:

Exodus 3:21–22 And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be, when you go, that you shall not go empty-handed. But every woman shall ask of her neighbor [for]... articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing; ... So you shall plunder the Egyptians.

And that’s exactly what happened:

Exodus 12:35–36 Now the children of Israel ... had asked from the Egyptians articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing. And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they granted them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

1. After the plagues, the Egyptians were happy to see the Israelites leave their country. But it seems very odd and irregular that they should give the Israelites gold, silver, and clothing. The Hebrew people were the cause of all this suffering. You would think that the Egyptians would not think favorably about the Hebrew people.
2. Why would they allow the Israelites to plunder them? The text gives us the reason: “*the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians.*”
3. How did God do that? The text does not tell us *how* God made the Egyptians favorable toward the Hebrews, but he did. He intervened in the hearts/minds of the Egyptians; he made them think or feel a certain way about the Hebrews. And the result was that the Israelites left Egypt with lots of silver, gold, and garments.
4. Did the Egyptians feel constrained or forced into this? Did they act against their will? No, there is no indication of the text that they felt constrained to do this. They acted freely and of their own will. They did what they wanted to do. And why did they want to do it? Because God gave them that desire. They did what God planned for them to do. Yet they did it out of their own free and voluntary choice.

App: God can intervene in human hearts to cause people to think or feel a certain way. God can cause people to accomplish his will without them being aware of it. And we should be glad that he can do that.

At times, it seems like our fate is in the hands of others. Their decisions will determine our futures. We are dependent on the favor or good will of someone else. We are at the mercy of others’ decisions and actions. E.g., political leaders, bureaucratic officials, employers.

That’s when we need to trust in God to influence the thoughts and actions of others, even those who have the power to harm us, ruin our reputations, or destroy our careers. We trust that God is able to intervene in the hearts of others so as to make them favorable toward us.

The fact that God can do that does not mean that he always will. We may suffer at the hands of those who are in authority. But even when things do not go the way that we'd hoped, we still trust that God can intervene in hearts and minds for our benefit.

Part of trusting God is the belief that he can make others favorably disposed toward us. He can change the way people think and feel.

- C. Perhaps one of the best known examples of God influencing human thinking is the case of Pharaoh. Listen to these verses:

Ex 4:21 ... *I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.*

Ex 7:3 *And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.*

Ex 14:4 *Then I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, ...*

And we also see this:

Ex 8:15 *But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not heed them, as the LORD had said.*

God is hardening Pharaoh's heart, but Pharaoh is responding to that by hardening his own heart. The point is that God has total access to the human heart. He influences people, yet they think they are doing exactly as they please.

Is God being unfair to Pharaoh? Has Pharaoh lost his free will? Did Pharaoh feel compelled or constrained in this experience? No, he felt like he was doing what he wanted to do. The text says that he hardened his heart. He was exercising his free will, but it was exactly what God intended. Pharaoh exercised his free will under the sovereignty of God.

God can make people favorable toward us, and he can make their hearts hard and obstinate. Even a hard and obstinate heart may be within the purposes of God.

- D. We see God's sovereignty in the case of Cyrus, the Persian king.

Ezra 1:1 *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing.*

1. God had previously revealed to Jeremiah that Israel would remain in captivity in Babylon for 70 years.
2. During those 70 years, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and took over their empire.
3. After that time had elapsed, God “moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia” to release Israel and send them home.
4. Why did Cyrus issue this proclamation? Because “the Lord moved” his heart. Cyrus had the power to destroy the Hebrew people. Instead, he issued a decree to allow them to go back to Israel and rebuild the temple.

5. Notice what the prophet Isaiah says about Cyrus:

Isaiah 45:4–5 ... *I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. ...*

Isaiah made that prophecy more than 100 years before Cyrus became the Persian emperor.

So here's an example of God influencing the heart and behavior of a pagan king who does not know God. That king did exactly what God intended him to do, although he had no idea he was fulfilling God's purposes for him.

And we should consider another verse from that same time frame that tells us more about this:

Ezra 1:5 *Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.*

Cyrus made the edict, but the people had to respond to it. It says here that God moved the human spirits of some who went back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. So God influenced both the king and the people to accomplish his will.

- E. In the book of Daniel, we find that “God caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel” (1:9). One of the reasons Daniel succeeded was because God intervened for him. God influenced the thoughts of the Babylonian official so he was favorable toward Daniel.
- F. Also in Daniel, we find the story of how Nebuchadnezzar lost his mind.

Dan 5:21 *Then [Neb] was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, ... till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.*

The implication of that text is that God caused this to happen; he brought about this madness in Neb for a purpose—to humble him and show him that God rules in the kingdom of men. God put Neb in power, deposed him for a time, and then put him back on the throne.

