

The Sovereignty Of God: Part Three

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The prophet Daniel writes, "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" (Daniel 11:32). Historical evidence identifies the man referred to as "he" as Antiochus Epiphanes. Because the record of his activities against the Jews parallels many of the activities prophesied about the end-time Beast of the book of Revelation, many believe he is a symbolic forerunner of that one to come. This verse prophesies three things of the coming Beast:

First, we normally and correctly associate the Beast with great, though evil power. However, among other things he will also be a flatterer. He will not only be a person of great political wisdom, but he will be personally persuasive and charming. Proverbs 31:30 warns us, "Charm is deceitful"—all too frequently, it is nothing more than a social and public relations skill used for personal gain. It can be nothing more than a dishonest puffery displayed to get another's cooperation to achieve an ulterior motive. Practically, it can easily become manipulation and control by a skilled person using honeyed words. David's experience with a charming betrayer is recorded in Psalm 55:21: "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords." Politically, this activity is defined as treachery.

Second, Daniel 11:32 also tells us he will corrupt or seduce some of those who have made the covenant with God. At first thought we might think that these are the unconverted, but that is not so. This refers to the last phrase of verse 30, where the Beast "shows regard for those who forsake the holy covenant." These are people who apostatize. A person cannot forsake an agreement he has never made. Some of the converted will be seduced by manipulative flatteries and corrupted into cooperation. At the end time, that means some of us! *Reader's Digest Encyclopedic Dictionary* lists some of the definitions of *corrupt*: "to pervert the fidelity or integrity of as by bribing; to destroy morally; pervert, ruin, change from the original, debase, contaminate."

Putting these two factors together, we ought to imagine God waving a yellow caution flag before us, revealing an area of danger that we should mark well. It is highly unlikely that any of us will move in the same political, social and military circles as the Beast. Thus, his personal charm or flatteries will not be used to deceive us in an intimate, personal circumstance. Therefore, his political wisdom and flatteries will be exhibited in his public policies. We must never forget that this man will be of the world and as unconverted as a man can be.

Therefore the political strategies he will use will essentially be appeals to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (I John 2:15-17). He will appeal to us to abandon our faith and give our cooperation, trust and loyalty to him by submitting to political programs and public policies that offer us physical wellbeing, peace and safety under his umbrella. It will seem advantageous for us, at least on a short-term basis, to support his programs. He will make glowing promises of preferment, reward and peace. But never forget, when seduction and subversion through flatteries fail, the reign of terror by persecution begins.

Third and finally, the verse prophesies that those who know their God shall be strong, or stand firm, and do exploits. God inserts this to show us how not to be deceived by flatteries. Jesus says in John

17:3, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Knowing God is the key to seeing through and rejecting the seductive flatteries of the Beast because it is the foundation of faith. We know God gives truths that are eternal.

The Beast will deceive through a combination of outright lies, partial truths and temporary truths. The people who see through his devious words will do so because they know and believe God and His truth. They will therefore be strong in giving glory to Him. These people will prefer to risk their lives rather than betray God's honor. By believing God, they will be prepared for the Beast's onslaught, and this will give them strength because it produces firm resolve and sense of purpose.

Though these prophecies are not yet fulfilled, evidence is accumulating that they are just over the horizon and thus something we may soon face. This series of articles will help us understand God's overruling sovereignty from the Bible's perspective—both to prepare us for what we might confront regarding these prophecies as well as to help us understand, face and overcome the day-to-day difficulties we encounter.

God, Sovereignty, Rulership and the Individual

God's rulership over His creation, including us, reveals Him choosing to do or not to do on the basis of His own purpose and will. Frankly, the specific "whys" of His election to do or not to do some act frequently escape us entirely so that we are left to speculate, hopefully on biblical precedent. For instance, God knocks down the walls of Jericho and never again repeats that miracle in Israel's behalf. He allows Stephen to be stoned to death, but lets John escape boiling oil unscathed and live to be nearly a hundred years old. He heals Hezekiah but not Paul. He chooses to heal a man who neither requested it nor expressed any faith in Him, yet He passes by everybody else.

The point is that He actively oversees the outworking of His purpose, selecting His spots to intervene and accomplish His ends. He has the power and the right to do as He pleases, when He pleases, with us or anyone else. We hope we are learning and putting our trust in the fact that nothing He does happens randomly. It may seem that way when we hear of hundreds being killed in an airplane crash; when natural disasters kill large numbers of people and devastate billions of dollars worth of property; or, as recently reported, when a man in Colombia, South America, is charged with killing around 150 children! We cannot help asking, "Where was God, the One who knows all that is going on and has the power to intervene but did not?"

