

Wheelersburg Baptist Church

Life Application Sunday School Class

The Attributes of God Series

Session 3 – "The Sovereignty of God"

June 30, 2002

Last session, we studied the uniqueness of God. God is solitary, self-existent, superior to and separate and distinct from all of His creation. He needs nothing outside of Himself, and is complete within Himself.

This week, we are going to take a glimpse at God's sovereignty. What does it mean to say that God is sovereign? God's sovereignty is the exercise or expression of His supremacy. His sovereignty is tied to His uniqueness. He is infinitely supreme over all of His creation, and therefore subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent, and does exactly as He pleases, only as He pleases and always as He pleases. This means that no one can hinder or thwart His plans. This truth will challenge our thinking, and stretch us. As in every study, it is important to state no more, and certainly no less than the Scriptures. So before we examine some of the questions raised in our finite minds concerning this attribute, let's read and work through a few passages that clearly state the truth that God is sovereign:

Isaiah 46:9-11

9 Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. ¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. ¹¹ From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

Notice in verse 9, that the uniqueness of God is stated "*I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.* And that uniqueness and absolute superiority is expressed in His sovereignty over all "*My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.... What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.*" This is the very reason that the promises of God are trustworthy and reliable. If He says that He will do something, it will be done, and none can stop it or contradict it or frustrate it. Not just part of His will is accomplished, or part way done, but all of His will and pleasure comes to pass exactly as He decrees and plans it.

Psalms 33:8-11

8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. ⁹ For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. ¹⁰ The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. ¹¹ But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

God's plan does not change. He has decreed it, and it will come to pass. His purpose will be accomplished, and will stand firm. None can throw it off course. If men's plans and ideas stand contrary to the plan of God,

they are foiled and come to nothing.

Do our plans and ideas change God's plan? Listen to Proverbs 19:21

21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

God is sovereign over the plans and intentions of men. God's purpose to the infinite detail will be fulfilled, regardless of men's plans and desires. Does this sound too absolute? Again, what does the Scripture say? Listen to Psalms 115:3:

Psalm 115:3

3 Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

Again, we see His transcendence followed by His sovereignty.

Now listen to Job 23:13

13 "But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases.

And finally, Daniel 4:35

35 All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

Even with the truth so clearly stated, there is something in man that resists such a thought. Why is it that we want to repudiate and deny the truth of God's absolute control over all of creation? The Scripture readily acknowledges that such objections will be raised when the absolute sovereignty of God is proclaimed. Such resistance is absurd and inappropriate. Listen to Isaiah 45:9:

9 "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?"

Before we can begin to even start to understand this subject, we must first affirm that as Creator, God has every prerogative and right to direct His creation, including mankind, as He pleases to express His glory. He chooses to use some to express His glory through their salvation as He pours out His mercy and grace in their lives. Others are used to express His justice and judgment as He pours out His wrath and eternal judgment. We seem to have no problem accepting that God is glorified through the salvation of souls, but many stumble at the fact that God uses the judgment and destruction of the wicked to express His glory and righteousness. Before we continue, let's examine one other warning from His Word concerning our response to His sovereignty. Turn to another classic passage on this subject in Romans 9. In this chapter, Paul is addressing the plan of God as it relates to the nation of Israel. From the human view, it appears that God's plan for Israel failed as they rejected the Messiah. But Paul points out that God's plan had not failed, and that within the nation of Israel there is an elect remnant that has been chosen from eternity past to inherit the promises. Those elect will be preserved and saved, ultimately because they were chosen for salvation by a sovereign God. Let's start a verse 6:

6 It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." ¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Both sons had the same father and mother. Both were Isaac's descendents. Yet only one had the blessing and favor of God, and that was Jacob. And that choice was made before they were born. It was not based on the actions of Jacob or Esau, but the sovereign choice of God. The Apostle Paul anticipates the reaction from the readers: verse 14:

14 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

In reply to those who would say that this is unfair and unjust, the Apostle restates God's right to do as He wills and pleases, and that will is not influenced or dependent on man's effort or desire, but solely based on the mercy of God. Paul then shifts to the example of Pharaoh, that in His sovereign plan He hardened Pharaoh's heart to display His glory and power in an even greater way in the supernatural judgment of the Egyptians and magnificent glorious deliverance of the children of Israel. Again, the apostle anticipates the reaction: Verse 19

19 One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"

The apostle does not immediately answer this question that borders on an accusation of injustice by the Almighty. He closes the mouth of the one who would presume to accuse God of anything less than perfect righteousness. He immediately puts those who would question God's methods and plans in their place.

20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

That is the question we must address before going further, and settle in our hearts. We must humbly accept that God has the right to do with us as He sees fit. As sovereign Creator, He is owner of all, and being perfectly holy and righteous, His actions and plan for His creation are holy and just. And if in His mercy and grace and plan He has chosen to reveal Himself to your heart, and opened your blind eyes to your helpless condition, and to the only remedy for your wretched soul, the altogether lovely and most holy Christ Jesus, then it is yours to rejoice and be thankful. It is all of grace, and not of works. We have no place to boast if we are saved. Once the apostle sets the tone, he continues:

22 What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—

The right question is not "How can God find fault with sinner that He doesn't choose to save, but rather, why doesn't He immediately consume and destroy all who would dare to rebel and despise His goodness. He could destroy and immediately squelch any sinner who dares to rebel against Him, but in His sovereign plan, He demonstrates His great patience in holding off His judgment. If He immediately destroyed and removed all of those who resisted Him, then none would be saved, for we have all sinned and gone our own way. We all deserve the judgment and wrath of God, because we have all willingly chosen to forsake His ways and go our own way. And the Sovereign God, based solely on His good pleasure and purpose, displays the riches of His glory in having mercy on some of these rebels, and He rescues them from their path of destruction for His glory. This same God chooses to pass others by, and allows them continue in the way that they choose, and to ultimately suffer the wrath and judgment they deserve for going their own way. In these He displays His holiness and glory in the just judgment of their wickedness. But our meditation and wonder should be that He has mercy on any. The fact that He doesn't unleash His wrath immediately toward sinners is a display of His great mercy, patience, and forbearance.

Again, let's turn to His word:

Let's look at the central event of history, the trial, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Turn to [Acts 4:23-31](#). John and Peter had just been arrested for preaching in the name of Jesus after the healing of the lame man at the gate beautiful. Because the Jewish leaders feared the people's reaction, they severely warned them and then turned them loose. Look at verse 23:

23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." ²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

The verse that we need to see is verse 28: *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.* Why did the people plot to kill Jesus? From their side, they were following and fulfilling the evil that was in their heart. This Jesus had exposed their hypocrisy and upset their religious system. They were merely expressing their depravity and sinfulness. They willingly crucified Him. But here is a glimpse into the amazing mystery of God's sovereignty and plan. They were doing exactly what God had planned by His power and had ordained in eternity past. Before we start asking questions and reasoning, again, look carefully at another passage pertaining to the same event that expresses this dynamic:

Luke 22:21 ²¹ But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. ²² The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him."

It was decreed by God that Jesus would be betrayed by Judas. This was the plan of God – the plan of redemption in action – carried out in part at the hands of wicked men!

Mt 26: ²³ Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

Wicked men, because of the depravity of their heart, do what come naturally and willingly from their spiritually dead nature. Apart from the intervention of a merciful God, they will face

the consequences of their actions. What we need to understand today in this lesson is that God in His sovereignty, though certainly not the author of their sinfulness and wickedness, directs every detail of their actions to fulfill His ultimate will and purpose.