Trans: All of these verses show quite clearly that God has access to the human mind, and that he can influence human thinking and behavior. And he does this in a way that people do not lose responsibility for their own actions. People think what they want to think and do what they want to do, yet they are thinking and acting under God's sovereign influence.

Nothing in these passages suggests that the people under God's influence lost their personal freedom or accountability. They did what they wanted, yet it was exactly what God intended for them to do.

So we see clearly that God influences human thinking and behavior. He can do that because he is sovereign. We don't know how God might be working in the hearts and minds of others. God can change their thinking and their behavior.

This gives us good reason to trust that God can still do the same thing. We pray and ask for God to intervene so that others might show favor to us or make the right decisions.

We can trust that God has a plan, and he is working out that plan by causing people to think and do various things. We don't know how it's all going to work out, but we trust that God is active in controlling human thought and behavior for his own purposes.

II. God sovereignly restrains human activity.

Another aspect of God's sovereignty over human affairs is the fact that God restrains people from making certain decisions or acting in certain ways. Again, we find this truth reflected in several passages.

A. In the life of Abraham, we find that he told King Abimelech that Sarah was his sister, not his wife. Abimelech took Sarah into his harem, but God prevented the king from doing anything sinful with Sarah.

In that context, we find this passage:

Gen 20:6 And God said to [Abimelech] in a dream, "... I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her."

1. Note those words: "I did not let you..." God restrained the king; he withheld him so that he did not sin. How did God restrain Abimelech? Physically? No, God restrained his mind or his will. Perhaps he controlled the circumstances so that the king had no opportunity.
2. Do you think Abimelech sensed God's restraint? No, there is no suggestion here of that. He was doing whatever he wanted, yet God prevented the king from sinning against Sarah.
3. Abraham's poor choices is what put Sarah and Abimelech in this difficult position, but that was no hindrance to God. He intervened to prevent sinful activity.

App: Our sinful behavior is certainly sinful, but it is no hindrance to God's ability to accomplish his purposes. God is never frustrated by the faults and failures of his creation.

4. So God can work in a person's mind to withhold him from doing something sinful or damaging.

App: Since we are not prophets, we would likely not know when God is doing this in the mind of someone. How would we ever know that God hardened someone's heart or prevented someone from sinning? That is all happening behind the scenes; it's hidden to us.

But we believe that God can do it. We can pray that God would do it. We can trust that God will do it or is doing it for the benefit of his people.

I imagine God is restraining sin all the time. Things could be a whole lot worse if God did not restrain sin.

- B. In Gen 35, we have the case of Jacob's sons killing a group of people, and then Jacob worrying about revenge. But here's what the text says:

Genesis 35:5 And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

Even though Jacob's sons had done something worthy of revenge, God brought about a certain feeling or way of thinking in the cities around Jacob and his family. Their enemies did not attack them because of God-ordained fear. God restrained the Canaanites from attacking when they had good reason to do so.

- C. Another example: as the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, God gives them this promise:

Exodus 34:24 I will cast out the nations before you and enlarge your borders; neither will any man covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.

God promises to restrain others from coveting the land of the Jews when they are away from their property for the various religious feasts. At a time when the cities of the Jews would be vulnerable to attack, God promises that he will prevent that from happening. He will restrain others from coveting their land.

Covetousness is an inner desire of the heart. Yet God has total access to the human heart and can move it however he wants. He can prevent people from feeling a certain way. He can protect those who are defenseless and exposed to danger.

App: We can ask God to do the same for us—to restrain the evil intentions of wicked people.

D. Returning to the situation with Ezra and Nehemiah, the Bible says:

Ezra 5:5 But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that [their enemies] could not make them [stop the work] ...

The enemies of Israel could have stopped the building process, but they did not because “the eye of their God was upon” the people building the temple.

God intervened to make sure the building project went on. God restrained the enemies of the Jews from hostile action.

App: We want God’s eye to be on us so we can complete our projects and plans. We want God to restrain those who would hinder us from success. We want God to watch over us for good.

E. And by way of contrast, we can consider

Jer 44:27 Behold, I will watch over them for adversity and not for good. And all the men of Judah who [are] in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword and by famine, until there is an end to them.

Just as God can grant someone favor or restrain the evil intentions of wicked people, God can also guarantee that adversity will fall on his disobedient people. How would you like to have God watching over you to insure that adversity or disaster falls on you?

Trans: So God can influence human thinking and behavior, and he can restrain evil people from doing what they otherwise would do.

These are aspect of God’s sovereignty. And they give us good reason to trust in God and obey him.

