

# The Sovereignty Of God: Introduction

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*Forerunner*, "Personal," September-October 1999

Most of us in the Western world have the terms "sovereign" or "sovereignty" in our vocabulary of recognizable words, though we do not use them frequently. They are words many of us find difficult to define accurately. We vaguely understand they have something to do with rulership, authority and power, but in everyday life we do not consider them something we deal with often enough to look into more thoroughly. Perhaps if we lived in a country ruled by a king or dictator rather than a representative government, some of the dynamism and nuance of these words would be much clearer.

Neither "sovereign" nor "sovereignty" appears in the King James Version of the Bible. Some modern translations insert it to amplify God's name.

*Webster's New World Dictionary* defines *sovereign* as "above or superior to all others; chief, greatest, supreme; supreme in power, rank or authority." It says *sovereignty* is "the state or quality of being sovereign; the status, dominion, rule or power of a sovereign; supreme and independent political authority."

In the late 1950s, I was introduced to God's sovereignty when someone gave me a small book, *Your God is Too Small*, by J. B. Philips, author of the Philips paraphrase of the New Testament. He draws his theme from conversations with many people whose concepts of God were so limited that he felt it was no wonder they had little or no faith. At best, he concludes, many seem to think of God as nothing more than a greater man; an angry judge; a soft and kindly grandfather; or a scientist who invented the universe, wound it up and walked away from it, unconcerned as it operated on its own.

How does our idea of God compare with these? Do we also think of God in some of these terms, however modified by our experiences in the church of God?

Is the God we worship almighty in authority over everything? Does He shape the history of nations? Does He place and displace the rulers of the mighty and not-so-mighty nations? Is He truly as involved in life's details as Psalm 139 indicates David perceived Him? And what about the sufferings of mankind? Where does our God fit into this tragic part of life? If God is truly sovereign, He is involved—deeply involved—in all these areas.

No series of articles can possibly answer every question that might be raised about God's sovereignty, especially in regard to specific incidents. However, the next several "Personals" will touch on many concerns people have about how deeply God is involved in the operations of His creation. This article will lay out the foundational principles we need to cover these concerns in greater detail.

The sovereignty of God is easily accepted when all that matters is intellectual agreement. But practically, it is often very difficult to accept, even unfathomable, especially when that practical reality strikes close to home through a difficult, tragic event. In cases like this, we feel constrained to ask, "Where was God?"

But what about God? Has He no rights over or claims on what He has created? Can we "grant" Him the right to do as He pleases with what He has made without calling His wisdom or fairness into question? People easily make too much of man and too little of God, especially because He is "out of sight." It is time to restore some balance to our understanding of this vital subject by learning more about the Father and what He does from His sovereign position as Creator.

Who regulates affairs on earth? Is it God, the Devil or man? If we are not careful, we will automatically designate God as supreme in the heavens but concede that Satan rules the earth. Does not the Bible say that earth is the first estate of the demons, and Satan is god of this world (Jude 6; II Corinthians 4:4)?

## **Responsibility and the Sovereign God**

Because evolution is such a popular religion in this world, God is not only denied creating everything by His personal and direct action, but also few allow that He regulates what happens on earth. Most believe that nearly everything works by the abstract laws of nature that are beyond the powers of man to control completely. To some degree, they see mankind as a victim of impersonal forces.

When it comes to personal responsibility, man almost invariably thinks of his own free moral agency or blames Satan for what in fact has likely proceeded from his own evil heart, as though he has no personal responsibility at all. It is the-devil-made-me-do-it syndrome. Human beings have a powerful tendency to cast themselves as victims of impersonal external forces or malicious spirit beings taking advantage of weaknesses.

God will accept these justifications only so far. Yes, there are impersonal and abstract natural laws, and yes, malevolent spirit beings exist. Both can have an influence on us. However, free moral agency and responsibility are more weighty. Because the Bible insists we obey the Sovereign Ruler, we must include these two elements in our perspective of sovereignty.

The Bible presents sin, government and redemption as sovereignty issues. God is supreme, governing all His creation in righteousness. Some angels and all of mankind have failed, though, to submit to Him, but God aims to redeem mankind through the work of Jesus Christ. He says in Mark 7:9, 20-23:

And He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. . . . What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

Matthew 13:14-15 adds:

And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:  
"Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they would understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them."

These two passages lay the blame for sin—and the failure to submit to the sovereign God—on man. The Devil has indeed deceived the whole world, but God holds each responsible: Satan for his part and each person for his part. God says in Ezekiel 18:4, 20, "The soul who sins shall die." If this is not so, of what consequence is free moral agency?

From His sovereign position, God does not consider us free of blame because we have been duped by Satan. In His judgment of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, He apportions blame exactly where it belonged: on all three participants. Church members, especially, need to understand this because the Bible is written for those who make the covenant with God and receive His Holy Spirit. As Luke 12:48 informs us, "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more."

