

Some Thoughts on the Sovereignty of God

by James D. Nickel

If you live long enough, you will experience, in the circumstances of life, positives and negatives: the rapture of joy and the devastation of discouragement. I have lived long enough to camp in both extremes. What has interested me over the years is to see how Christians of different theological persuasions have tried to resolve the “negative” circumstances of life; i.e., when things go “wrong.”¹

Biblical Christians believe that God is sovereign because Scripture teaches it. Before you continue with this essay, carefully read these passages, in context:

Daniel 4:35 ... 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?”

Psalm 76:10 ... Surely the wrath of man shall praise you; the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt.

Psalm 115:3 ... Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Isaiah 45:7 ... I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

Jeremiah 18:6-10 ... O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

Amos 3:6 ... Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?

Romans 9:20-21 ... But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

I Timothy 6:15 ... which he will display at the proper time--he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

I Chronicles 29:11-12 ... Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all.

II Chronicles 20:6 ... O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you.

Proverbs 16:1 ... The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Proverbs 16:9 ... The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

Proverbs 16:11 ... A just balance and scales are the LORD's; all the weights in the bag are his work.

¹ By wrong, I mean circumstances (disasters, calamities, etc.) and people that damage the *imago Dei* (image of God) in man. (NB. Biblical Christians use the Word of God as a standard for adjudicating what is right and what is wrong.) This damage is a consequence of the historic space-time fall (Genesis 3) and God's redemption in Christ will ultimately “right all wrongs” (Genesis 3:15, Acts 3:18-21, Romans 8:18-39, Revelation 21-22), not in terms of the salvation of everyone as universalism teaches ... a view held by many, if not most, of the early 21st century emergent church leaders, but in terms of the display of God's righteous judgments; i.e., the vindication of God Himself. It is the Triune God, His Glory, that ultimately “wins” in history.

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Proverbs 19:21 ... Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.

Proverbs 20:24 ... A man's steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way?

If there is one attribute of God that threatens man is his sinful claim to autonomy, it is the revelation of God's sovereignty. By sovereign, the Bible means the absolute, irresistible reign of God over all He has created, in which He is answerable to none but Himself. This means that God is not forced by any pressure outside of Himself to do anything. *This means that God is His own reason for all His actions.* This means that God is not bound to give an answer to any for what He does. This means that all that God does is for His good pleasure alone. This means that *only* God is absolutely free to do what He wills.² God has a right to make what He pleases, possess what He has made, do what He wills with what He has made, and, finally, *with reference to none but Himself.*

But, if we *just* understand God as Sovereign, we quickly run into a mine field. We must always remember and reinforce in our minds that *the reality that God is sovereign should never be divorced from what the Bible reveals about His other attributes.*

Hence, as we investigate these attributes, we will conclude that *the Biblical God is perfectly fitted for such an absolute rule.* And, if He was *not* the God He is, such a reign would be horrific.³

God's sovereign rule is:

- *Goodness and love.* God's will is founded in God's love, the self-giving nature of His interpersonal, Triune relationship, and God's rule is a love rule. Since the Being of God is an eternal love relationship, a relationship of inclusion, then this type of love is the "due north" of any understanding of the doctrine of God.
- *Eternal.* The rule properly began at creation, there being nothing before that to rule over except His His tri-unity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). It shall never end. He shall ever be the love sovereign of immortal spirits and man.
- *Self-existent.* His rule is as independent as His being, receiving it from none, but containing it completely within His Triune being.
- *Holy.* God is separate from that which opposes Him and, thereby, damages what He has made; In Him, there is a beauty of relationship that is Holy, opposed to all that challenges and destroys this goodness.
- *Just and righteous.* Because the Triune God's rule is sovereign, all evil shall finally be judged. He shall set all things right in His Son Jesus.
- *All powerful.* God is able to accomplish all that His good pleasure wills. His power, demonstrated in "fiat" by creation, is confirmed by Providence, and is unveiled its ultimate dynamism in the power of God, the sufferings of God the Son, on the Cross.
- *Ever present.* His rule is transcendent but also immediate; perfect in all aspects.
- *Omniscient.* God's knowledge is infinite in scope. Within His universal domain, His knowledge encapsulates all things at all times. He knows when a sparrow hops out of a tree and when a far-distant star goes into nova.
- *Infinite.* His rule covers all that is, from spirits of angels, devils, and men, the brute creation, and the "machine" universe.
- *Immutable.* His purposes do not change with the changes of men and history. His glory is always His

² Man, in his most "liberated moments," is a slave to a thousand things; e.g., time, body, vocation, family, life, and finally death.

³ Such "horrific" absoluteness is the picture that the Koran gives us of Allah, a picture that pins the character of Allah primarily to one attribute; i.e., sovereignty.

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prime object.

