

The Sovereignty of God

Day 1

...He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen. (1 Tim 3:15b-16 NASB)

When we speak of God's *sovereignty* we are referring to His all-powerful attribute or character trait. Webster defines the word *sovereign* as "supreme power; unlimited in extent; absolute; superlative in quality."¹ An evil sovereign king would be one to be feared but a good sovereign king is one to be aligned with. As Christians, we serve a good and wise sovereign King. Therefore we have nothing to fear.

A similar term, *God's providence*, refers to God's "intervention in our affairs."² In other words, God controls, directs or arranges circumstances so that "a specific result...[is] bound to occur."³ God's intervention – or providence – is His sovereign plan for us. Questions that trouble many are, "Does God's providence refer only to the "good" things that He sends into our lives? Is God Sovereign only over the good things, while the evil and pain of life sneak in through a back door unknowingly to Him?"

Jerry Bridges so clearly articulates the answers to these questions:

God is in control, but in His control He allows us to experience pain. The pain is very real. We hurt, we suffer. But in the midst of our suffering we must believe that God is in control; that He is sovereign...God controls both the good and the bad. God has not looked the other way or been caught by surprise when adversity strikes us. He is in control of that adversity, directing it to His glory and our good.⁴

Look up and read the following Scripture passages and write in your own words what they reveal about God's sovereignty. **Draw a star in the margin opposite 5 passages which you find most hopeful or encouraging.**

Ecclesiastes 7:14

¹ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., Publishers, 1984), sovereign.

² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts Study Guide*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1989), 19.

³ Jerry Bridges. *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 24.

⁴ Jerry Bridges. *Trusting God*, 39, 51.

Lamentations 3:38

Job 42:2

Psalm 115:3

Isaiah 14:27

Isaiah 43:13

Isaiah 45:7

Isaiah 46:10

Daniel 4:34-35

Ephesians 1:11-12

Day 2: God's Sustaining Power

Another common question that humans often ask is, "Does God intervene in our lives only at certain points, leaving the remainder of our lives open to chance or human will?" Bridges reminds us that "The Bible teaches that God not only created the universe, but that He upholds and sustains it day by day, hour by hour."⁵

Look up the following verses and write beside each reference what God reveals to us about His sustaining power:

Acts 17:24-28

Colossians 1:17

⁵ Bridges, *Study Guide*, 20.

Psalm 31:15

Pslam 147:8-9

Hebrews 1:3

2 Corinthians 9:10

Day 3: God's Sovereignty Over the Hearts of People

Sometimes we are in a situation where the decision of another person affects us and it is out of our control to do anything about it. When this happens, it feels like we are at the mercy of that person. Where is God's sovereignty when people victimize us or have authority over us? Jerry Bridges speaks to this issue:

The Bible also teaches that God governs the universe, not only inanimate creation, but also the actions of all creatures, both men and animals. He is called the Ruler of all things (1 Chronicles 29:12), the blessed and only Ruler (1 Timothy 6:15)...God can and does move in the hearts of people to show favor to us when that favor will accomplish His purpose. Furthermore, when necessary, God restrains people from decisions or actions that would harm us. Of course, God does not always restrain the wicked and harmful actions of others toward His people. We do not know why God sometimes allows our enemies to prevail and sometimes restrains them. It is enough to know that God can and does restrain the harmful acts of others toward us when that is His sovereign will.

We must also keep in mind that God is never the author of sin. Though people's sinful intents and actions serve the sovereign purpose of God, we must never conclude that God has induced anyone to sin. God judges people for the very sins that He uses to carry out His purpose.⁶

The cross of Jesus Christ is a central example of how God sovereignly used the sins of people to carry out His divine purpose. The rejection, betrayal and crucifixion of the Son of God was the most heinous of all sins ever committed. God the Father is not the author of the sins of Judas who betrayed Him, Pilate who gave Him over to the demanding mob or the Roman soldiers who crucified Him yet God used their sins to carry out His providential plan for the redemption of mankind.

⁶ Bridges, *Study Guide*, 22, 30.

When we are sinned against, our adversity is not out of the control of our sovereign God. Even though we cannot see any purpose for it at the time, just as the disciples and mother of Jesus could not see a divine purpose for His crucifixion until later, we must trust that God is divinely in control and has a loving purpose behind our suffering.