The Bible is not directly written for the world. We, then, are in much the same position as Adam and Eve. God has spoken to us through His Word, and we are responsible. Yet we have even less excuse for blaming Satan because his deception has been revealed and thus largely removed from us. We must squarely face our responsibility of choosing whom we will serve. Will it be the Lord Creator, Satan or our base human nature? Who will be sovereign in our life?

## **The World's View**

The apostle Paul's prophecy in II Timothy 3:1, 13 provides a concise but penetrating description of the kind of world we live in. "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come. . . . But evil men and impostors will

grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." This is a warning especially applicable to us because the world applies sufficient pressure that, if we are lackadaisical, we will allow ourselves to follow Satan's arrangement of things. The human nature that remains within us finds much "out there" attractive, and true Christians, despite 2,000 years of preaching, still see the overwhelming majority following the broad way that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13). This creates a great deal of peer pressure.

The world scene makes it appear that Christianity is an abject failure, an altruistic experiment gone awry. If the Christian allows his focus to wander, it can seem either that God has gone off somewhere or that creation is nothing more than a cosmic joke in which God never did care—that it is merely a plaything with no positive, beneficial purpose to mankind.

When viewing the expanse of Christian history, a carnal person can easily conclude that God may have good intentions, but He is frequently disappointed with how things turn out. All that He attempts to accomplish is frustrated. Either Satan outwits Him at nearly every turn, or man thwarts Him through his resistance. To those taking a cursory glance, it seems God wants to bless men, but they will not let Him. With this perspective, who can take God seriously?

We must take this seriously because, if questioned about it, we may reply, "No! I don't think that way. God is completely and totally ruling His creation." Yet, though we may say it, sometimes we live as if we believe just as the world does. When that happens, our conduct fits the description Jesus gives in Mark 7 and Matthew 13.

## **Hearing, Faith and Sovereignty**

Who will not think, live and talk that way? Those who walk by faith. What does it mean to walk by faith? It occurs when we allow our thoughts to be formed and our conduct molded by the fact of God's existence, His sovereignty over our life and the reliability of God's Word. Why? Because living faith, the faith that works, exists because of these factors. "[H]e who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). From these two foundational

elements we derive a convicting sense of God's sovereignty over His creation, and we can then develop human responsibility.

A commentator writes that we can reduce Christ's most frequently repeated command, exhortation or charge during His ministry to one word: "***Listen*** !" He means, of course, listen to the Word of God, listen to the message of His servants. "Hear" appears 135 times in the New Testament alone, most of the time in this sense or implying it. Seven times in Revelation 2 and 3 He commands us to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This is very important to faith, sin and understanding God's sovereignty—to life itself!

Jeremiah 25:3-4, 8-9 gives a simple, clear and graphic example of why hearing God's Word, believing it and understanding God's sovereignty is important to practical applications in our life:

From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the LORD has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened. And the LORD has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. . . .

Therefore thus say the LORD of hosts: "Because you have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north," says the LORD, "and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against these nations all around, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, a hissing, and perpetual desolations."

This is why Jesus admonishes us to listen. The Jews certainly *heard* Jeremiah's voice proclaim God's warning, but it did not motivate them to act. They did not fear God's sovereignty over their lives. The direct result was disruption in society, the pain of warfare and the captivity that followed. As almost any parent would say to his child in a similar situation, God is saying, "I told you not to do that. If you had listened to me, this would not have happened."

Why did they not listen? The words spoken by God's prophets carried no authority in their minds because they had no faith in God's sovereignty. If asked, these people would have asserted they believed in God. In reality, they had no faith that God was even anywhere around, that He had the power to do what He said or that He cared enough for them to do it. They lacked living faith.

Why is it so important to listen to God's message? Because God's summons comes to those who listen to and believe the message, and through them His work is done. Notice John 6:29: "Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.'" God is working salvation in all the earth (Psalm 74:12), and He is doing it in and through those who believe the Son. Only those who believe the Son will willingly submit to God's sovereignty because they look to Him as their Ruler.

The Bible is the Word of the Son as well as the Father:

"It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." . . . Then Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom [else] shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (John 6:63, 68-69)

Only from God's Word can we know who is regulating affairs on earth and the truth about what to believe. All the major issues of life revolve around whether we believe what He says.

## **The Church and Sovereignty**

What is the single biggest doctrinal concern in the church today in the wake of the break up of the Worldwide Church of God? Government.

