

The sovereignty of God in our salvation also humbles our naturally proud hearts. We tend to think too highly of ourselves and our abilities. However, when we come to see that we would never have surrendered to God if he did not first work in us, we are greatly humbled. There's something in every fallen child of Adam that wants to contribute something to their own salvation. We want to add a little of our own works and effort so that salvation is viewed as a cooperative effort between us and God. But this is not what the Scriptures teach, nor will they allow us to move in that direction. The apostle Paul writes, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (*Eph 2:8-9*). His meaning is clear. There is nothing we can add. We contribute nothing but our own sinfulness and unworthiness. We come to God as empty-handed beggars looking to his mercy in Christ alone. Salvation is the free and gracious gift of God. We are not saved because of anything we have done, or because we are somehow better than our neighbors, or more desirable to God when considered apart from Christ. God's sovereignty in salvation melts away our pride and leaves us no room for boasting. And in its place there grows a deep thankfulness for such a great salvation that has come to lost sinners such as we were and at such a great cost.

The sovereignty of God in our salvation also gives us confidence as we face the future. We can stand our ground against spiritual opposition because we know that he who has begun the good work in us will carry it on to completion. As Christians we quickly become aware of the many difficulties that we are called to go through in life. There are terrible foes who try to keep us from persevering with the Lord and who discourage us time and time again. It is no wonder then that doubts and fears arise about the ultimate outcome of our commitment. We sometimes wonder if we will make it to the end. Will we be able to hold on to Jesus amid the twists and turns of life? Will we prove to be valiant soldiers or will we turn back in disgrace? Although we have a very important role when it comes to keeping in step with the Spirit (*Gal 5:25*) and keeping ourselves in the love of God (*Jude 21*), we are not kept by our own efforts alone. God, who called us by his grace in the beginning, will keep us by his grace until the end. So Paul can say with great assurance: "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (*Phil 1:6*). God is on our side. He has brought us to himself, and he will not abandon us along the way. He will keep us all the way to the end. We are safe in the hand of Jesus and in the hand of the Father who gave us to him. As Jesus said,

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand (*John 10:27-29*).

The Sovereignty of God and our Personal Lives

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God anchors our prayers. Some people think that belief in the sovereignty of God chokes off prayer. They do not see the need to pray if God is in complete control of the situation and his will is ultimate. Fortunately, the Bible does not reason in this way; in fact, the Bible goes in the opposite direction. For example, after being released by the Jewish authorities in Acts 4:23-31, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that had happened to them. This in turn caused the people to raise their voices together in prayer to God. In the prayer that followed they reflected upon God as the Sovereign Lord who made the heavens and the earth, and everything in them. He is not only the creator God but he is a speaking God who has revealed himself by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of his servant, their father David. Long before Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city of Jerusalem to conspire against God's holy servant Jesus whom he anointed, God predicted what would take place. And when they acted for their own reasons as an expression of the corruption of their hearts, they did exactly what his power and will had decided beforehand should happen (*Acts 2:23; 4:27-28*). So rather than discouraging prayer, Luke tells us that the sovereignty of God actually *inspired* their prayers and *motivated* them to ask for more power so that they might speak the word with boldness accompanied by miracles of healing, signs and wonders. Their corporate recollection of the sheer majesty of God in accomplishing salvation in spite of the venomous opposition of the powers of darkness did not stifle a spirit of prayer; instead it gave their prayers wings that lifted them up and carried them to the throne of God's grace.