Listen to another classic passage pertaining to this matter: Acts 2:22-24 – part of Peter's famous sermon on the day of Pentecost:

Acts 2: 22 "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Did God plan for Jesus to die on the cross? According to the Scriptures, He is the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world. Think about it. This can only mean that this plan was formulated by the triune God in eternity past. The Son would come and be despised, forsaken, and crucified on a Roman cross to bear the sins of God's chosen people. And every detail of this plan was decreed by God, as proven by the multitude of prophecies that were given centuries before the event. God foreknew those events because He ordained and decreed them. Look at verse 23. God's set purpose and foreknowledge was why Christ was handed over to wicked men to be killed. Don't miss the other side of the coin. Those who crucified Him were responsible for their actions. The crucifixion of the perfect, sinless, Son of God was the most evil and wicked act ever performed on the earth. They were accountable for such horrendous actions. But God was not taken off guard, no, rather the Scripture teaches that it was His plan for it to happen just this way. He was directing and using every detail of this event for the greatest purpose in all of history, the forgiveness and redemption of God's people. In fact, it seems likely that some who were crucifying Him were later saved by the very death that they carried out.

I've heard it described this way. Water naturally flows down hill. But that natural downward flow of water can be directed to accomplish many purposes, such as the generation of electric power. Sinners commit sin. But God directs their sinful actions to fulfill His divine plan and purpose. They are responsible for their moral choices and actions, and yet God uses those very choices and actions to fulfill His good pleasure and purpose.

This same principle is expounded in the story of Joseph. Remember Joseph, the dreamer. His father favored him, and his brothers despised him. And that spite was carried out as they threw him in a pit and left him for dead. In the midst of that murderous plot, a caravan headed for Egypt just happened to come by, and it just happened to work out that Joseph's life was spared as the brothers sold him to that caravan as a slave. It just happened that Joseph was assigned a position at Potifer's house, and Joseph worked hard and was well respected. But then Joseph was framed by an evil, sensuous woman, and thrown in prison, and then forgotten. It sure didn't look like God was in control. Yet the truth of the matter is that God was orchestrating and directing all of these unrighteous actions towards Joseph to a good and glorious end and purpose. Eventually God delivered Joseph out of prison, and exalted him to the second most high position in Egypt. In that capacity, he again meets his brothers, and is able to save his family from starvation and ultimately preserve the nation that would bring the Messiah. Listen to Joseph's perspective on his life as we pick up the story in Genesis 45:

Genesis 45:1-8

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. 3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. 4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! 5 And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. 6 For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. 7 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 8 "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.

Joseph's perception of God's sovereignty was what enabled him to express mercy and kindness to the very ones who had despised and forsaken him. Hebrews 12 states that Christ Himself focused on the joy set before Him, the fulfillment of the purpose of a Sovereign God, to carry Him through the agony of the cross.

As we embrace the truth of God's sovereignty, though we may not fully comprehend it, we will start to understand that God has not forsaken us in the pain, evil, and injustice of life. On the contrary, God is right in the middle of it. Though He is not the source or author of evil, He is in absolute control and directing it to accomplish a greater purpose for His glory and our good. This is the implication of God's sovereignty. Acceptance of this truth brings great joy and comfort. No weapon formed against us can prevail. No evil directed our way can harm us. All of these things come our way under the orchestration and direction of a sovereign God who has planned from eternity past for His glory. In the words of James, as we face difficulties, trials, and evils of this life, we can count it as joy, because such hardships are instruments used by God to produce enduring faith that will carry us to the end.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Since God is in control and His purpose will inevitably prevail, why do we need to pray?
2. How should this truth affect us when we are treated unjustly or maliciously by others? How should this truth affect how we pray for other people? Think about a recent event in your life that was affected by the action or decision of someone else. How does this study affect how you view that situation?
3. Discuss God's sovereignty and our responsibility as it relates to our spiritual growth.
4. Discuss how that sometimes God's purpose (as expressed in circumstances) does not appear to working for our good.
5. Think about a person who sees chance or randomness as the explanation for all that happens. How would this philosophy affect his or her life? What would such a person value?