

The Sovereignty of God: Comforting Truths in the Midst of Trials

A. Introduction:

On a crisp Spring day in 1945, U.S. and allied troops were advancing through the German countryside as the German army retreating. As the 89th armored division were making their way through the country, all of a sudden the smell of rancid meat and burned hair began to gradually become prominent. The fences and gates of a German outpost were seen along the road ahead, but the smell intensified as they got closer to it. When the point man finally got close enough to see through the fence, he noticed hordes of what look like skeletons covered in skin all standing in the midst of a razor-wired courtyard-all of which, they would find out, were Jews. Over the course of the World War II, millions of people were killed intentionally and cruelly within concentration camps and forced labor camps. Along with military casualties during the war, an estimated 80 million people lost their lives.

- 1) Is it possible that God could have stopped these seemingly pointless deaths during the time of WW2? Why do you think God would bring war, famine, and suffering to the world on such a scale?
- 2) As a Christian, what do find hardest about reconciling the fact that God is all-powerful and all-good?

Objective: Through this study, we will gain a scriptural understanding of the sovereign will of God, how his sovereignty applies to his whole character, and how God's sovereignty can be applied like a salve to the trials and temptations of living in a sin-cursed world.

Definitions:

“When we say God is sovereign, we mean *he is powerful and authoritative to the extent of being able to override all other powers and authorities*... Nothing can successfully stop any act or any event or design or purpose that God intends to certainly bring about.” -Piper, J. (2019)

“God is *continually involved with all created things* in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.” Grudem, W. Systematic Theology, p. 316.

“Sovereignty characterizes the whole Being of God. He is Sovereign in all His attributes. He is Sovereign in the exercise of His power. *His power is exercised as He wills, when He wills, where He wills*. This fact is evidenced on every page of Scripture.” -A.W. Pink

B. God's Sovereignty in the Scriptures

a) Old-Testament References:**Genesis 45:4-6**

*“So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for **God sent me before you to preserve life.** For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And **God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.**”*

Genesis 50:19-20

*“But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, **but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.**”*

- 1) What’s the background of this story of Joseph and his brothers? How does that shed light on Joseph’s understanding of God and His character?
- 2) What do we learn specifically about God’s sovereignty from these passages?

Job 1:6-12

*“Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the Lord and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” **And the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.**”*

- 3) In what area do you see God’s sovereignty being exercised in this passage?
- 4) What does this tell us specifically about the nature of demonic powers and their authority?

Isaiah 46:8-11

“Remember this and stand firm,

*recall it to mind, you transgressors,
remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
**declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,**
saying, **'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'**
**calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.**
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it."*

- 5) In what ways does this passage describe the scope of God's sovereignty?

- 6) In this passage we see the "eternal decrees" of God. Which sections from the passage would support that God has ordained all that will happen since eternity past?

Daniel 4:34-35

*"For **his dominion is an everlasting dominion,**
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and **he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;**
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?""*

- 7) How does this passage compare and contrast the authority of God and the authority of man?

- 8) According to the passage, what's the range of God's dominion?

Psalms 139:13-16

*"For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

*Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
**in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.***

9) In what ways does this passage give us details about the sovereignty of God?

10) How should this truth impact the lives of believers?

Proverbs 21:1

*“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord;
he turns it wherever he will.”*

11) What aspect of life does this verse show God sovereignly controls?

12) How should an understanding of this concept impact our daily lives?

Discussion Question:

What other **old-testament** references do you know of that show God's sovereignty over different aspects of life?

b) New-Testament References:

Matthew 5:29-31

*“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And **not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.** But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”*

- 1) What does the verse tell us about God’s control over the world?

- 2) What practical implication is Jesus communicating to us in this passage?

Matthew 8:23-27

*“And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing.” And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Then **he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.** And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that **even winds and sea obey him?**””*

- 3) How were the disciples feeling during the storm? What word does Jesus use to describe their emotional and spiritual state? What was their response to the calming command of Jesus?

John 6:65

*“And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless **it is granted him by the Father.**””*

- 4) What aspect of the believer’s life is shown to be controlled by God within this passage? What are some logical implications of the fact that it’s in God’s hands?

- 5) How do we reconcile this verse with the painful experiences we go through of having believers leave the fold in unbelief?

Acts 2:22-24:

*“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, **delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified***

and killed by the hands of lawless men. *God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”*

- 6) How does this passage describe how God the Father related to the crucifixion of Jesus?

- 7) Does the passage say that “God crucified His Son?” Who is responsible for the murder of Jesus?