The question for us is quite practical: Are we willing to live within this relationship with Him, though we will at times be somewhat mystified about why certain things do or do not occur because we do not fully understand the goodness and severity of God (Romans 11:22)? Are we willing to live our lives by faith, walking according to things not seen, aware of His great loving, intimate concern for us—though knowing that others He loved endured some horribly painful experiences because they had the same faith in Him (Hebrews 11:32-39)?

The answer to these questions will, to a great degree, decide the extent and enthusiasm of our cooperation with Him. In turn, this will affect how much we will grow and therefore whether we will really know God. Being a Christian, a slave bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ, involves yielding our lives into the hands of the Sovereign God. A slave is one whose life is determined by another, and a Christian has yielded control of his life through indebtedness to his Redeemer. On the other hand, human nature is extremely self-concerned. It does not want to give up control and will fight with great tenacity to retain it. As its possessor, to whom will we give our

loyalty? To the flattering persuasions of the Beast, who offers immediate fulfillment and/or relief, or the sometimes distant and mystifying will of the Sovereign God?

Some Instructive Examples

Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. . . . He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:25-27, 30)

Consider this situation. Jesus later testifies that of all men born none was greater than John the Baptist. Earlier in his ministry John had attracted a great deal of attention. Crowds followed him everywhere and seemed to hang on his every word. Now his bewildered disciples watch the fickle crowds leaving John to hear and follow a new voice. To compound the problem, John himself had extolled Jesus and seemingly set off the exodus of his followers to Him. So in their frustration at not wanting to see John in any sort of disadvantage, they enter into an argument with others around them.

Their question is, "John, this other fellow, this Jesus, is growing great, but you are diminishing. Why? Have you lost your touch? What does He have that you do not?" John's reply reveals a great deal about his character: He is a humble man, neither jealous, presumptuous, envious or bitter. He exhibits no rancor but a generous spirit. He knows who is guiding and directing His servants. He rejoices in the operations that he, as a servant, can perform in being the forerunner to Christ. A paraphrase of his response might be: "I have to work at whatever God charges me and be content with what He gives me. It is not as if Jesus is stealing disciples from me, it is because God is giving them to Him." He undoubtedly perceives God as His sovereign Ruler.

This is a major reason why the Church of the Great God operates as it does. We have not proselytized among the church of God. We have not invited people who were with the Worldwide Church of God or any of the spin-off groups to come with us, using the presumptuous tactic that we and we only are doing the work of God or that we and we only are Philadelphians, therefore you had better come with us lest you be judged a Laodicean. When the Church of the Great God began, I did not understand this principle as precisely or as submissively as John the Baptist did, but at least I knew we should not try to rustle sheep from our brother's corral. We must remember who owns us: the Father and Son, not the minister. Just as surely as God calls whomever He wills, so He has every right to place people where He wants them when He wants them there.

In Jeremiah 23:21-24 God makes an interesting indictment of people who run though He does not send them:

"I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings. Am I a God near at hand," says the LORD, "and not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?" says the LORD; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the LORD.

God is very aware of what is going on. He has scattered His people, and He knows where each one is, what they need to fulfill His purpose for them, and whom they need to help them and where they

need to be so that can occur as He works with them. If the Father wants to give us people to work with and to help in our work, then that is the way it has to be. We are very happy to receive them from Him. Within God's will no other way will successfully work to glorify Him.

Consider God's sovereignty in the exercise of His love. A number of months ago I attempted to explain that God does not love everybody equally—that, in fact, He does not love everybody except in the sense that He will always do what is right for them within the framework of His will and purpose. Satan is a good example. Does God love Satan as much as He loves Jesus Christ? Does God love Satan at all? Can we name even one lovable quality in him? We could begin to reason, "Well, I can understand how God doesn't love Satan. I mean, look how evil He is." This rationalization, however, is just our vanity puffing us up as being better than Satan. If God says we are worthy of death for committing only one sin, are we all that much better than Satan?

Consider Psalm 139:21-22: "Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies." This psalm's superscription attributes it to David. It is a part of God's Word, and therefore it was written under the inspiration of God. We have to conclude that God, under certain circumstances, permits a flawed human the right to hate. If it is all right for a flawed human to hate under certain circumstances, then it is certainly all right for the perfect Creator God to do so.

