

## The Sovereignty Of God: Part Two

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Herbert Armstrong mentioned on several occasions that one of the first things he said in prayer to God was to thank Him that He is God. This expression of gratitude encompassed his understanding of the enormous difference that exists between the kind, wise, patient, loving yet all-powerful Supreme Ruler and the often despotic, foolish, narrow-minded, weak-willed, immoral, grasping and self-centered efforts of men to rule over each other. What a blessing it is to live under God's direction!

The ringing declaration by God in Isaiah 46:3-5, 8-10, 12-13 reminds us of the One with whom we deal:

Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been upheld by Me from birth, who have been carried from the womb: Even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hairs I will carry you! I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you. To whom will you liken Me, and make Me equal and compare Me, that we should be alike? . . . Remember this, and show yourselves men; recall to mind, O you transgressors, remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure." . . . Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, who are far from righteousness: I bring My righteousness near, it shall not be far off; My salvation shall not linger. And I will place salvation in Zion, for Israel My glory.

God commands us in this solemn declaration to remember that what He has said in the past has always happened exactly as He said. He reminds us that the idols established in our hearts have never been able to deliver what we desire of them because they have no life, let alone power to bring those things to pass. Whatever God's counsel, whatever His pleasure, will occur. Nothing—neither time nor any other being—can turn the Almighty Eternal God aside from what He has set His will to do. We must never forget that He is always with us from birth to death, and He never fails to provide what we need.

These are awesome concepts to consider deeply and frequently. At the same time, we are confronted by a world in which virtually everything works to turn us aside from the faithful commitment God desires of us. Thus, the question for us is not, "Do we intellectually agree with God's declaration?" but, "Does it move us to be faithful to living by it?" Romans 6:12-14 captures the kind of response God intends His declaration to motivate us toward:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

All the issues of life that involve true spirituality, morality, ethics, character, correct conduct of relationships and using our God-given free moral agency come down to the same simple question that confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden: Who will we permit to be the Sovereign of our life?

On the surface this issue appears to be a "no-brainer." Anybody ought to be able to come up with the correct answer. Though this idea is simple to state, the practical application of it often is not. From our life experience, we know that its practical application is not a working part of very many people on planet earth.

We must face this because our life experiences show that all too frequently our conduct reveals that our practical application of God's sovereignty leaves much to be desired. At times, we

- » do not believe that God is supreme in His creation;
- » are ignorant of what to do;
- » are too weak to do what we know we should do;
- » are deceived to some measure;
- » are confused;
- » are so self-willed we do not care and decide to take our chances, all the while relying on God's mercy and hoping we will not reap what we are sowing.

In our heart of hearts, far too many of us are gamblers.

The critical element in all this is the use of faith. We must use faith because God has willed it so. Hebrews 11:6 reads, "He who comes to God must believe that He is." This also helps explain why Jesus teaches in John 6:29, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." God works to produce faith in His children. Therefore, if we are ever to get a handle on making right choices, we must buttress our faith with every support we can find to help us submit to God.

God's sovereignty is the very foundation of faith. It is also the warp and woof of Christian living because it energizes faith and motivates us to make the knowledge we are receiving applicable and productive in everyday life. Is there anyone else we would rather submit to? Is there any better way to live our lives than the one He has revealed? Have we been shown any hope greater than the one the sovereign God has disclosed to us?

### **Defining God's Sovereignty**

Daniel 4:34-35, the words of Nebuchadnezzar as he emerged from his seven-year curse, provides us with an excellent starting point:

And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He

does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?"

How should we define God's sovereignty? To say that God is sovereign is to say that God *is* God. He is almighty over all. It is to say that He is THE Most High, doing His will among angels and men, and that nobody can call Him into account for what He chooses to do. He is absolute in power and authority and at the same time supremely wise and loving in the outworking of His purpose. Some may foolishly or ignorantly choose to challenge Him, but none succeeds.

Psalm 115:3 succinctly states God's authority and power over all He created and surveys: "But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases." To say that God is sovereign is saying that He is the Almighty, possessing all power in heaven and earth. No one and nothing can thwart His purpose or resist His will. Psalm 22:28 adds, "For the kingdom is the LORD'S, and He is the governor among the nations" (KJV). It is good to remember that a governor manages and controls. Short-sighted and ignorant human beings think they rule, but they rule only to the extent God permits in the outworking of His purpose. Therefore God establishes kingdoms and overthrows empires, as well as setting up dynasties and determining the length of their dominion (Daniel 4:17; Romans 13:1).

I Timothy 6:15-16 gives us a brief glimpse into what the God we worship is really like:

[Christ's second coming] He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.

With a description like this, we have only begun to scratch the surface of this subject, especially in its importance to our Christian life and growth. Understanding even a tiny portion of God's glory, wisdom and power is much needed because the god of this world's "Christianity"—a miserable, blasphemous creature and a travesty of the truth—has given us a deceptive picture of Jesus Christ, causing us a great deal of misdirection. Some of the concepts of that false Christ, planted before conversion, remain in our minds, influencing our attitudes and choices.

