

The Sovereignty Of God: Part Five

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," February 2000

We have seen God's sovereignty over His creation in that His work in it is precisely timed. He is sovereign over time. We can learn from the precise patterns in the movements of the heavenly bodies—the stars, moon and planets, including earth—to appreciate how this is so. This precision enables us to establish calendars to organize the religious, governmental, social and business aspects of our lives. In like manner, the Bible shows that God sets deadlines in His dealings with us, and He brings things to pass right on His schedule, not ours.

We also saw that the earth needs management because God built a certain degree of entropy into creation. Not only does He oversee and manage the earth, but He has also given mankind a limited degree of dominion to manage in His likeness. However, while natural laws regulate life to some extent, because of mankind's general mismanagement combined with his spiritual sins, God is keenly involved in overseeing and overruling mankind for His purpose.

We have begun to explore what the Bible reveals about God's active involvement in managing the inanimate elements of His creation: the weather and natural disasters like earthquakes. We will extend our search into that area, then proceed to God's sovereignty over the animate elements as well.

A Day-to-Day, Hands-On God

Speaking to the entire nation of Israel in Deuteronomy 28:7-12, Moses writes,

The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways. The LORD will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you. The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. And the LORD will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the LORD SWORE to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.

Is God involved? He is anything but passive, constantly participating across the full spectrum of the life of His people specifically and the whole earth generally. The Bible certainly does not show nature automatically producing great benefits merely according to natural laws. If it did, then the Bible would have to show the uniform laws of nature as sovereign, not the Creator God. In addition, God would be guilty of at least gross generality when He claims He does this or that.

Notice how clearly verses 1 and 2 proclaim God as the active cause:

Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God.

That the blessings are conditional shows God is actively watching and the blessings occur because He responds. Verse 7 adds, "The LORD will cause"; verse 8, "The LORD will command"; verse 9, "The LORD will establish"; verse 11, "The LORD will grant"; verse 12, "The LORD will open"; and so on.

Sovereignty Over Angels

We tend to take for granted a great deal about God and His relationship with various aspects of His creation. These are things we accept but rarely research in His Word, for instance, His relationship with angels. Seeing how the Bible reveals mankind as going through all kinds of devious mental contortions to avoid submitting to God, we frequently think of angels as being somewhat robotic, without personality and passively, automatically doing their thing. But the Bible shows that angels are created beings like us, but of much greater capacity and immortal besides. Hebrews 2:7 plainly states, "You made [man] a little lower than the angels."

This means they have personalities like men and greater capacities. When we consider mankind's technological achievements and that angels are greater than humans, we can speculate on the wonders they could produce if they did not patiently restrain themselves out of respect for God. They are mighty indeed! Hebrews 1:14 says of angels, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" At least partly because of misunderstanding this verse, some have reckoned angels as the domesticated animals of the spirit world! Nothing could be farther from the truth. They are great, thinking, powerful beings who are by choice submissive to God.

Daniel 10:8 reveals an inkling of this potential power when apparently the angel Gabriel, with more than his usual glory evident, confronts the prophet. "Therefore I was left alone when I saw this great vision, and no strength remained in me; for my vigor was turned to frailty in me, and I retained no strength." On another occasion, the apostle John, overcome by the appearance of an angel, bows down to it. But he is told, "See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 22:9). These godly men are awed in the presence of beings of greater holiness and power than themselves.

Revelation 12:4 suggests another aspect of an angel's capacity. "His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth." In biblical imagery "stars" are symbols of angels. The verse implies that Satan coerced a third of these great beings to choose to submit to him and follow him in resisting God Himself as well as the outworking of His purpose in us. The Devil's persuasion and the angels' subsequent choices occurred in the distant past, and those who submitted to him are now demons against whom we wrestle (Ephesians 6:12).

Angel literally means "messenger." Hebrews 1:14 calls them "ministering [or serving] spirits," sent by God to aid the heirs of salvation. A messenger is one dispatched to carry out a responsibility in service to the sender, and in this case, in service to the recipients as well. God has created beings greater than we are to serve us! A key to understand why He has done this is in recognizing God's

sovereignty in the words "sent forth." The greater (God) rules and utilizes the lesser (angels). The Bible shows God actively commanding and managing them to perform functions in His governance of project earth.

During David's sin of numbering Israel, God actively commands an angel:

And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it. As he was destroying, the LORD looked and relented of the disaster, and said to the angel who was destroying, "It is enough; now restrain your hand." And the angel of the LORD stood by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. . . . Then the LORD commanded the angel, and he returned his sword to its sheath. (I Chronicles 21:15, 27)

In Matthew 13:41, an end-time context, God again commands His angels: "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness." The Bible contains many similar contexts, but these are sufficient to show God commands even mighty angels. He is their sovereign too.