Read the following Scriptures. Look for evidence of God's work in the hearts of people. What do each of these passages reveal about God's sovereignty over the hearts of people? Write your answer beside each Scripture reference:

Ezra 1:1, 5; 6:22

Proverbs 21:1

Daniel 1:9

John 19:10-11

2 Corinthians 8:16-17

Deuteronomy 2:30

Joshua 11:20

Exodus 4:21 and 8:15

Acts 4:27-28

Revelation 17:15-18

Day 4: Regret

Another problem that often crops up for people is the feeling of regret. We look back and wish we had not done something that did not turn out the way we had hoped or we wish that that we had done something that we did not do. We often torture ourselves with the perpetual thought “If only I...” A common question that arises out of this thinking is, “How was God sovereign over my choice of the past when I had the free will to choose?” Jerry Bridges also speaks to this issue:

The Bible asserts both God’s sovereignty and people’s freedom and moral responsibility, but it never attempts to explain their relationship. For one thing, God is infinite in His ways as well as His being, A finite mind simply cannot comprehend an infinite being beyond what He has expressly revealed to us. Because of this, some things about God will forever remain a mystery to us. The relationship of the sovereign will of God to the freedom and moral responsibility of people is one of those mysteries.⁷

For further understanding, let us consider what is meant by the term *God’s will*. We say “It is God’s will that we not steal from others.” This truth is clearly revealed to us in Scripture, in the Ten Commandments, for example. This is God’s *revealed will* or *moral will* for us. Despite the fact that humans are creative about justifying their sins, there is never any convincing evidence that it is God’s will to ignore or rebel against what He has clearly revealed to us in Scripture. God’s *moral* or *revealed will* is quite clear. However, there are other instances where we wonder, “Is it God’s will for me to marry a particular individual or to accept a particular job offer or to spend my money on certain items?” Here we must consider what is God’s *sovereign will* or as Jay Adams refers to it, God’s *decreed* or *decretive will*.⁸ Because God is sovereign over man, He can permit or restrict what we choose to do or not do. As we have seen in the passages above, nothing happens unless God permits it. And if He permits it, He will use it to bring about His grand scheme of things. Jay Adams writes,

After the fact one may rightly say “God determined that I should marry Betty, not Jane. I know that because I married her, and whatever comes to pass *is* His eternal (or decretive) will.” Before the fact, one can only speak about God’s directive [moral or revealed] will.⁹

So we can rest knowing that if we did something that we now regret, even if it was not in line with God’s moral or revealed will, we can be confident that God has decreed it to be so, if it has occurred. Therefore, we can be sure that He *will* use it to fulfill His purposes.

⁷ Bridges, *Study Guide*, 30.

⁸ Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 28.

⁹ Adams, 28.

[God] permits, for reasons known only to Himself, people to act contrary to and in defiance of His revealed will. But He never permits them to act contrary to His sovereign will.¹⁰

Read the following Scripture passages in 2 different Bible translations. Write in your own words beside each reference what God is teaching about His sovereign will in relation to man's plans:

Proverbs 16:9

Proverbs 19:21

Proverbs 21:30

Ecclesiastes 7:13

Lamentations 3:37

James 4:13-15

Revelation 3:7

Day 5: God's Goal

Another question that must be considered in order that we might understand God's providence more completely is this: "When God intervenes in our lives, what is He working toward? When God permits us to make sinful or unwise choices, what is His purpose? What is His end goal?"

Again let us look at what Jerry Bridges explains:

¹⁰ Bridges, *Study Guide*, 20.

God's providence is His constant care for and His absolute rule over all His creation for His own glory and the good of His people. Note the twofold objective of God's providence: His glory and the good of His people. These two objectives are never antithetical; they are always in harmony with each other.¹¹

Look up the following Scripture passages and write beside each reference what is revealed about God's purposes:

Romans 8:28-29

Colossians 1:16

Isaiah 43:7

Day 6: Application

Go back to "Day 1" and locate the 5 Scripture passages where you placed a star in the margin. Write out each of those passages on 3x5 cards. Read them each every morning before beginning your day.

What have you learned about God's sovereignty and His providence in your life?

How do these truths apply to or bear on your circumstances today?

What do you need to change about the way you think, speak or behave as the result of this study?

Write a prayer asking God to help you change how you think in regards to His sovereignty over your present circumstances.

¹¹ Bridges, *Study Guide*, 19-20.

Day 7: So, Now What?

“So, what should I do?” You might ask. “I now understand more of God’s sovereignty and His providential plan, but how do I stop my whirlwind of thoughts that say ‘So and so has been so cruel to me!’ or ‘Why oh why did I do that?’ or ‘What if...?’ or ‘If only...’”

Below are some steps to take. The steps have been written in a simplified manner, but that does not mean emotional and spiritual healing will be simple. You will need the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart in order to complete these tasks. Take each step prayerfully and thoughtfully and then intentionally choose to persevere in doing the work at each step. Beside each step, note what you will do. This will be your plan for change. It may take some time in order to “feel” better, but the process will be one that will glorify the Lord and ultimately bring peace to your soul.

Step #1 Have you sinned? To answer this question, slowly and thoughtfully pray Psalm 139:23-24: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me, and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (ESV).

When considering your sinfulness, ask yourself these questions: “Have I been worrying rather than trusting God?” “Have I been thinking judgmental thoughts about others?” “Have I been lusting for someone other than my spouse?” “Have I been wallowing in self-pity?” “Have I been blaming someone for something?” “Have I allowed my thoughts to remain centered on the past?” “Have I been failing to believe in God’s promises?” “Do I tend to minimize my own sin but maximize the sins of others?” “Do I think that my ways are better than the ways of another?” These are all examples of sinning in thought.