The same is true of our prayers. There is no reason to pray to a God who is merely doing his best to work things out for his people somehow. While prayer may have some physiological and psychological benefits for the practitioners, that is not why we pray. We pray as Christians because we want to express our love and gratitude to God for all he has done. We also want to find healing for ourselves and for others. We want to see things happen. We long to see the kingdom of God expand, churches established and congregations built up in the most holy faith, the lost converted and brought to a saving knowledge of Christ. We understand there is no sense in praying at all if God is not sovereign and able to intervene in this world and in our lives. But because he is sovereign we can pour out our intercession with bold confidence knowing that he who reigns over the universe is able to break into human history, including our history, without in any way violating our freedom and responsibility as human beings.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God also stabilizes our lives in many practical ways. As finite beings, our perspective on life is often very limited. Consequently, we worry about many things, sometimes to the point of being paralyzed by

our anxieties and fears. If God were not sovereign we *would* have something to worry about! How can we be sure that he will triumph in the end? How can we know that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose"? (*Rom 8:28*). We can know because our confidence lies in God himself, the creator and sustainer of the universe. He is the One who never slumbers or sleeps. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explicitly forbids an unbelieving kind of worry that takes our minds away from what is most important. He tells us not to worry about our lives, what we will eat or drink; or about our bodies, what we will wear, not only because we are more important than food, drink and clothes, but because our heavenly Father knows that we need them and he promises to provide for us if we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (*Mat 6:32-33*). Life can be difficult. Indeed it is. Sometimes it is best described as a "veil of tears." There are many disappointments and discouragements. Terminal pronouncements would drive us to despair if it were not for the fact that God is sovereign and he reigns in heaven and earth. "The sovereignty of God is a soft pillow for a weary head."

Divine sovereignty also rules out luck or chance. Things may *appear* to happen "by accident" but ultimately this is not the case. This universe in which we live is a personal universe, because behind everything that happens is the triune God who is not only all-wise, all-powerful and all-knowing, but infinitely personal. Nothing just happens. Things come about because they have been decreed by our Father in heaven. This is the difference between various forms of pagan superstition and the Christian faith. Superstitious people try their best to appease the "forces" of the universe in the vain hope that this will cause things to go well with them. Today many people consult horoscopes and fortunetellers hoping to discover hidden information that will help them plan for the future. But Christians who understand the sovereignty of God do not need any of these things. If we need wisdom we go to the word of the God who cannot lie. When things come into our lives that we do not understand, we know that they have come from his wise and loving hand and that they serve a purpose in our lives. Although we may not be able to see it at the time and may not understand God's dealings with us in this life, the fact that he is there directing all things for his glory and our good is profoundly comforting. Our knowledge of God's sovereignty keeps us from being tossed back and forth like the waves of the sea. As it says in that famous hymn *Solid Rock*—

*His oath, his covenant, his blood, support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.*

There is no greater stability than this. When we are mindful of his sovereignty, the world is a different place for the Christian, no matter what is going on around them.

God's sovereignty also has implications when it comes to the very personal matter of self-acceptance. It is very important to understand that God has made every one of us as unique

reflections of his image. David speaks of God's knowledge of himself and God's involvement in his life from the very beginning:

For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them (*Psal 139:13-16*).

This kind of all-encompassing sovereignty even extends to traits that we might view as liabilities. When Moses was reluctant to speak to the Israelites in God's name because he was slow of speech and tongue, the Lord reminded him that he was the One who gave human beings their mouths and made them deaf or mute, and he was the One who gave them sight or made them blind (*Ex 4:11*).

The same is also true of any gifts and abilities that we have. When Israel was entering the Promised Land, Moses reminded them that it was the Lord who gave them the ability to produce wealth in keeping with his covenantal faithfulness (*Deut 8:18*). And in the New Testament, the apostle Paul links the presence and distribution of spiritual gifts to the sovereign working of the triune God: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (*1 Cor 12:4-6*). We are who we are because God has made us that way. And no matter who we are, if we yield to him, we can glorify him and enjoy him forever.

Thus, God's sovereignty is personally liberating for those who understand it. None of us are called to serve him in precisely the same way as those who have gone before us. As believers we stand before the Lord as individuals and we present ourselves to him as the One who made us the way he did for a reason. He has something for us to do that only we are able to accomplish. Instead of looking around at everyone else or trying to imitate them, we should be asking the Lord to help us realize our own unique purpose. Sometimes people can feel that there is nothing they can do to contribute to the cause of Christ. But nothing could be further from the truth. God does not make mistakes, nor does he make junk. We have value as his creatures and we have even greater value as those redeemed by his Son. In fact, salvation enables us to enter into our true purpose as human beings. Paul brings salvation and our service as Christians together in a way that grounds them both in the sovereignty of God:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them (*Eph 2:8-10*).