III. Affirmations and denials about God's sovereignty over human thought

People might have many questions regarding how God's sovereignty impacts human affairs.

A. Affirmations

1. We affirm that God sovereignly influences or restrains human thoughts and actions. God is the potter; we are the clay. He is the creator; he can do what he wants with his creation, including influencing human thoughts and behaviors.
2. God has complete access to the human mind, and he can influence human thinking without the person feeling constrained or forced into anything.
3. We should take courage from the fact that God can and does work in the human heart and mind. We can pray and ask God to influence others for our benefit. We can ask God to change people's minds, to make them favorable toward us or to restrain their activity or hostility.

B. Denials

1. God's sovereignty in influencing human thoughts and actions does not reduce human responsibility or accountability. God is able to work in the human mind so that people do what they want to do while fulfilling God's intentions.
 - a) Pharaoh wanted to harden his heart.
 - b) Cyrus wanted to show favor to the Jews.
 - c) The government officials wanted to show Daniel favor.
 - d) When God intervenes in the human heart, that person feels no sense of coercion or compelling. They do what they want, and they are accountable for what they do.

Quote: God is able and does move upon the hearts and minds of people to accomplish His purposes. Yet ... God does this without violating or coercing their wills, but rather ... He works in His mysterious way *through* their wills to accomplish His purposes.¹

¹ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 66.

2. God is never frustrated in not being able to carry out his plans. He is never at a loss because he can't find someone to cooperate with him in carrying out his plans. He can move in the hearts of people so that they do what he wants them to do, and they do it of their own free will.

The creation cannot frustrate the will of the Creator. God does not need to ask permission from anyone to do anything. He is never thwarted or prevented from doing anything he wants to do. Note what Nebuchadnezzar said after his ordeal:

Dan 4:35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?

3. We are not guaranteed that God will intervene to change what someone might be thinking or to restrain wicked people from doing evil against us.
 - a) We can certainly pray that God would intervene, but we don't know that he will.
 - b) And even if he does, we would probably not know it. How would we know what is going on in someone's mind? How would we know that God is producing this influence? If the person whose mind is being changed does not even know that God is doing it, we would never know that either.
 - c) We know that God often allows the evil actions of wicked people to happen; he does not often change their thinking or restrain their actions. And that may result in us experiencing great sorrow, pain, and evil.
 - d) The frustrating thing about God's sovereignty is that we know that he can do such things, and then we wonder why he does not. Why doesn't he intervene to change people's thinking? Why doesn't he restrain evil so that it does not affect us? Why doesn't he change the heart of the king?

E.g., I often think of this regarding the political realm. Why doesn't God change the thinking of evil people who are in positions of authority in our country? If the king's heart is in the hand of God, why doesn't he change it?

God's ways are often beyond our comprehension.

4. Another denial: We should not blame our own shortcomings, failures, or sins on God's sovereignty. God holds us accountable for our own actions. We are responsible for most of what happens to us. Don't blame the devil or God for your sins. God's sovereignty is no excuse for your own bad behavior. God's sovereignty is no excuse for the sinful thinking or activity of anyone.
5. We should not become bitter or resentful when God chooses not to intervene to change someone's thinking or to restrain evil for our benefit. God often allows his people to experience sorrow, grief, abuse, and pain. But remember that God has a sufficient moral reason for the evil that we experience. If God does not intervene to change someone's thinking, there must be a good reason for it.

We can stand secure in the knowledge that God's plans for us always happen. If God wants to bless us in some way, he will make it happen. If God allows tragedy and loss, we take that as from God as well. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

When we are dependent upon people, we trust that God can move in their hearts and minds to do their part in accomplishing God's plans for us. We have every right to pray that God would direct the heart of the king or of anyone else. We can pray that those hostile to us would show us favor. We can pray that God would restrain the evil intentions of wicked people.

We should spend much time in prayer regarding these things. We are much more dependent on God than we are on anyone else. We don't know how God will respond to our prayers, but we know that our destiny is in his hands. We can pray that God would restrain evil from happening to us. We can pray that God would watch over us for good and prevent evil.

Because God is sovereign, we can trust in him. Everything about us is in God's hands; he's in control of all the details of our lives. No one can do anything to us apart from the sovereign will of God. We trust that God is able to grant us favor in the sight of those in authority over us. We trust that God is able to restrict and prevent harm.

Quote: God is sovereign over people. He will move their hearts to cause them to do His will, or He will restrain them from doing anything contrary to His will. But it is His will, His agenda for our lives, that God will guard, protect, and advance. We must learn to live by His agenda if we are to trust Him.²

² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 71–72.