

The Sovereignty Of God: Part Four

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Several years ago in a discussion of events concerning the church and the times we live in, someone mentioned that a certain minister had recently stated in a sermon that God was delaying the return of Jesus Christ because the church is not ready. This statement, though a widely held belief in the church, is only half correct. Yes, the church is not ready, but it is not holding God back one second.

The crux of the minister's statement was a threat that those listening to him should begin paying zealous attention to spiritual matters because whether Christ would return soon or late depended on their spiritual state. If they had any concern for the state of the church and/or world, they needed to "get with it," or the burden would be on them because God's merciful patience was running out.

I cannot point the finger of scorn at this man because I am just as guilty as he; in the past I have uttered statements similar to this. But with an enhanced understanding of God's sovereignty, I must conclude that such a threat cannot possibly be true. Who has the power to stay the hand of God? Who can turn Him from the successful completion of His purpose at the exact time He has determined it will be finished? Is God sitting on His throne wringing His hands because we are delaying Him and pushing Him into a timeframe with which He is uncomfortable?

Is God Ever Delayed?

Jesus tells His disciples in John 14:2, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." God has ways of causing us to yield so that He can mold and shape us into what He desires. Because of this, we will be ready for our "place" when the Kingdom comes. God not only has power, but He also always has alternatives to ensure that His will is done without taking our free moral agency from us. He has another option we may not want to consider: If we will not cooperate by using our free moral agency for right purposes, He can always replace us with somebody better. We are, after all, the weak of the world. We have every reason to be encouraged, however. He will use every means at His disposal to prepare and save those called into His purpose on schedule with the return of Jesus Christ.

The Bible indicates that God, like manufacturers and builders, sets a time for the completion of a project. He, like men, works against deadlines. The difference between Him and us is that He *always* meets His. Genesis 17:20-21 contains a deadline concerning the promised birth of Isaac:

And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.

Genesis 21:1-2 confirms that God met this deadline: "And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him."

In Psalm 69:13, David appeals to God to set the time for answering his request: "But as for me, my prayer is to You, O LORD, in the acceptable time; O God; in the multitude of Your mercy, hear me in the truth of Your salvation." We can infer from Psalm 102:11-13 that God has already set the time of Zion's—the church's—salvation: "My days are like a shadow that lengthens, and I wither away like grass. But You, O LORD, shall endure forever, and the remembrance of Your name to all generations. You will arise and have mercy on Zion; for the time to favor her, yes, the set time, has come."

Psalm 105:16-19 reveals that Joseph's release from prison came exactly when God set it. "Moreover He called for a famine in the land; He destroyed all the provision of bread. He sent a man before them—Joseph—who was sold as a slave. They hurt his feet with fetters, he was laid in irons. Until the time that his word came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him." God's sovereignty and involvement with the details of Joseph in Egypt persist from beginning to end; everything happens when, where and how God planned. Undoubtedly, God is already working in and through Joseph as a lad of 17. But between 17 and 30, Joseph's life is a veritable roller coaster ride from top to bottom and from bottom to top.

The story shows his faith in God; through it all he trusts Him, not fully understanding every detail until after it is over. But God works throughout those years and in all the details toward a purpose and a time He had determined in advance. The same is true regarding Abraham and Sarah's 25-year wait for Isaac.

Perfect Timing

Psalm 19 teaches that God "speaks" to us by revealing Himself in the creation. Consider God's precision in the movements of the heavenly bodies in combination with the "set time" principle and Matthew 24:35-36: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only." This suggests that we might be able to know of the year and month, yet it also gives the impression that God has already set the day and hour. It is this precise deadline—toward which He is constantly working—that we will never discover. We can relate to deadlines because we must frequently work against one. In this case, God has set this mark for Himself.

Multitudes of examples show God doing things right on time. An outstanding one involves a promise He makes to Abraham hundreds of years before it is answered. When it is, it appears that God answers it almost down to the second.

Therefore say to the children of Israel: "I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD. (Exodus 6:6-8)

It happens just as God says it will, and from what we can gather from the Scriptures, it happens exactly as He purposed—right to the very day, perhaps to the very hour, minute and second!

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge: afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there was a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying; "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates. . . ." (Genesis 15:12-18)

This prophecy is fulfilled exactly 430 years later (Exodus 12:40-41; Galatians 3:17) when Israel left Egypt as the sun set ending the 14th day of Abib and beginning the 15th. God says to us in Isaiah 46:10, "My counsel shall stand." This is why the prophecies ring with such positive assurance. No puny man or angel, no mighty army of angels or all nations of men can stop Him from acting exactly how, when, where and in whom He purposes.