The Sovereignty of God and our Ministries

When it comes to Christian ministry, the sovereignty of God is a great encouragement in at least four ways. *First, it assures us that in the end, God will win the battle.* Victory is never in doubt, even though we are up against some fierce opponents. If God were not sovereign, or if he gave up his sovereignty in certain areas in order to allow for human freedom, then we could never be sure that he would actually defeat his foes and usher in the new heavens and earth as predicted and pictured in Revelation 21 & 22. In fact, the bulk of the book of Revelation would be nothing more than wishful thinking on God's part, or at best a sketch of how he would like to see the future unfold. But this is not how Revelation begins or ends. Read the first three verses. There is no suggestion of uncertainty in the opening words. The revelation is set forth as genuine and sure. We are encouraged to listen and obey and to allow the prophecy to regulate our lives. God knows what is going to happen because he has ordained it. And on the basis of his decree he can give us instructions as to how we should live. The characteristic certainty of Revelation as it progressively reveals what will happen during the church age by means of pictures and symbols, between the advents of Jesus Christ, comes to a triumphant conclusion at the end of the book (*see chapters 19–22*). Revelation leaves no doubt as to the eventual triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ over all of his foes (*see 1 Cor 15:25*).

The sovereignty of God also assures us that he is able to change the human heart. The "heart" in the Bible is the center of the human personality. "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (*Pro 4:23*). However, the Bible also tells us that our hearts are corrupt by nature. Paul's sober assessment is both gloomy and accurate:

There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one... There is no fear of God before their eyes (*Rom 3:10-18*).

Given such a pessimistic evaluation, unless God changes the human heart, our ministries are a complete waste of time. Heart change takes more than clever arguments, a certain style of music, the right atmosphere, or the eloquence of a polished communicator. Given the moral and spiritual darkness that dwells in our hearts, nothing short of the sovereign life-giving power of God is able to make human beings new creations in Christ Jesus. And this is what we find emphasized in the Bible time and again.

Thus we are told that Peter was the first of the Twelve to begin to grasp the truth about the person of Jesus in a clear substantial way because the Father in heaven "revealed" it to him (*Mat 16:17*). When some of the Gentiles believed as a result of the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, it was because they had been "ordained to eternal life" (*Acts 13:48*). And when Lydia responded to Paul's message it was because unknown to her

the Lord came and opened her heart (*Acts 16:14*). Nor are these examples exceptional. This is what always happens when people come to faith in Christ. God is at work opening the eyes and ears of the heart and liberating the will from its bondage to sin, so that people can see and hear and therefore come most freely to Jesus. What Paul says of the Christians in Thessalonica is true of all believers everywhere:

Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance... But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (*1 Thess 1:4-5; 2 Thess 2:13-14*).

God is able to do what no one else can do. "Thy people *shall be willing* in the day of thy power" (*Psal 110:3*). Practically speaking, this means that we should never give up on anyone. If God can save *us* there is no one who is beyond his power! In the words of the great old hymn *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* by Charles Wesley:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free; His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood availed for me.

This is why the church in Corinth had the kind of membership roll that it did. Paul can speak of the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, practicing homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers who will not inherit the kingdom of God, and then go on to say, "and *such were some of you*: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (*1 Cor 6:9-11*). God is able to take out our old hearts of stone and give us new hearts of flesh that beat with love for him. And this gives us confidence to press on in our ministries. We know that if it were left up to us the situation would be hopeless; but with God on our side, nothing is impossible—"With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible" (*Mark 10:27*).

The sovereignty of God is also a glorious truth when it comes to world evangelism. Christ said in Matthew 28:18-20:

All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.