In addition to sins of thought, we must consider how we may have sinned in word or deed. To discover the answer, it may be helpful to ask yourself these questions: “Do I speak with a harsh tone of voice?” “Do I use words that are unloving?” “Do my words sometimes tear others down rather than build them up?” “Do I grumble or complain?” “Do I speak more than I listen?” “Do I gossip?” “Do I boast?” “Do I have a habit that I know God is displeased with?” “Am I hiding a sin?” “Am I presently living in a way that is contrary to God’s ways?”

After prayerfully and thoughtfully considering these questions in the quiet of your own soul, write down in what ways you have sinned.

Step #2 Is the answer “No” to Step #1 above? If, after much thought and prayer, you determine that either what happened was completely out of your control and you responded in a way that honored God or that what you did was unwise but not sinful or it seemed wise at the time but you now see it from another perspective which results in regret, then move to Step #7 below.

Step #3 If you have sinned, who have you sinned against? If it is only a thought sin, then you have only sinned against God. If it is a sin of words or behaviors when you were alone, again you have only sinned against God, unless you caused damage by your actions. In that case, besides sinning against God, you have also sinned against the person who owns what you damaged. If you have spoken unkind words to someone or done something unkind to them then you have sinned against that person and God. If you have spoken unkind words about someone in the presence of another, then you have sinned against the person who heard you and you have sinned against God. If those words spread to the person you were talking about then you have also sinned against that person and anyone else who heard it. List the person(s) you have sinned against:

Step #4 Seek forgiveness from anyone listed in Step #3 above. To do this you do not *apologize*. *Apologize* is not a biblical term nor is it a biblical principle. You will typically not experience the freedom from your sin by apologizing. In order to enjoy the freedom of biblical forgiveness, you must seek forgiveness God's way. To do that, humble yourself before God and/or the person you have sinned against and say, "I sinned against you when I _____. I know this was hurtful and there is no excuse for it. Even though I don't deserve your forgiveness, I want your forgiveness. Will you please forgive me?"

When you seek forgiveness from another person you are not responsible for their response. If they are unwilling to forgive you, you must go forward in love toward them anyway. Depending upon the severity of the damage you caused, you may need to express more brokenness over your sin and give them the chance to express the depth of their hurt while you actively listen. If your actions, tone and attitude do not coincide with your words when you seek forgiveness, it may be harder for the offended to forgive you. Chances are in time, they will grant forgiveness to you if you demonstrate true repentance (change). You must be patient.

If your sin was thinking or speaking wrongly about another person and that person never heard about it, then you are not to confess your sin to them; it will only hurt them and cause problems unnecessarily. In this case seek forgiveness only from God and anyone else who may have heard you.

When you seek forgiveness from God, use the same terminology suggested above for seeking forgiveness from others. He promises to freely forgive you (1 John 1:9). Once you seek forgiveness from God, you must go forward in the belief that you are forgiven. If you continue to beat yourself up about your sin once God has forgiven you and you say something like "I can't forgive myself," then you are practicing unbelief and elevating yourself above God.

Step 5 Repent of your sin. To “repent” means you will put off your sinful behavior and replace it with righteous behavior. Ask God to help you write down and to carry out your plan to repent.

Step 6 Make Restitution. This means that any damage you have caused, you will repair or replace, no matter how long it takes or how much it costs.

Step #7 Take your thoughts captive. Allowing your thoughts to go wherever they choose is not practicing self-control and is not honoring the Lord and is therefore sin. Humans are not made to be able to directly control their emotions and feelings. However, we are created and empowered by the Holy Spirit if we are in Christ, to be able to control our thoughts and when we control our thoughts, our feelings are affected and changed over time. If you have had a habit for a long time of thinking “If only...” or “What if...” thoughts on a regular basis, then you will need to do the work of establishing new thinking habits. Granted, any new habit is difficult at first, but becomes easier with practice.

Because thinking God-honoring thoughts brings glory to the Lord, you can experience His power to overcome your sinful habit of thinking wrongly. Ask Him for His help in this. Begin by writing Philippians 4:8 on a 3x5 card and meditating on it throughout each day. Meditating on a passage means that we mull over and over in our mind ways that we can practically apply it to the circumstances of our lives. This can be done while doing mundane tasks – waiting, showering or washing dishes, for example. Driving often presents opportunity to meditate on Scripture. Checking yourself throughout each day on whether you are thinking God-honoring thoughts as articulated in this verse or whether you are thinking sinful, self-centered, thoughts that are often focused on the past rather than on what God has for you for the future. Get into the habit of checking your thoughts as you get out of bed in the morning, when you eat meals and again when you go to bed at night. God does not give you grace to think “What if...” thoughts or “If only...” thoughts. He does, however, give you grace and power to think thoughts that are praiseworthy.

If you are not presently in the habit of doing so, begin a *Praise and Thanks Journal*. Record in your journal every day something about the greatness of the Lord and what He is doing or has done. This will begin the process of changing your thought patterns. If you have been thinking wrong thoughts for several months or years, imagine how life-changing it will be to think God-honoring thoughts for several months or years instead.