Practical Considerations

Under the best of circumstances, we are saved in spite of ourselves. Consider God's saving of Lot from Sodom. The angels seem to do it more for Abraham's sake than Lot's, virtually dragging him out of that cesspool of a city, but bring him out they do. With this in mind, to say that we are delaying God impugns His sovereignty! If He has set His will to save us to be in His Kingdom, He will do it and without overriding our free moral agency.

Revelation 19:7 records in advance that the bride "has made herself ready." When Christ comes she is prepared to take her place beside Him. This indicates she yields to God to be ready exactly when He is, but it does not say how painful it is for her or what she has to go through to be ready.

Preparing for a wedding between a man and woman is stressful. Besides the bride and groom beginning to blend their lives together, a multitude of arrangements must be completed so that the marriage ceremony proceeds smoothly. Jesus Christ is energetically working on us now to prepare us to take Him as our Husband. Paul writes in II Timothy 3:12, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." Jesus adds in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation." There will also be times of stern correction (Hebrews 12:5-11). It can be very painful if we fail to yield because He will apply whatever pressure is needed to motivate us to use our free moral agency rightly. Does it not seem wise to yield? Why not make it easier on ourselves?

God, an Absentee Landlord?

Many either take the sovereignty of God for granted or fail to seek to understand it more thoroughly beyond the facts that God exists and is working to some degree in our lives. But we need to see how intimately and actively He is involved. He is more than casually involved in the operations of His creation, and this includes each of us personally and individually.

Humans can literally lose themselves in their work by devoting to it all their time and energy to the exclusion of everything else. We call these people "focused" or "single-minded," and this often leads to relationship problems. There is no telling how many marriages or friendships have been ruined by this intensity of purpose. God is deeply involved in operating His creation. Unlike a man, however, God will never "lose" Himself in what He is doing at any given moment because the capacity of His powers and the perfection of His nature prohibit such a thing. Is our concept of God "big" enough to include such a thought? Our understanding of God must be growing, otherwise our faith will be severely limited.

Previously, we saw that God expresses Himself with great diversity in both the animate and inanimate elements of creation. Nonetheless, the laws of nature operate and keep everything under control. Because we are so attuned to law, we are naturally and subtly persuaded to think that God made things and then stepped aside to let laws regulate them. Does God really need to manage or govern His creation actively? Psalm 22:28 supplies the answer: "For the kingdom is the LORD's, and He rules over the nations." Notice, "rules" is an active verb, and "nations" is plural! He manages, keeps under control or directs everything according to His own purpose. God did not create then step away from what He made; He does not allow His creation to operate on its own. We are not subject to uniform, impersonal law but a Sovereign God actively controlling the operations of His creation!

Operating under uniform, impersonal law might be worth considering except for two very important factors, both of which appear early in the Bible—in fact, before Genesis 3!

- » Then God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Genesis 1:26)
- » Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

That God mentions dominion, tending and keeping shows that His creation would not operate uniformly to produce a never-ending source of life and beauty. It still requires managing, governing.

Hebrews 1:10-12 adds another factor confirming this thought:

You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain; and they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will fold them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail.

Here, stated in a simple form, is the second law of thermodynamics. The whole creation is slowly running down. God has built a certain amount of entropy into the system, which, if not managed through the constant operations of dressing and keeping, will bring it to a state of disorganization. The *Reader's Digest Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines *entropy* as "the irreversible tendency of a system, including the universe, toward increasing disorder and inertness." The principle is that neglect of natural things is destructive.

The Sin Factor

The second factor that demands that God must exercise His rule is sin, the breaking of His spiritual law, which the Bible introduces in Genesis 3. Sin greatly exacerbates the problem of governing. Thus, if God requires man to govern His creation within the extent of his dominion, God overrules what man does (as He clearly states) so that, first, events do not spin completely out of control, and second, His overriding purpose moves forward. Does God need to govern His creation? The answer is an overwhelmingly clear and resounding, "Yes!"

Though each law God created works consistently within the framework of its influence, the conditions affecting each law are not always the same. For example, each season is not always the same. One spring is not the same as all the springs that have preceded it. Some years warm weather comes early, others it is late. Sometimes record high and/or low temperatures are set. Some years have few storms, other years many. Some years the storms are weak, and in other years they are strong. Nature's overall tendency, however, is to revert to a state of wildness, and this is why, especially where mankind lives, it must be managed. If nature is not managed well, forces within natural law intensify other laws' effects, producing worse disasters than if man had left things alone.

Leviticus 18:24-25 brings this out:

Do not defile yourselves with any of these things [abominations]; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants.