As "hate" is used here, we should not conclude that God is speaking of a virulent and malignant passion that desires to destroy the life of another. The words "loathe" or "grieved," as modern translations use, defines and limits the hatred to deep sorrow for or strong disapproval of the conduct of those under discussion. David did not desire to be associated with them; he wished to avoid their company and find his friendships among those of beliefs and conduct like his. Conclusion? God does not love everybody equally, nor does He expect us to. Psalm 5:5 concurs: "The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity."

God adds to this concept of His hatred in Malachi 1:2-3: "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." In Romans 9:10-13, this statement appears in context with another interesting comment:

And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

The way Paul explains this love-hate concept shows God displayed His "hatred" before either Esau or Jacob had ever done a thing, and that His choice of Jacob expressed His love.

No clearer illustration shows that works had nothing to do with God's choice of whom He would use for His purpose. God simply exercised His sovereign right as Creator God to do completely and totally according to His will. He decided to love one and not the other. What about the progeny of Esau, the Edomites? Who are they today, where do they live and what is their history? God indeed blessed Esau, as Genesis 27:39-40 delineate:

Then Isaac his father answered and said to him: "Behold, your dwelling shall be of the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; and it shall come to pass, when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck."

Compare these blessings, however, with what God gave Jacob, or Israel. Who has God blessed superabundantly? Who lives in the fairest lands in all the earth? Who has been blessed with God's Word?

Did He do this because the progeny of Jacob is any better than Esau's or anyone else's? No, He did it because He is God. He exercised His sovereignty in our behalf. He loved our fathers and He loves us. Notice 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.

There it is right in His Word. He seems to delight in choosing to pour out spiritual blessing upon those least esteemed and considered the weak (I Corinthians 1:26-31). Does this offend us, that He chooses one and not another? Are we disturbed that He distributes His blessings unequally, to one more, to another less?

Let's make this very personal. Ephesians 1:3-6 proclaims:

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, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.

His Word declares that in His love He predestined us "according to the good pleasure of His will." It does not say that He predestined us according to what He foresaw we would become, that He chose us because we were from a particular ethnic group, or that He picked us because of some mark of intelligence, character, looks, ability, or any other quality. Just as in Deuteronomy 7, His calling of us occurred out of the good pleasure of His will. He gave to us the same privileges and opportunities as He did to Jacob rather than Esau, and they were extended on the same basis—by God's election following the counsel of His own will and not by our works.

Sovereignty and Grace

We need to consider ourselves in comparison to a singular human being on the one hand and a whole nation, as seen by God, on the other. David writes in Psalm 22:6-7:

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All those who see Me laugh Me to scorn; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, "He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!"

These words, originally penned by David, were apparently uttered by Christ as He was dying on the stake. Who said them is not important. Both were great men, the One infinitely greater than the other, but that, too, is of little importance to the point. Both were humble men, considering themselves objects of contempt, and compared to God, as nothing.

Isaiah 41:8-14 adds another perspective to this picture.

"But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend. You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest regions, and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away: Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.' Behold, all those who were incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; they shall be as nothing, and those who strive with you shall perish. You shall seek them and not find them—those who contended with you. Those who war against you shall be as nothing, as a nonexistent thing. For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.' Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I will help you," says the LORD and Your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

The whole nation of Israel is but a worm before God! He frequently calls Ezekiel "son of man," but that phrase can also be legitimately translated "son of dust"! Whether worm or dust, neither is a flattering comparison. But He loves these "worms" and this "dust," and that makes all the difference in the world! Through bestowing His favor He is making holy and powerful instruments of worms and dust.

This means, then, that God is sovereign in the exercise of His grace. Grace, in its broadest biblical sense, is favor shown to the undeserving. It is the antithesis of justice. Justice demands the impartial enforcement of law, requiring each to receive his legitimate due. It bestows no favor and is no respecter of persons, thus it knows neither pity nor mercy.

In Romans 5:20-21 Paul writes:

Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Grace reigns supreme over law, sin and death. Because God is gracious and the supreme sovereign over His creation, and because He is supreme over law as its Giver and can resurrect whom He chooses, grace is His to give freely as He pleases. Grace is supreme over the others because God has willed it so and gives it to whomsoever He chooses.

Because grace is a gift, it can neither be demanded nor earned (though it can be requested). Therefore salvation must be by grace. Because of this, even the greatest sinner is not beyond the reach of His mercy. Conversely, because salvation is by grace, all boasting is likewise excluded.

For example, Isaac receives grace, but Ishmael is cast out with his mother. Jacob receives the inheritance and blessing, but Esau is in reality cursed. God chooses to have Christ born in the tiny town of Bethlehem, not at the temple or in the capital city, Jerusalem. He could have sent angels to announce His Son's birth in every capital of every nation on earth, or at least to announce it to the religious leaders among the Jews. Instead, He chooses to invite common shepherds and foreign magi for that peculiar honor.