What about evil spirits? Are they, too, forced to submit? In Judges 9:22-24, God balances the scales of justice a bit by using a demon to requite Abimelech for killing the seventy sons of Gideon:

After Abimelech had reigned over Israel three years, God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, that the crime done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be settled and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who aided him in the killing of his brothers.

I Kings 22:19-22 posits another intriguing episode, in which the righteous King Jehoshaphat of Judah and the very unrighteous King Ahab of Israel confer on a matter of common interest, war against Syria:

Then Micaiah [God's prophet] said, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left. And the LORD said, 'Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?' So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, 'I will persuade him.' The LORD said to him, 'In what way?' So he said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And He said, 'You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.'"

The evil spirit went, of course, and Ahab died in battle.

Satan himself is entirely subject to God's control. In Eden he must listen to God's sentence, making no response (Genesis 3:14-15). In the book of Job, he cannot touch Job until God permits, and even then he cannot cross the line to kill him (Job 1:12; 2:6). Matthew 4:10-11 clearly illustrates the extent he is under God's authority: "Then Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve."' Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels, came and ministered to Him." When Christ commands him to depart, he leaves! Finally, in Revelation 20:1-3, Satan is bound and cast into a bottomless pit, and in verses 8-11, he is released for a time at God's discretion then cast into the Lake of Fire.

Over Mankind

Is God sovereign over mankind in general? There are times when, from our perspective, it looks as if events are completely out of control. Is man a creature so perverse, powerful and unruly that he is beyond God's control? Has sin so alienated us from God that we are outside the pale of His jurisdiction? Consider this: Either God rules or is ruled; either God has His way or man his. These are the alternatives. Is man entirely free to do as he pleases? Is he such a rebel against God's throne that God cannot fulfill His plan through him? Is God powerful enough to complete His purpose in spite of mankind's perversity?

It is clear from the incidents of the Flood and Tower of Babel that God can simply overrule what man does. Beyond this, however, God can work with and through a person to get him to carry out His will without his knowledge. Pharaoh of Egypt and Judas Iscariot are good examples. Was Judas, for instance, plotting from the moment of his calling to betray Jesus to the authorities? Scripture gives no indication of this, yet Jesus says He knew from the beginning who would betray Him. In John 6:69-70, He says Judas is a devil. Judas has no clue of this, but God nonetheless works out His purpose through him.

Acts 17:26-28 points out a large-scale aspect of the same principle:

And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, "For we are also His offspring."

Deuteronomy 32:7-8 confirms these things.

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you: When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel.

Notice that in Deuteronomy the focus is Israel, but in Acts it is on the Gentiles. We almost automatically accept that God is working among the descendants of Abraham, but Acts 17 extends the concept far beyond that. The natural and correct conclusion from this is that God exercises His will and purpose among unconverted heathens. He may not call them to salvation at this time, but He is certainly manipulating events to His own ends in their world as well as ours.

Paul says that God determines their preappointed times as well as where they will live. This means that He has predestined when they will rise to power, prosperity and dominance, and when they will fade into weakness, poverty and subjection. Many more billions of Gentiles than Israelites have lived during the 6,000 years of man's history.

God, then, has overseen the mighty angelic kingdom, the demons, the Israelite nations, the Gentiles and the church over millennia and has kept all of them moving toward the successful conclusion of His purpose! What kind of God is this we serve? How awesome His mind, purpose, wisdom and love!

Man does not merely owe His life to God's creative acts, but his movements across time are to some extent programmed by our Sovereign God—even down to the personal, individual level, as He sees fit. Almighty God works in this manner to the end that all might seek and find Him.

In Matthew 10:29, Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will." This is an astounding statement, considering the size of the earth and the number and relative insignificance of birds! But God's exercising of His will in working out His magnificent purpose is far greater because in this He is not dealing with irrational creatures but rational men in His image. Unlike birds, men have free moral agency and sufficient powers to form conclusions and set their wills to go their own way.

Fulfilled Prophecy

Fulfilled prophecy offers a treasure trove of truth to mine regarding God's intervention in and control of human events. It also offers unbelievers opportunities to attempt to undermine the Bible's authority, and at the same time provides breathtaking evidence of its accuracy to those who believe. Biblical prophecy is usually sufficiently vague as to appear open-ended, that is, a person can misinterpret it to fit many periods of history before God actually fulfills it. We usually see it clearly revealed in hindsight, and it strengthens our faith.