This brings together two factors: Sin and God's sovereignty. Because the earth requires maintenance and therefore dominion, and because God gave dominion to mankind, the rest of creation shares in the way mankind lives. Thus, when mankind sins, nature will be affected and react to some extent. In verse 25, God personifies the land as a living creature that violently rejects what it dislikes.

The context shows the iniquity to be spiritual and that God is personally involved in what happens when mankind sins. This confronts us again with whether God actively governs this world. Has He, as it appears in Leviticus 18, set limits on the evil mankind can do?

Suppose man is totally free to choose as he pleases, and it is impossible to compel or coerce him without destroying this freedom. If so, it follows that man is sovereign, doing as he pleases—the designer and architect of his destiny. Given man's history, we can have no assurance whatsoever that morality will not gradually disappear, and that anarchy, barbarism and eventual genocide will not arise in its absence. It is absolutely imperative that God be sovereign to govern the antics of the very creatures He created! His reaction in the Flood and at the Tower of Babel is strong evidence of this.

Notice Hebrews 1:3: "[God's Son,] being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Sometimes we might be misled not to give God His due by failing to comprehend what this verse is saying. "Upholding" just does not give the impact of the Greek, giving us the impression of God as a sort of Atlas figure or as a watchmaker who wound His creation up and then walked away. *Wuest's Amplified New Testament* translates this word as "sustaining," indicating an ongoing operation. Sustaining not only gives the impression of support but also of continuous maintenance and providence. *The Amplified Bible* also catches the essence by adding "maintaining, guiding and propelling."

What this statement illustrates is the continuous, minute-by-minute, year-by-year, century-by-century, eon-upon-eon generation of the enormous, awesome, prodigious amounts of power necessary to keep His creation operating. The very stability of the creation speaks of His continuing involvement. He did not just create and walk away with everything operating according to impersonal law.

Genesis 1:3 sets the pattern for the revelation of His governance: "Then God said, 'Let there be light; and there was light.'" His sovereignty over the inanimate creation is stated very simply: He speaks and light appears. In verse 9, He speaks, and the waters are gathered into one place, revealing dry land. Since water seeks its own level, this passage indicates that God determined where He wanted the water to go, thus it shows Him shaping and managing His creation.

God says in Genesis 6:17, "And behold, I Myself am bringing the flood waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; and everything that is on the earth shall die." The Flood was not a natural occurrence. In Genesis 11:5-8, it was God who confused the languages and scattered the families of men over all the earth, and the early chapters of Exodus clearly reveal God's involvement in the plagues on Egypt. In the latter example, God even actively supervises who receives the plague and how they are affected:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt—on man, on beast, and on every herb of the field, throughout the land of Egypt." And Moses stretched out his rod toward heaven; and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire darted to the ground. And the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt. So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, so very heavy that there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. And the hail struck throughout the whole land of Egypt, all that was in the field, both man and beast; and the hail struck every herb of the field and broke every tree of the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, there was no hail. (Exodus 9:22-26)

Exodus 10:21-23 confirms God's active involvement in the affairs of men and His use of the inanimate aspects of His creation to bring about His will:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, darkness which may even be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another; nor did anyone rise from his place for three days. But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

Jesus says in John 3:8, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." This verse brings out that man has no power over the wind. He cannot command the wind when, where or how hard to blow; man has no control over it. But God does, and He uses it as it pleases Him. Notice the vivid contrast between impotent man and omnipotent God:

Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!" (Mark 4:39-41)

It is as if the wind and waves hear the voice of their Creator and immediately obey His sovereignty over them. At a word from Him, the fig tree perishes; at His touch or word, disease instantly flees. When He dies for us, it happens only because He gives men power to take His life, and as our Sovereign, He submits to our shameful treatment of Him.

Matthew 24:7 presents a challenging proposition regarding prophecy and God's active involvement in the governance of His creation: "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places." Jesus can say this only if God will use His powers purposely to increase the number and intensity of these plagues in a variety of places, even where they are not normally experienced. No study has ever shown that these things increase or decrease according to uniform law, especially in widely divergent places. Jesus intimates that they will increase unusually and rather suddenly.

Psalms 147:15-20 shows God actively exercises His sovereignty daily in good times and bad. His involvement is not limited to the big disasters we call "acts of God," though they are certainly included. "He sends out His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly. He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes; He casts out His hail like morsels; who can stand before His cold? He sends out His word and melts them; He causes His wind to blow, and the waters flow. He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His judgments, they have not known them. Praise the LORD."