He has presented a portrait of a helpless effeminate, a maudlin, hand-wringing sentimentalist who is desperately trying to save humanity. If He is as He is portrayed, then He must be constantly disappointed, dissatisfied and discouraged! In His ineptitude He is being defeated by the very creatures He is supposed to have created and be greater than. Is God so weak that Satan and sin in recalcitrant man thwart His purpose for mankind at every turn?

I Peter 1:19-20 lends us some insight into what has gone on behind the scenes even before God created man: "[We were redeemed] with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you." Paul adds in Ephesians 1:3-4: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." Both passages use the phrase "before the foundation of the world." Not only were man's calling and sinning taken into consideration even before the creation of Adam and Eve, so were the Savior and the church.

To imply that God's original plan has been frustrated by sin through a portrait of a weak Savior is to attempt to degrade and dethrone God. This may work to some degree with the uninformed, but not with anybody who understands God's power and purpose. Thinking that what occurred in the Garden took God by surprise declares that He is nothing more than a finite, erring mortal. Considering God's infinite wisdom, we have no reason to believe He did not plan for these possibilities even before He created the angels. Thus He planned for the possibility of angels sinning as well. This is not to say He desired these things to occur—He hates sin and the damage it does—but He created them with the possibility to do so and knew very well they would. Indeed, sin opens the door for God to display both His wrath toward the disobedient and undeserved mercy for salvation.

Notice how far God's knowledge of man's sins has been thought out beforehand—so much that God will use even sin to His glory: "Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; with the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself" (Psalm 76:10). Even the anger and the wars of man against God will turn to His praise because they will prove that He is righteous, wise and merciful in His conduct for the greater good of His marvelous purpose. Satan loves to influence people to take a narrow, short-term view of the events of history, as though there is no one overseeing and directing them to fulfill a planned purpose and conclusion. This creates the illusion that Satan is winning, that life and history occur randomly and that God, if He exists at all, does not care what is happening.

Revelation 4:9-11 provides God's right to work out His purpose as He sees fit:

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created."

The sovereignty of God is absolute, irresistible and infinite. By this we affirm His right to govern the universe for His glory and pleasure. It is, after all, His. He has power over the clay to do with all as He pleases. He can choose to mold each person as He sees fit: this one to honor, that one to dishonor, and both from the same lump, if He so chooses.

### **God Chooses Too!**

Every Christian should read and understand Romans 9:9-24. We must grasp what Paul is teaching here, or our relationship with God will have the wrong footing, one that allows us far too much say in things and easily builds to a resentful misunderstanding of events. God is under no rule or law outside of His own will and nature. He is a law unto Himself, and He is under no obligation to give an account of His matters to anybody. God is sovereign in the exercise of His power and wisdom; He exercises His power as He wills, when He wills and where He wills. We always need to remember that He is operating according to His purpose from His perspective, by His plan and time schedule, not ours.

For example, the Bible is the only direct light—a window, as it were—into the mind and operations of God. Even here, God must remove the veil from our minds to open them to the mysteries His Word contains. What would cause Paul to write in Romans 9 about the exercise of God's power? For

long seasons His power seems to be dormant, as if He has gone far away, paying no attention. Hundreds of years stretch between major characters and events like Noah, Abraham and Moses, or the Flood, the Exodus and the forming of Israel into a nation under David.

In Egypt God exercised His power, delivering Israel and slaying their cruel taskmasters. Just a few weeks after Israel walked out of Egypt without even a dog barking against them, after God parted the Red Sea so Pharaoh's army could not devastate them, the Amalekites cowardly attacked Israel's rear. Did God pour forth His power to destroy the enemy of God's people? No! Instead, He says He would have war with Amalek from generation to generation (Exodus 17:16).

Forty years later, when Israel entered Canaan, God knocked the walls of Jericho flat so that Israel did not have to use the normal strategies and skills of warfare. This event was never repeated; no other city fell to them in that manner. They had to capture every other city by the sword.

The same principle holds true regarding individual deliverance. God used His power to deliver David from Goliath. He saved Shadrach, Meshach and Abed—Nego from the fiery furnace and Daniel from lions. But Hebrews 11:36-38 shows another side of God's sovereignty:

Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted and tormented—of whom the world was not worthy.

But why? Why are some delivered and others are not? Why does God not show more consistency? Why does God allow Stephen to be stoned to death, but He releases Peter from prison? Later, Peter, according to surviving legends, is crucified upside down, and Paul is beheaded outside Rome. John, on the other hand, is reputed to have been thrown into a large pot of boiling oil, which he survived unscathed, then sent into exile on the island of Patmos, dying a peaceful death at a great age. Is God unfair?

In John 21:18-22, Jesus says to Peter:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me." Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays you?" Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."

From this direct response of Jesus, we can see that God expects each person to take personal responsibility in responding to the events of his own life and not to look with envy, bitterness or self-righteousness at what He requires of others. Each must learn to operate within his faith. God deals with each of us individually, preparing us for what He wants for His Kingdom. In a context that applies to the entire nation of Israel among all other peoples of the earth, Deuteronomy 8:18 contains an element of this same principle: "And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day."