- *Wise.* God's rule is the outworking of perfect wisdom; it is the most perfect reign that could be.

If only God is sovereign, as the Bible declares, then where in the picture is man, his thoughts, his actions, and the consequences of these actions? Here is where the Westminster divines, *albeit not perfect but in some aspects of its assertions, seasoned in Scripture*, drafted, in their *Confession* (1646), this remarkable affirmation:

“God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” (Chapter 3, Article 1).

This confession means that the reality of God's sovereignty does *not* relinquish or free man from being responsible for his actions. Man is *not* a mere robot, dangling at strings pulled by a capricious God, for, if he is, God would not be God! What *seems* to be a paradox is hinged by the revelation of Scripture: God is absolutely sovereign and man is totally responsible for his thoughts, words, and actions (carefully study Acts 2:22-23; Hebrew 4:13, Philippians 2:12-16).⁴

It goes without question that it is in the doctrine of the sovereignty of God that many people “go to seed.” Some people, who claim to be Christians, deny that God is absolutely sovereign. They still use the word sovereign as a referent to God *but they qualify it* ... they desperately feel the need, from a rationalistic viewpoint, of “saving God from Himself.” To their way of thinking, for God to be truly *all in all* means that man is *nothing and zero*. So, to protect from what they think is a horrendous view of God, they create a theological system where man is given some sovereignty in the guise of his having “free (read *sovereign*) will.” But, setting up thought structures like this will plant seeds that will eventually grow weeds of evil. Why? Sovereignty is inescapable, and when you deny God's absolute sovereignty (by relinquishing some of it to man), man will latch onto this freedom (read “autonomy”) and eventually “take up the sovereignty mantel entirely

The Loving and Holy Sovereign God is the source of all life. Without Him and His permission, no one exists; no one can draw their next breath. In the context of the Fall of man (Genesis 3), no one deserves life; all deserve death (Romans 5). In Christ, redemption from death to life is a gift far about the faintest imaginations possible. Christ is the revelation of the boundless, extravagant love of God. Hence, the life we now have and enjoy, every beat of our heart, every breath that we take, *is a gift of mercy from the loving hand of the Triune God*. He has deemed fit, according to His purposes, to birth us into our families. He chose to give us our unique characteristics (plus and minus). He chose to position us in a geographical place and a specific culture. And, He chose the time to insert us into the historical march of His providence. The Lord gives our life and He can take it away at His choosing. Our times are in His hands. It is only with this viewpoint on life that we can truly say, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

⁴ As we can see in a couple of these passages, the absolute sovereignty of God and the total responsibility of man are revealed in the same sentence!

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to himself.” In the denial of God’s absolute sovereignty, man will become the central point of orientation, the measure by which all things are judged.⁵

We see these weeds partly in the deviant “word of faith” movement, representing a theology that ultimately pronounces “man as God.” By this thinking, a person can merely “say things” into existence and, by doing, change the nature of reality. Too many followers of this theology have tried this formula with devastating consequences. If we are sick or have some pressing need, we are to confess that we are well or that we have the need supplied (in spite of the circumstances, which we, according to the leaders of this movement, are to ignore).⁶ If we do not see a change, we continue in our confession.⁷ And, worse yet, if, after multiple confessions, things are still “status quo,” *the culprit is the confessor* . . . he or she does not have “enough” faith or, worse yet, *he or she has sin in their life*.⁸ What we have in this deviant theology is a recipe for heaping guilt on someone where, in some cases, there is no guilt.⁹ This theology is ultimately anti-compassional and anti-pastoral.

Those that deny or limit the sovereignty of God are not the only ones who can “go to seed.” Unfortunately, and more than most people would like to acknowledge, those who embrace the absolute sovereignty of God can also be guilty of “seeding the weed garden of foolishness.” How can this happen?

A classic example of this absolutist imbalance is the Islamic faith. As previously noted (footnote 3), Muslims embrace the reality of Allah’s sovereignty as a compartmental conception. The consequence of this ideational isolation is the *blind* affirmation that “Allah wills” no matter what happens. If I were a Muslim and my wife walks across the street without looking both ways and she is struck by a car and killed, my response, as one of the submissive faithful ones, would be, “Allah wills.”

In the late 1970s, when I was travelling in Southeast Asia, more than one person cautioned me about travelling on Garuda Airlines, the Indonesian carrier. These people cited this airline’s poor safety record as the primary reason for this warning. One can reasonably conjecture that the heritage of Islamic theology had something to do with Garuda’s sub-standard maintenance and training procedures.¹⁰

Some Christians who embrace the reality of the absolute sovereignty of God have erred in the same way as the followers of Allah. Before I elaborate on this, we must recognize *it is very easy to leap off this cliff of distortion*. Some, when they first embrace the teaching that the God of Scripture is sovereign, have tended to drift into the Islamic view. This is exemplified by statements like, “Whatever I do is God’s sovereign will.”¹¹ This

⁵ Thus, denying God as Sovereign will lead to man as sovereign (i.e., from a God-centered faith to a humanistic faith). As the many writings of Rousas J. Rushdoony (1916-2001) reveal, when Christians deny that God is sovereign, then, in time, the self-presumed “almighty” State will attempt to fill the vacuum or as George F. Hegel (1770-1831) pronounced, “The State is God walking on earth.”