Regarding "acts of God," Amos 4:6-9, 13 provides arresting insight into why God uses them to intervene in the affairs of men:

"Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities. And lack of bread in all your places; 'Yet you have not returned to Me,'" says the LORD. "I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied; yet you have not returned to Me," says the LORD. "I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me," says the LORD For behold, He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, who treads the high places of the earth—the LORD God of hosts is His name.

Is God involved? Certainly! He does these things to grab peoples' attention and turn them back to Him!

Deuteronomy 28:1-6 reveals God's active participation in blessing those with whom He has made a covenant as they fulfill their part in keeping it:

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 on 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: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. Blessed shall be your basket and

your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

We could go on and on in this chapter, but these verses suffice to show how deeply God is involved. They certainly do not show nature just automatically producing great benefits according to natural law. If it did, then those uniform laws would have to be credited as sovereign, not the Creator God. God would be lying to us when He says He did this or that.

Zechariah 14:16-19 gives us a small window into the Millennium, showing that God will then be involved in actively blessing or cursing all nations, not just Israel:

And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain. If the family of Egypt will not come up and enter in, they shall have no rain; they shall receive the plague with which the LORD strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.

Thus the Bible clearly shows that God is now exercising His sovereignty over His creation and will continue to do so beyond the return of Jesus Christ, even in the area of inanimate things like the weather and ground. Blessing or cursing is an act of His sovereignty conditioned to our response to Him. He is not merely passively paying attention and responding as He sees fit, but even more so initiating actions to bring His people to His desired end.

Even Over Beasts

The Bible also reveals God as sovereign over animals. Since men can use animals like the horse, mule and dog to do his will, it naturally follows that the Creator's use of them is even greater and more purposeful in illustrating His power in bringing about His purpose. Notice Genesis 2:19: "Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name." God brings animals before Adam to be named. Genesis 6:20 adds, "Of the birds after their kind, of animals after their kind, and of every creeping thing of the earth after its kind, two of every kind will come to you to keep them alive." God directs even carefree birds and mindless insects to come to Noah. Genesis 9:2 introduces something new: "And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand." This implies that the dread is new, something God added to alter their relationship with mankind.

Amidst the plagues on Egypt, God uses and controls even the tiniest of creatures:

Or else, if you will not let My people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants, on your people and into your houses. The houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand. And in that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, in which My people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there, in order that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the land. (Exodus 8: 21-22)

Before this, God brought forth huge numbers of frogs. But the significant element here is that He chooses to demonstrate His dominion through refusing to allow small flying insects, seemingly free to go anywhere they wished, into Goshen, the dwelling place of the Israelites. The same sort of distinction occurred in the plague of murrain. Egypt's cattle became diseased by a virus or bacteria and died; Israel's remained untouched and healthy.

One of the more remarkable occurrences is in when He caused Balaam's ass to speak (Numbers 22: 28-30). Several other passages show Him involving animals in the affairs of men. In I Samuel 6:1-12, God directs back into Israel the two milk cows pulling a cart laden with the Ark of the Covenant. I Kings 17:2-6 records ravens sent from God feeding Elijah. In II Kings 2:23-25, God sics bears on Elisha's 42 tormentors. He shuts the lions' mouths when Daniel is thrown among them (Daniel 6:22). He prepares a great fish to swallow Jonah and compels it to vomit him up on shore exactly where He wants him (Jonah 1:17; 2:10). In Matthew 17:27, He causes a fish to bring Peter a coin so both Jesus and Peter could pay their taxes. Finally, in Malachi 3:11, God declares, "'And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field,' says the LORD of hosts." Here, God selectively exercises His authority and power over the tiny organisms that can destroy the fruits of His people's labor to prosper them and not another—even during a plague! God is watching and acting for the benefit of His name and His people.

All this does not mean the laws of nature have no effect. The Bible presents a broad general concept. The uniform laws of nature, given by God, combined with the state of our relationship with Him determines, to a great measure, whether He will bless or curse. This is not the entire picture, though, because His spiritual purpose always overrides everything, and He is Sovereign over all. It is entirely possible for us to be obedient to God's will and have a good relationship with Him, and still suffer or seem not to prosper as we would normally expect. Job is a prime example of this.

Though some have said that Christ cannot return because the church is not ready, this cannot be true! If it were, we would be directing and controlling the affairs of God, not Him. The reality is that He is moving things at His pace. Are we willing to trust that the faithful God is aware and at work, and that His purpose and how He works it out will resolve far better than if only our will were done or if only natural laws were at work? This means we must strive to make His will our will in everything. We must be willing to expand our understanding of our powerful God's *active* involvement in all things pertaining to His desire to bless us and bring us into His soon-coming Kingdom.