Jude wrote his book in the wake of the first-century church's break up, due primarily to its infiltration by false ministers with strong leanings toward Gnosticism. Because there are strong similarities to our current situation, we can learn much from it. He advises:

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Jude 8 names several of the characteristics of the infiltrators: "Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries." We hear echoes of speaking evil against dignitaries in our age in the vituperation aimed at the one through whom the faith was delivered, Herbert W. Armstrong. Some speak as though Herbert Armstrong never did a right thing in his life, although virtually all of us owe our relationship to God to the work He did through him. People criticize him as if they stand on some pinnacle of sinless perfection, possessing esoteric knowledge that was beyond him.

Who were these dignitaries the filthy dreamers spoke evil of in Jude? I John 1 suggests it was the first century apostles, even as today some speak evil of the apostle God used to found his end-time church. But it does not stop there. They say, "I'll never follow another man," as though following a man is inherently evil. Those people speak either from ignorance of God's Word or by design to get a following for themselves. They are forgetting, however, God's sovereignty over His creation. Is there any place in God's Word—except for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—when a man is not included in the mix between Him and men?

Though God has occasionally stooped to speak directly to one of His servants, He has always used men as messengers to and leaders of those He was working with, including all the prophets and apostles and even some of the kings. These men may have held high positions, being close to God and at times directly inspired by Him. Nonetheless, all of them built upon what they had learned from those who went before. Thus, they too followed men.

These people may also say, "I'm just as good as he is and more intelligent." They might also say: "I can read the same resources he uses." "I can learn apart from him." "Ordinations don't mean a thing." "I've been in the church longer than he has." "My marriage is better than his." All of these may be true, but they are not the issue. God's sovereignty is the issue! It is whether



God put that person in the position to shepherd a flock! A shepherd leads, and the rest, the flock, follows. Obedience to this principle is why Paul repented so quickly after reviling the high priest: "Then Paul said, 'I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people'" (Acts 23:5).

## **When Is God Not Looking?**

Much is happening in the world and in the church that we can carelessly assume happened when God either was not looking or did not care. We easily write events off in this manner, but is it a true, biblical conclusion? Is history merely drifting, or is God directing it along a definite course and purpose?

Paul writes in Ephesians 1:11, "... in [Christ] also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. . . ." Notice he says God "works *all things* according to the counsel of His will." This thought comes in the midst of a paragraph in which some commentators believe Paul reflects on how God arranged every detail to bring Israel out of a seemingly impossible situation in Egypt and into the Promised Land. It is perhaps most directly tied to Deuteronomy 7:7-8:

The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Consider Israel's roots, geographic location and history. They were a slave people in a foreign land, freed without a revolution, taken on a 40-year journey during which their needs were supplied, led to a stronger people's land and given it when they should have been easily defeated. This land, situated between stronger and larger nations, was constantly fought over, yet Israel somehow survived. Even today, they continue to exist, though the world thinks they have virtually disappeared!

Did all of this happen more or less accidentally? Paul is saying indirectly that even as Israel's history is no accident, and since the church has succeeded Israel as God's inheritance, God has a far grander purpose that He will just as surely work out in His sovereignty. Who can withstand what He wills to do? It is no accident that we are in the church because God has been working toward these events from the beginning, and what God wills is done. God is sovereign over His creation in *all things* .

Stretch that "all things" generally into other areas of life. It makes this subject very interesting in light of Jesus' statement that a sparrow cannot fall without God taking notice (Matthew 10:29-31). Perhaps we could make a case for saying that some things occur out in the world that are of no significance to God's purpose, but what about in His church, the apple of His eye, the focus of His attention? This is Paul's theme in Ephesians 1. Is God so unaware, so unconcerned about His children that things happen without His notice, without His scrutiny and His judgment about what He should do?

Is God really the "Almighty"? Consider this: He must either rule or be swayed and ruled by Satan or man. His will must either be done or be thwarted by what He has created. Either He is the only King of kings who has perfect vision, wisdom and limitless power, or He is God only in name. It cannot be any other way; there is no middle ground in this issue. God is sovereign, or He is not.

Perhaps we take this subject for granted because we have no argument against God ruling His creation, but it is a vital part of Christian living that we need to understand. In a Christian's life, faith should undergird every motivation and action; this is living faith. However, faith is itself undergirded, supported and strengthened by a very important factor that enables it to produce good works.

At this juncture, the word "know" (Hebrew, *yada*; Greek, *ginosko*) becomes important. *Yada* appears in Daniel 11:32: "Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who *know* their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." "Know" indicates a close, warm and even passionate intimacy combined with head knowledge that

produces an "edge" in a person's life. This enables us to trust God and, at the same time, to perceive what He is doing. It is this factor that makes God's Word authoritative to us.

This warm, close and passionate relationship forms the very foundation of a true, working willingness to submit to His sovereignty. Do we really believe that, because God is holy, His anger burns against sin? That, because He is righteous, His judgments fall on those who rebel? That, because God is faithful, His promises of blessing or cursing are absolute? That, because God is omnipotent, nobody can resist Him? That, because God is omniscient, there is no problem He cannot master? "The people who know their God" do! Because God is what He is, we are seeing His prophecies of the end of this age being fulfilled in the world and in the church, and that translates into tumultuous, difficult and sometimes scary and confusing times.