Matthew 20:1-2, 11-16 also touches on God's sovereignty pertaining to His right to do as He pleases:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. . . . And when they had received it, they murmured against the landowner, saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day." But he answered one of them and said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

This is a subject that must be thoroughly understood and practiced if we are going to have a right relationship with God. He is Creator and Sovereign Ruler, and we are servants He has chosen out of the good pleasure of His will. He will honor His covenant with us, but He also retains the right to use us as He wills. The position He has put us in is at the same time humbling and an awesome privilege and honor. The value of this graciously tendered gift is so great we in no way want it to slip from our grasp.

Sovereignty Over Creation

Perceiving how God displays His sovereignty in creation will help to lead us to a fuller understanding of His administration of planet earth. Revelation 4:11 in *The Living Bible*, says, "O Lord, you are worthy to receive the glory and the honor and the power, for you have created all things. They were created and called into being by your act of will." Kenneth Wuest, an eminent authority on the Greek language, translates the last phrase, "and because you willed it, they existed and were created."

Think back to that time before anything we call "the creation" came into existence, when God and the Word were planning. Even then the One who became the Father was sovereign. He might create this way or that; He might create a million worlds or one. He might create one body of creatures with absolute equality, or He might endow millions of creatures with great diversity. He might create an organism so tiny that nothing but the most powerful microscope can reveal its existence, or a universe so immense we can never discover its limits, if it has them. I Corinthians 15:40-41 declares:

There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory.

Why is it this way? Because God exercised His sovereignty to make them this way.

God chose to create in great diversity and with great contrast of nature and function. Thus we have lions and lambs, dogs and cats, mouse and elephant. We have the ugly, foul-smelling and sometimes vicious pig that nonetheless seems to be among the most intelligent of animals, and the powerful, sleek and beautiful horse among the least intelligent. The lion and tiger roam their domains with a great deal of freedom, while the donkey, mule and ox live lives of continuous drudgery as beasts of burden. One animal, the cheetah, is created streamlined and swift of foot, while another, the tortoise, is ungainly and slow like molasses, but lives a very long life protected by sturdy body armor into which he can pull his head. Why should we think it strange that God gives one person five talents and another one? Why is it so odd that He made more than one race and wide variety of families within those races into which one can be born?

Proverbs 16:4 provides wisdom regarding sovereignty when it teaches, "The Lord has made all things for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom." This is a basic truth of Christianity that we neither hear nor consider very often because it has become popular for man to glorify himself, thinking he is somehow running the show and far more important than what the Bible reveals. Man is important only because God has made us the focus of His creative efforts, not because of anything inherent within us. We have great potential because of God's workmanship now in progress, but aside from His purposes, we are nothing but animated clay.

Psalm 135:3-6 contains meaningful instruction in this regard:

Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant. For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His special treasure. For I know that the LORD is great, and our LORD is above all gods. Whatever the LORD pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places.

Since God is God, who can dare challenge His prerogative? Who can dare call Him into account for the way in which He deals with us or those we feel close to? Do we, in our limited perception, frequently become critical or frustrated with the way God is handling affairs? When this happens, we are in reality leaving God out of the picture. Where is our faith in His character or His lovingkindness? To murmur against Him is rank rebellion. To question His ways in the wrong attitude is to impugn His power, wisdom and rights. We should never forget what Isaiah 40:17-18 says of Him whom we serve: "All nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?"

We can see that God has created all of nature with great diversity. The laws of nature, also set in motion by God, operate and keep everything under control. Is it really necessary for Him to manage or govern His creation actively? Psalm 22:28 reminds us, "For the kingdom is the LORD'S, and He rules over the nations." The King James version reads, "He is the governor over the nations." But rule is what a governor does. He rules, manages, keeps under control or directs according to His own

purpose. Did God create all things and then step away from what He had made, allowing it to operate on its own? Are we now subject to uniform, impersonal law rather than a Sovereign God actively controlling the operations of His creation? Everywhere the Bible confirms that God is actively involved in managing His creation, and no part of His creation receives more attention than the supreme, ongoing creation He is working in our lives, the creation of His image in us. This Almighty, sovereign God has His attention focused on His church, and we can have faith in that. There is nothing in its existence of which He is not aware and that is not subject to His sovereign dictates.

As we prepare for what is coming, who will be the sovereign in our lives, the world today, the Beast who is coming, or God, by faith, today, tomorrow and forever?