## God Delegates and Appoints

God is sovereign in the delegation of His gifts. Though He is constant in His love, character and purpose, it becomes obvious in reading His Word that He does not deal with everyone in exactly the same way. To one He may give power to do things that He does not give to others. To Samson He gave great physical strength; the rest of us are just normal. To those before the Flood He gave power to live for many hundreds of years; to the rest of us He gives roughly seventy years. He chose Assyria to be the rod of His anger against Israel; but He made Egypt the basest of nations to this day. To Elijah He gave power to do many miracles; to Elisha, even more than Elijah—but to John the Baptist, none.

I Corinthians 12:18 brings this concept right into the present day church: "But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased." Verses 28-30 add:

And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles; then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

Because God is Sovereign He does as He pleases and we must—must!—adjust our thinking on this to avoid human nature's tendency to pull us into sin. Do we have any right to call Him into account or fall into a bad attitude because of what He permits or directs in our or other's lives? I Corinthians 4:6-7 confirms what our understanding must be on this reality:

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?

This reaches right down to all of us. What room is there for either boasting or envy? There is room for nothing but to face humbly what the Bible tells us. In Romans 12:3, Paul makes a similar statement and adds a warning: "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." Who among us clay vessels can rightfully ask God who has made us, "Why have you made me thus?" or look with disregard or envy at another, knowing God is also measuring out to him the gifts that please Him?

Human nature contains a strong drive to be in control of everything, which makes people feel safe and secure within themselves. But if we were truly in control, there would be no need for faith! Faith involves trusting God. This means we are not in control, but He, possessing monumentally pure love, power and wisdom, is in control! Knowing this, it seems almost incongruous that we would not implicitly give Him childlike trust in every area of life. But the reality is that, even though we may be converted, human nature drives us to retain control for ourselves in certain areas of attitude and conduct.

The world knows many things about God. People understand plenty about His creative power, His orderly wisdom in designing the placement of the heavenly bodies or His artistic genius in the environment of earth (Romans 1:20). At the same time, they will not yield to Him on such simple

things as keeping the Sabbath and Holy Days as our Savior did or not celebrating holidays as deeply pagan as Christmas, Easter and Halloween. Even now, God does not choose to remove any blindness that remains, keeping them in the grip of bondage to sin until He sees fit.

### **Mercy or Severity in God's Hands**

In Romans 9:14-18 Paul writes:

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, "Even for this same purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name might be declared in all the earth." Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

Many places in His Word remind us that He is in control of His creation. He determines the destiny of individuals, families and nations. At times, events on earth present us with a confused picture, but we can have faith to conduct our lives according to His will because we trust that this powerful, wise and loving God is drawing events on earth to a wonderful, peaceful and fulfilling conclusion. Currently, the church is scattered to the four winds and much looks bleak. However, Romans 8:28 is still "in the Book," and that means the scattering fits into God's purpose. From it we will be far better off than we would have otherwise.

Paul writes in II Timothy 2:19, "Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and 'Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.'" Peter adds, "The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment" (II Peter 2:9). These two apostles spell out our responsibility during this duress. We must put our faith in the sovereign God's power, love and wisdom, and get to work overcoming iniquity in our lives. He willed what is going on, and He knows where all His children are and what they are doing. He has the power to make us ready for His Kingdom, and no one can snatch us out of His hand. These ideas bolster the faith of those who believe. Nothing is more vital than that we properly use the current circumstance in which He has placed us.

The Bible clearly teaches that God bestows His mercies on whom He pleases and withholds them as seems good to Him. The Bible contains many graphic examples of this. Deuteronomy 3:23-28 shows an occasion from Moses' life:

Then I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying: "O LORD GOD, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your mighty hand, for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do anything like Your works and Your mighty deeds? I pray, let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, those pleasant mountains, and Lebanon." But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me. So the LORD said to me: "Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah, and lift your eyes toward the west, the north, the south, and the east; behold it with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. But command Joshua, and encourage him and strengthen him; for he shall go over before this people, and he shall cause them to inherit the land which you will see."

God denied Moses but permitted Joshua to enter the Promised Land. Things of this nature frequently happen in the church family, and by faith we learn to accept them—not in a spirit of resignation, but in a spirit of making the best use of the hand that is dealt us.

In II Corinthians 12:7-10, the apostle Paul cites an example from his life that shows his acceptance of God's decision, his attitude toward it and use of it:

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul turned what could have sent him into deep bitterness and passivity (an affliction God decided not to heal when Paul felt he needed it) into a strength (humility and a deeper reliance on God). As painful, frustrating or hindering as it was, his circumstance never deterred him from being an apostle who by the grace of God labored more abundantly than all others (I Corinthians 15:10).

God is, and He rules in heaven and in the kingdoms of men. He is sovereign over all He surveys. The major issue in life for us is coming to know this, believe it and by faith put it into practice personally and individually. Adam and Eve decided they would not let God rule them, and all their progeny have chosen likewise. Now by God's grace He has given us the opportunity to reverse those misguided choices and wisely choose to allow Him to rule us.