Regarding Moses, Hebrews 11:27 reads, "By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible." Only through the eyes of faith can God's sovereignty be truly seen, understood and endured so growth will continue. Faith is always occupied with God, which is why sovereignty is so important to our life. Faith endures the disappointments and mysteries of life by knowing that we are God's elect and the sovereign God is involved in our lives.

We endure because we know His character—He is too wise to make mistakes and too loving and concerned about the outcome of our lives to allow us to be totally overwhelmed. We know that Romans 8:28 is still "in the Book," and because we know He rules His creation, we are assured He is on the job. Therefore we can live through these times and continue growing with a peace that passes all understanding.

## **Do We Think Like God?**

Because salvation is by grace through faith, a pastor's responsibility from God is to feed the flock with knowledge that will build faith and to provide motivation for practically applying in everyday life what God says. At this point, a major problem between God and man arises, simply stated in Isaiah 55:8-9:

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

Because we do not think like God, we are not in His image. We cannot say as Jesus did, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). God, in His wisdom, has willed that we grow in His image through exercising faith in what He says, buttressed by what He reveals of Himself in His creation.

The fundamental difference between the person of faith and the unbeliever is revealed by the way they judge things. The unbeliever, of the world, judges things by worldly standards, by his senses and by time. The person learning to think like God brings God into everything, viewing things from His perspective, by His values. He ascertains how the activity, event or thing looks in terms of eternity. He seriously meditates on God's sovereignty over all things. At times, doing this puts the screws to his trust because the Bible says that God's judgments are "unsearchable . . . and his ways past finding out" (Romans 11:33). Faith holds a person steady.

Because we do not think like Him, and because we do not have His perfect perspective, we often do not exactly know what God is doing. Only in hindsight do we understand what is occurring in our personal life, to the church or in the world in the outworking of prophecy. So we must trust Him, and in the meantime weigh what is happening and its possible outcome.

When we were in elementary school, what was our attitude toward the information the teacher gave us? We accepted it without question. When the teacher said  $2 + 2 = 4$ , we viewed her words as absolutely true, as indeed it is. Regardless of the subject—whether in literature, history, math, science, geography or social studies—we absorbed her information like a sponge. As time passed, we received more information, sometimes conflicting, from other sources. We retained it but did not always know exactly what to do with it.

By the time we hit our teen years, we began to question some, if not much, of what the teachers gave us. Our childlike acceptance was yielding before a veneer of sophistication we felt was making us wise. Some of us had

accumulated enough conflicting knowledge from a variety of sources that we became unsure what was true, especially in scientific, religious and social areas.

We thus began to make up our own minds based on our accumulated knowledge and experience, and it sometimes brought us into conflict with others doing the same thing. For those who attended college, conflict often became even sharper because colleges diffuse more specific, wider and deeper knowledge. Colleges also operate on a philosophical system that encourages challenging the teacher, present knowledge and the system.

By the time God calls us, the "I'll do it my way" of thinking is so thoroughly ingrained that only the Almighty Creator can get it out of us so that we can return to some of the rudimentary elements of faith we had by nature as children (Matthew 18:1-5). Somehow, we must get to the place where we look at God and His knowledge with the same attitude that we once gave our teachers in elementary school. Understanding God's sovereignty can play a role in helping us do this by showing how personally, powerfully, deeply and minutely God is involved in affairs on planet earth and in our lives.

It is relatively easy to conceive of Him being involved in the big things, like a nation's destiny or that of a group of nations or the church. His involvement, though, reaches right down into the nitty-gritty of our personal, everyday lives, as He works His creative powers until we think as He does, until we are truly in His image. By no stretch of the imagination can we call our lives mundane!

The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:14-15:

I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

He adds, "Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus"

(Hebrews 3:1). No higher, greater responsibility than His calling has ever been given to anyone at any time. Nothing greater can be given to a person than what God has given us!

It is our responsibility to take what He has given and run with it. But we are to run along the course God details in His Word, and we must live by faith as we do it. Submission, even to one as great and good as God, is not always easy. Jesus says the way is difficult, and we can see from the Bible's beginning to its end that those who have gone before us had many, many trials.

The only way to negotiate the Christian life successfully is to do as God instructs. To do this, we absolutely need to know that He is with us the entire way, believing His Word carries the greatest authority in the universe. He is sovereign over all, and nothing can prevent Him from succeeding at what He sets His hand to do. That is what the author of Hebrews is asking us to consider.

Isaiah 46:9-10, 12-13 says this of our Apostle and High Priest:

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.