⁶ Something else is ignored using this sure-bet “confession formula.” What are the circumstances that led to this sickness or this need? Also, this denial of sickness borders on the errors of *Christian Scientism*, a theology and movement initiated by Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910).

⁷ Some unfortunates have continued in their confession to the point where no doctor is sought and the illness or sickness or bodily pain is compounded beyond “human” remedy (this is not to say that God, in His infinite mercy, still could choose to remedy the situation).

⁸ This may or may not be the case although there needs to be, in the case of calling church elders to anoint the sick with oil, a consideration of sin (see James 5:14-15, but note the conditional statement regarding the issue of sin).

⁹ I have seen the application of this theology result in unnecessary physical pain and anguish and, yes, even physical death.

¹⁰ Since then, improved international maintenance and safety standards have forced all airlines to comply or face fines. As an addendum, it would be worthy to note that, in the early 20th century, many Islamic people endured physical suffering due to minimal hygiene standards. Missionaries to this area have told me that it was common in those days to see Islamic women breastfeeding their babies amidst swarms of flies. Little recognition is given to Western influence in the Middle East, an influence that came in the first decades of the 20th century in the form of oil companies. These companies not only drilled wells for profit but also built hospitals for their employees (and, as a secondary consequence, these hospitals served the physical well-being of local Islamic populations).

¹¹ I have actually heard this. The person who said this to me was trying to justify a decision that could not be justified any other

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confession is a cover-up justifying the doing of one's will, a will that is most likely opposed to God's clear commandments, commandments for life.

If God's word is "black and white" on a matter and a person disregards this directive using "whatever I do is God's sovereign will" as justification, this person is sinning and under the obligation to repent.¹² Sometimes issues are not "black and white." In this case, in dependent prayer upon the Holy Spirit, we need to infer directive principles from Scriptures. Also needed is a multiplicity of counselors as "checks and balances" and not just counselors who agree with you, are of the nature of the "counselors of Job," or have stakes in a specific course of action at hand.¹³ Remember, Christians, though saved by God's grace, can still transgress God's laws. They can be tempted to shift temporarily to autonomy; i.e., claiming sovereignty of self. The Word of God, the Holy Spirit of God, and the seasoned insights and oversight from the body of Christ, can prevent a person from leaping into this void of autonomy.

Another, but more subtle, example of distorting the Biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God is a proper understanding of ministry calling.¹⁴ Many people "feel called" to do some specific for kingdom work.¹⁵ The nature of calling, in terms of an individual's vocation, including seasons of vocations¹⁶, is subjective and should never be absolutized. For example, I once felt "called to be a foreign missionary" in a classical sense. I moved in this direction with serious preparation, i.e., four years in the prime of my income earning years. I spent nearly six years overseas and, while doing this, I came to understand that God had called me to do something else! I could have stubbornly continued to endeavor to work as a foreign missionary and I could have justified this inflexible persistence by saying to myself,

- I spent four years, in the prime of my life, training to be a missionary.
- I have a vested interest in being a missionary.
- I must save "face."
- Since I once "felt" called to do be a missionary, then to renege on this calling would invite God's judgment.

To defend myself by any of these reasons would, in reality, be a denial of God's sovereignty in my life.¹⁷ I emphasize this point: God knows more about what He wants us to do than we do and He orchestrates our hearts, including our right desires, our circumstances, and even our mistakes and failures, including sinful failures, to get us in the place of His choosing in the season of His choosing. Only the God revealed in Scripture is capable of doing this!

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way. This person was saying, in effect, to himself about me, "I will pull the 'trump card' of the sovereignty of God on him; that will shut him up." Well, it may have shut me up, but it did not shut up God. *God is not mocked; whatever a man sows that will he reap* (Galatians 6:7-8).

¹² The sin of pride, one outcome of autonomy, is a wall that will crumble in repentance.

¹³ The primary purpose of a multitude of counselors (Proverbs 11:14, 24:6) is to identify an individual's "blind spots," an attitude or an action that is not fully grasped by the person and thereby skews that person's decision-making abilities.

¹⁴ I do not understand "ministry calling" in the terms of church offices or missionary work only. My view is much broader and can be better understood as "vocational calling."

¹⁵ God calls us to serve the King and the diversities of services are as many as there are individuals in the kingdom!