Unbelieving men think there is no God, or if they will consider that perhaps a Creator exists, they do not believe He is involved in the affairs of mankind. Such people believe that the prophecies were written post-fulfillment or are merely fanciful imaginations created to inspire or give hope of deliverance from threatening circumstances. The prophecy we will examine has led critics to claim that at least two men wrote Isaiah. Lacking evidence of the second man's name, they call him "Deutero-Isaiah," meaning "Second Isaiah."

Isaiah stands at the pinnacle of Old Testament prophecy. His is not only the longest prophetic book, but it is also the most highly acclaimed for its literary genius. He had a long ministry that apparently began in the year King Uzziah of Judah died (c. 740 BC) and spanned the reigns of Uzziah's son, Jotham, his grandson, Ahaz, his great-grandson, Hezekiah, apparently continuing until sometime after the death of King Sennacherib of Assyria (681 BC). By this time Isaiah was in his ninth decade, and Jewish tradition claims he met his end when Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, ordered him sawn in two!

Isaiah's prophecy of Cyrus, king of Persia, is most arresting because he is specifically named as the Jews' deliverer. Notice Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4, 13:

[The LORD] says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be built,' and to the temple, 'Your foundations shall be laid.'" Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—to subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut: "I will go before you and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze and cut the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the LORD, who call you by your name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named

you, though you have not known Me. . . . I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build My city and let My exiles go free. Not for price nor reward," says the LORD of hosts.

Ezra 1:1-2 states that Cyrus issued a decree to free the Jews in the first year of his reign over Babylon. Since Cyrus conquered Babylon on October 12, 539 BC, the first year of this reign was 539-538 BC. God through Isaiah, then, named him at least 143 years earlier. What God did through Cyrus also fulfills a prophecy made through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:11-14) sometime during the century following Isaiah's death. Ezra distinctly says that God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to perform this and that Cyrus claimed that God commanded him. Ezra 1:5 states that God also stirred the spirit of the Jews, Levites and Benjamites to return to Jerusalem to build the Temple, confirming His sovereignty over the whole affair.

In Him We Live and Move

It is tempting to pass off such works as something He does through the great and mighty, but Daniel 5:23 ought to make us consider how deeply God is involved in our lives. Reflect on what He says through Daniel to Belshazzar.

And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and *the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways*, you have not glorified.

We should not deceive ourselves into thinking that this principle does not apply to us because we are insignificant. It applies to all men, high or low, rich or poor, slave or freeman, Gentile or Israelite, converted or unconverted. It is deeply moving to consider that the breath on which our life depends, itself such a frail thing, is in the "hand" of an invisible Being over whom we can have no control. He can stop our breath at any time. We continue living only at His pleasure! There is perhaps nothing more absolute than the power God holds over us, yet we do not seem disposed to acknowledge it.

In addition, He claims to have the power to control all our ways. We can go nowhere without his permission; once we leave, we cannot return home without His allowance. We like to think we have faith, but do we really live our lives considering His nearness to us? How little we recognize this! Yet it is what the apostle Paul means when he tells the Athenians, "[I]n Him we live and move and have our being." Solomon reiterates this thought in Proverbs 19:21, "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the LORD's counsel—that will stand." Again he writes in Proverbs 16:9, "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps," and in Proverbs 21:1 it says, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes." *The Living Bible* paraphrases this last verse, "Just as water is turned into irrigation ditches, so the Lord directs the king's thoughts. He turns them wherever He wants to."

If the king's heart is in God's hand, and He is influencing his decisions, is it not clear that all governors of men are completely beneath the governmental control of the Almighty? What ruler can resist Him? This does not mean He is inspiring the evil things they decide to enact as policy, but He oversees and thus allows them, or they would never be able to implement them. Belshazzar seemingly had a free hand until God dramatically intervened to bring about His will. We should consider this in light of the "sovereign citizenship" movement gathering grassroots support among

certain elements in America. It presents a growing danger to some church members who are being deceived into ignorantly opposing the very governance of God!

Once we understand God's sovereignty over the nations, it is not difficult to understand where Paul based his instructions in Romans 13:1-7:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

Thus we can understand why Moses so quickly and surely considers the actions of Korah and his group as rebellion against God rather than merely against himself (Numbers 16). When Israel rejects Samuel as judge over them because they want a king, God reveals to Samuel that the people are really rejecting the rule of God Himself (I Samuel 8:7). It does not matter whether a Christian considers his nation's government to be unlawful. What matters is whether God permits it. If He permits it, this One, who is aware of even sparrows falling, has allowed it or has directly brought it to pass because of the purpose He is working out. That is all that matters. God is ruling His creation, and this is what we are here to learn and trust.