Taking the teaching of Jesus into the nations of the world has never been easy. It is all the more challenging today with the prevalence of philosophical ideologies like post-modernism and the revival of religions. But we know that God has given the Son "power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him" (*John 17:2*). Nothing can prevent the Lord from claiming his own. Even when there is great opposition, we should not be cast down. If the Lord has "much people" in a city or country, he will bring them to himself through the preaching of the gospel (*Acts 18:10*).

Another ministerial implication of the sovereignty of God is that we can work and rest in God. Both things are important. We are not balanced biblically if we are working ourselves to death because we think that everything depends on us. Nor are we balanced if we are resting and waiting for God to act on our behalf. There must be a combination of work and rest. Both aspects are presented in the Bible as compatible with each other. God has ordained the means as well as the end. His will embraces both, and we need to include both in our thinking. The biblical balance between our work and resting in God's work is seen where Paul says, "I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (*2 Tim 2:10*). Paul's knowledge that God had a people whom he would surely bring to himself did not lead him to sit around and do nothing. Rather it moved Paul to fervent action.

In Romans 10:13-15 Paul carefully balances the need to believe the gospel with the need to send out preachers who will announce the good news. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, but people cannot call on one they have not believed in. And they cannot believe in one of whom they have not heard. And they cannot hear without someone preaching to them. And they cannot preach unless they are sent. Paul understands that God's salvation does not come about in a vacuum of non-involvement. We have a job to do. We are to pray and share what we have learned. So on the one hand, the sovereignty of God calls forth the greatest exertion on our part; it stirs us to action. But on the other hand, it allows us to rest in the Lord. We do what he calls us to, and we do it to the best of our ability, but we leave the results to him. We labor, but he gets all the glory (*1 Cor 3:6-7*). God's sovereignty is never an excuse for being idle. Paul puts these things together by saying, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (*Phil 2:12-13*).

The sovereignty of God is indeed a "soft pillow for a weary head." How thankful we should be that God is in control of all things. Trying to find comfort anywhere else but in him is futile. It is never good or wise to resist the Lord. At all times we should run to him and receive the mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (*Heb 4:16*). And when we come to him we do not have to fear that he cannot or will not help us. Sovereign power, love, and goodness are perfectly combined in him. Those who come he will receive, and those he receives he will keep to the very end to the praise of his glorious grace. The more we grow in the sovereignty of God the greater our comfort, stability and usefulness as Christians.

—Adapted from the writings of Kirk Wellum

The Sovereignty of God

The Sovereignty of God and our Salvation

The fact that God is sovereign in the salvation of his people is a truth proclaimed in all of the Scriptures. Although the biblical data is vast, there is one key text in which the apostle Paul masterfully sums up what the Bible teaches on this great theme. He tells Christian believers in Ephesus that they obtained an inheritance in Jesus Christ, "being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (*Eph 1:11*). According to Paul, the salvation of those who call on the Lord Jesus Christ was not any kind of an afterthought. He tells these same believers that God

hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved (*1:4-6*).

This means that God is at work in the salvation of believers. He is the one who brings us to himself. When we come to him, we come most freely, but only because he has taken the initiative and sought us out. John confirms what Paul teaches: "We love him, because he first loved us" (*1 John 4:19*).

It is important to understand this because it means that all the glory for our salvation belongs to God. Even though it is true that we repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we only do so because of his grace (*Acts 18:27*). This is significant because we live in a man-centered age in which human achievements are praised and celebrated and God rarely gets so much as an honorable mention. This is wrong. This world and everything in it was made for his honor and glory. But the world is not what it once was. Human beings have rebelled against God and fallen into sin. As sinful creatures we live for ourselves and not for the One who made and sustains us.

But when God comes to us in salvation, everything changes at the most basic level. He opens our eyes so that we understand who he is, who we are and what he has done for us. As a result our whole perspective is revolutionized. Now we understand that we were made for God, made to love him and enjoy him forever. And we also understand that this is the reason we have been redeemed. We have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of his dear Son so that we might bring praise and honor to his holy name forever. All Christians instinctively know this at some level because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but those who understand the sovereignty of God as it has been revealed and exercised in their salvation are in the best position to praise him for his wonderful love and grace.