Romans 8:28-30

*“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. **For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.** And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”*

- 8) In this passage we see that God is the active participant in bringing about our salvation, sanctification, and glorification. How would this be comforting to someone who is going through the midst of trials and temptations?

Romans 9:10-18

*“And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, **not because of works but because of him who calls**—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”*

*What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then **it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.** For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”*

- 9) Briefly summarize the relationship of Jacob and Esau. What do we know about them?

- 10) Why is it such a big deal that Jacob, being a younger son, was chosen to be the preeminent child?
- 11) What logical and scriptural justification can Paul use to infer that there is no injustice on God's part? What example does he use to back it up?

Hebrews 1:1-3a

*“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and **he upholds the universe by the word of his power.**”*

- 12) How should the believer respond to the fact that our “Great High Priest” also “upholds the universe by the word of His power?”

1 Peter 2:13-14

*“Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors **as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.**”*

- 13) How does the passage describe God's control over governments?

Summary: God is sovereign over the weather, over the political regime in power, over your parents, your children, your sickness, your suffering, your height, your lifespan, your abilities, your intellect, your salvation, sanctification and glorification. In all this, *he uses the wills of sinful people as well as a sin-cursed creation to bring about the full revelation of His glory in all things, but most gloriously in the person and work of Christ in the lives of all believers.*

B. The Effect of God's Sovereignty on the Heart of Believers

Discussion Question: What specific situations have you personally been involved in where the sovereignty of God was seen in your life?

a) Counseling Scenario #1: The Farmer and the Sun

Joe is a farmer who has attended your church for a long time. He is a middle-aged man who is married, has three teenage children, and has about 1500 acres of farmland, not including the cattle and livestock he cares for. Since he started attending, Joe has been “seasonal” in his attendance and service in the church and bible study. When asked about the reasons behind his sketchy attendance and involvement, Joe always blames it on the weather. He says, “You know how important it is for me to get my crops in the ground, if I lose yields, my family won’t be provided for. So yeah, I skip a service here and there in order to make sure my responsibilities are taken care of on the farm.”

- 1) What would be some questions you could ask Joe in order to gain more information about his situation?

- 2) How could a correct view of God’s sovereignty allow Joe to have a more beneficial impact at home, at church, and at work?

b) Counseling Scenario #2: Collegiately Stressed Out

Cally is a junior in college and attends a university in the town you live in. She’s just recently started coming to church, and has been meeting every week with someone for discipleship. She reads the scriptures regularly, attends church and bible study, and does well in all of her classes at school. One day, while at church, she confides in you and begins to explain how anxious and stressed she’s been feeling about her schoolwork. She says, “I am just so anxious to get anything but an A in any classes, and right now I have a “B” in Introduction to Philosophy.” She then exclaims, “It’s not even a major course!” I am just so worried that this stupid class is going to bring down my GPA, and I want it to be as high as it can be. I’ve been studying so hard for that class, it’s hard to find time to do anything to feel spiritually productive.”

- 1) What questions should you ask Cally?

- 2) What scriptural advice would you give her? How does the sovereignty of God apply to her understanding of school?

c) Counseling Scenario #3: Sovereignty and Suffering

Eliza, a woman in your church, about seventy years old has just been diagnosed with a fast-acting version of Alzheimer’s Disease. Her memory started to fade slowly, but now it’s becoming very apparent that her memory will be gone fairly soon. Her husband, Randy, has been distant and cold since the diagnosis confirmed what he thought might be the case. He won’t talk to anyone about how he’s dealing with the stress or how he’s feeling. When asked a question, he just shrugs it off and says, “God is sovereign” and then continues about his business. Recently,

the children of the couple have come to talk to biblical counselors about problems they're seeing. They tell the counselor that Randy has made no preparations for the long-term care of his wife, that he hasn't enrolled in any long-term insurance to have her taken care of in the future, and that the two definitely don't have enough money in their nest-egg to have Eliza stay at a long-term care facility.

- 1) What other information would be good to find out before you try to talk to Randy?
- 2) How would you approach this situation? What resources within the church might you try and connect Randy with?
- 3) What misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God does Randy have, and how could you help enlighten him-assuming he becomes open to advice?

Thought Questions:

- 1) How do you view God most often? Do you see him as an all-powerful being that's distant from his creation? Do you see him mostly as a personal and loving God? How can we check ourselves to make sure we're not emphasizing His sovereignty but neglecting His goodness, or vice-versa?
- 2) If someone viewed a film-reel of your life, how would they say you respond to suffering or inconvenience? What practical things can we do to remind ourselves of the perfect sovereignty of God?

Conclusion:

"There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of Divine Sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe troubles, they believe that Sovereignty hath ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all." -Charles Spurgeon