Jesus lived His entire life under an unlawful civil government. The Roman government ruled over Judea as a result of military conquest. Moreover, at times even the ecclesiastical government was not in the proper hands because corrupt Roman officials discovered that just-as-corrupt Jews were willing to pay bribes to "buy" the high priesthood. But the Scriptures repeatedly show Him subject to them, though He called both, especially the ecclesiastical one, into account. Matthew 17:24-27 is a clear example:

When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" He said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you."

The Temple tax was one-half shekel per year for every Jew over 20. Since Jesus Christ was Lord and Owner of the Temple, He and His "children" should have been free of taxation. Jesus orders Peter to pay it anyway for both of them to avoid a bitter and offensive debate on the merits of His claim. By doing this, Jesus sets the right example looking by faith beyond a legal technicality to the True Ruler, the Father. God likely brought this episode to pass for our instruction.

Perhaps a brief statement of Solomonic wisdom will summarize Christian understanding of God's sovereignty over the governments of men: "There is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the LORD. The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but deliverance is of the LORD" (Proverbs 21:30-31). His meaning becomes clearer in other translations. *The Living Bible* renders it, "No one, regardless of how shrewd or well-advised he is, can stand against the Lord. Go ahead and prepare for the conflict, but victory comes from God." *The Revised English Bible* translates it as, "Face to face with the Lord, wisdom, understanding, counsel avail nothing. A horse may be made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord."

It may seem a remote possibility, even strange, that we would fight against the Lord, yet because human nature remains in us, we do. The apostle Paul complains in Romans 7:14-23 that what he did not want to do he did anyway because a law of enmity against God worked within him. Proverbs 21:30-31 tell us that human wisdom, insight and counsel must be in conformity with God's will to be successful. God's children must understand His sovereignty over everything and conduct their lives knowing that nothing avails against God and nothing without Him.

Proverbs 3:5-8 gives supremely wise counsel regarding our lives, especially the governance of them:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones.

These verses contain the first principle upon which all our work and hope depend. In every aspect of life, we must take God into account. We should seek His counsel regarding our home, community, work and play. This is not an elective but an absolute necessity, so the relationship established through Jesus Christ influences our conduct to the point that it is according to His will. This requires humility, but if we remember that He made us, and we are dependent upon Him for everything, the proper attitude comes easier. If we do not do this, we are foolishly failing to acknowledge the One whose thoughts and ways are higher than heaven is above the earth. All of our ways are in the hand of this Almighty Sovereign; success and safety are of the Lord. We of all people do not want to end up fighting the Almighty when He causes changes in civil government or in the church. They may appear on the surface to be working against us, but who is ruling?

Recall some examples from the Old Testament: Nimrod attempts to build a tower and unite all of mankind under one government, but God sweeps it away by the simple expedient of making communication too difficult. Esau burns with anger against Jacob, but when next they meet, he weeps for joy at seeing his brother. Joseph goes into Egypt a slave and spends time in prison based on a false charge, but as a result of God's blessing, he ends his life reconciled and reunited with his family and second in command of all Egypt. Israel is a slave people in Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth at the time, but God devastates it through supernatural occurrences—Israel is freed without "firing a shot." Balaam is hired to curse Israel, but God compels him to bless. Haman builds a gallows for Mordecai, but is hanged from it himself. Jonah resists God's command to preach to the hated enemy, the Assyrians, but God prepares a great fish just for him!

Understanding this, David writes:

Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His

Anointed saying, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, and distress them in His deep displeasure. . . . "You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Psalm 2:1-5, 9)

God is infinitely stronger than even the greatest of confederacies, and He will blow away the most extensive and vigorous efforts to overthrow His plans like so much dust. He laughs at man's puny attempts to rule without considering Him, their Creator, in whom they live and move and have their being. Will He who repulsed the attacks of Satan's mighty angelic host be put in fear of more limited men?

God says in Isaiah 14:25-27:

. . . I will break the Assyrian in My land, and on My mountains tread him underfoot. Then his yoke shall be removed from them, and his burden removed from their shoulders. This is the purpose that is purposed against the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?

We can understand God's questions in verse 27 as either defiant challenges to the rebellious or rhetorical reflections for the thoughtful to consider. Either way the answer is clear: No one can frustrate His plans. He informs us with great confidence in Isaiah 55:11, "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

Job 23:10-14 contains keen insight from a man whose experience with God's governance includes a trial meaningful for all who have a relationship with Him:

But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food. But He is unique, and who can make Him change? And whatever His soul desires, that He does. For He performs what is appointed for me, and many such thing are with Him.

Is there any good reason why we should not trust this great, powerful, ever-observant and ever-present Being?