¹⁶ By "seasons of vocation," I mean that God sometimes directs us to do different things at different times. Of course, this *doing* is never to be divorced *knowing God* and *being* with Him in ever-growing dependency.

¹⁷ Note, I did not make a mistake wanting to be a foreign missionary. God used my desires when I was in my 20s to put me in places and to meet people that would be instrumental in a deeper understanding of what I believe He wants me to do. And, in my 50s, I have learned a valuable lesson: Do not to absolutize what I believe God wants me to do.

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Some people start Christian organizations, churches, or businesses to accomplish specific kingdom-related goals. There is nothing wrong with this but we must hold these associations, not with a gripping hand, but with a hand open to God. We must realize that God is bigger than my “called” organization and that His purposes might transcend what I think this organization should be doing or continue to do. Sometimes, God moves upon a person to start something to use it as a spark to light fires in ways unimaginable to the person or persons who first started it.¹⁸ Sometimes God stops what He starts, in His infinite wisdom and purposes. Sometimes God presses the “pause” button on something He starts. Sometimes, when “play” is restarted, what is reconvened looks radically different from the original. In all of these starts, pauses, and stops, God is in the business of building individual character while entwining His sovereign purposes for history in ways that are “above our ways” (Isaiah 55:8-9).¹⁹ It is arrogance on our part to object to His pauses and stops. We have no business thinking what we think God started is what God thinks He started. If we do, we are inviting confusion and misdirection when we encounter God’s pauses and stops.

If we skew the Biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God, we open ourselves to hurts, misunderstandings, and other devastations when things go “wrong.” I have illustrated how this distortion is detrimental to God-honoring decision-making, vocational changes, and the start, pause, and/or stop of organizations. There is much more to say about our thinking about God when things go “wrong.” Sometimes, we are “reaping what we sowed” and we must recognize the consequences, the weeds, of our actions. As we do so, we are affirming the responsibility of man as a legitimate secondary cause, according to the aforementioned *Westminster Confession*. Many times, we cannot get a handle on the answers when things go “wrong.” The book of Job, especially chapters 37-42, provides us with the wise counsel. If we take the time to meditate on these chapters, we may not have an answer to all the “downturns” of life, but we will come to know God on a level equivalent to unshakeable dynamism (Hebrews 12).

We have no business thinking
what we think God started is
what God thinks He started.

¹⁸ I can testify to this reality. In the 1980s, I worked for an education ministry in Australia with a distinct vision. God favored this ministry with some remarkable open doors in the mid 1980s but then things seemed to “slow down” for this ministry and its vision in the 1990s (I returned to the States in 1987 but things did not slow down because I was no longer directly involved). In the late 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, God demonstrated His favor upon the initial vision of this ministry *in nations outside of Australia*, a specific favor in concrete ways *unforeseen by the original founders*.

¹⁹ Sometimes, but not always, God’s stops and pauses are due to character weaknesses, failings, or other issues that would dishonor Him. Other times, God stops, pauses, or restarts solely for His pleasure; i.e., for purposes higher than ours. It is therefore up to us to trust Him as He makes these updates in our personal lives and ministries.

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I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, Whence doth my help come?
My help is from Jehovah,
maker of heaven and earth,
He suffereth not thy foot to be moved,
Thy preserver slumbereth not.
Lo, He slumbereth not, nor sleepeth,
He who is preserving Israel.
Jehovah is thy preserver, Jehovah is thy shade on thy right hand,
By day the sun doth not smite thee, Nor the moon by night.
Jehovah preserveth thee from all evil,
He doth preserve thy soul.
Jehovah preserveth thy going out and thy coming in,
From henceforth even unto the age!
Psalm 121 (Young's Literal Translation)

In conclusion, Corrie Ten Boom (1892-1983) knew the pits of darkness that few of us have encountered.²⁰ In these pits, she learned to affirm, "There is no pit that He is deeper still." Her poem, *Plan of the Master Weaver*, is an affirmation of the Biblical understanding of the sovereignty of God. Her thoughts form a fitting conclusion to this essay.

The Plan of the Master Weaver

My life is but a weaving between the Lord and me,
I may not choose the colors,
He knows what they should be
For He can view the pattern upon the upper side,
While I can see it only on this, the under side ...

Sometimes He weaveth sorrow, which seemeth strange to me,
But I will trust His judgment, and work on faithfully,
'Tis He who fills the shuttle, and He knows what is best,
So I shall weave in earnest, leaving to Him the rest ...

Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why –
The dark threads are as needed in the Weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.

By Corrie Ten Boom

²⁰ During World War II, Corrie Ten Boom experienced the multiple horrors of not only losing her family to Nazism, but experiencing (and miraculously escaping) the Ravensbrück concentration camp. NB. Her sister died at this camp.