

### Part 3: Is God Sovereign Over Circumstances?

We have been looking at God's sovereignty in this series. Too many Christians today are confused over the truth of God's control, and have bought into theologies that teach them that God is not in control, or He was once in control, or that our words are in control, or that the Devil is in control.

We began by looking at the book of Job, and we saw that God is totally sovereign over Satan. The fact that Satan is the god of this world does not make him an autonomous being with all power. He must still give an account to God, and God places limits on him.

Then, in Part 2, we saw that God is sovereign over sickness. Sickness is not a moral evil; it is part of the curse that God Himself announced on the world. As such, we saw God using sickness to glorify Himself, to remind man of his mortality, to mature Christians and to discipline sin. God is sovereign over it – and uses it as He pleases.

Well, now we wrap up by painting God's sovereignty in the broadest possible strokes – we want to ask – is God sovereign over circumstances? In a general sense, is God in control of all that happens? Is God finally responsible for how everything will work out in the end?

We have to understand, that one of the attributes of God is that He is infinite. That means He is absolute in all He is. In other words, His holiness is infinite. His love is infinite. It is not simply greater than ours, or our multiplied by a large number – He is infinite in all His attributes – justice, wrath, mercy, power, knowledge. Now consider: if God has absolute power, and if His power is infinite, then all sovereignty is His right to exercise that power. The One who holds all power, when He uses it, is the One in final control.

God is infinitely sovereign. He is not just higher up on the authority chain, He is the absolute, total and final ruler. When He says, *"My glory will I not give to another"* (**Isaiah 42:8**), He means He will not abdicate His throne for another. All final authority rests in Him. Any authority that any created being has is delegated authority. It is authority given by the final authority.

So when it comes to God's created universe, God is in total, final control. All that happens will unfold to God's design. Listen to **Ephesians 1:11**: *"...according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will."* God works everything according to His own decisions. History is His-story: He is telling it and shaping it according to a Design conceived in His infinite mind.

Hear the glory of God as He thunders in **Isaiah 46:9-10**: *"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.'"*

God says He will do all His pleasure. He will be totally pleased with what He does. In a final sense, He will be infinitely joyful over how everything works out. **Psalms 115:3** says: *"But our*

*God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased.*" Now, let me ask you – if God is not in final control, is it possible for Him to do all His pleasure?

If God is not in total control, it means He is lacking in some area of power and control, and it therefore means that He will be frustrated in that area. He will not be able to shape it to His pleasure. Wherever God is not sovereign, He cannot do all His pleasure. But God is clear when He says, *"I will do all My pleasure."* God cannot be thwarted, frustrated, slowed down or hindered by anything except that which He makes possible. The only limit on God is a limit He sets on Himself.

Consider something else in that verse from Isaiah: It says that God declares the end from the beginning. God can stand at the start of human history, and tell you how it will end. The only way this is possible is if He is sovereign. How can God perfectly say how Christ will triumph in the end, if that fact is actually in doubt? How could God tell you how it will all turn out, if in fact there were many factors and variables outside of God's control?

The fact is, God can tell you how it will all work out, because He has planned it, and will execute it. Some say, "Well, God can tell the future simply because He knows how it will all work out." That is only partially accurate. God is not reacting and changing according to humans, as if He is caught off guard. He does not simply know how the chips will fall, and then recount the story. He is in fact intimately involved in the story, weaving and shaping it together into a mosaic that will dazzle the angels for an eternity.

This truth of God's sovereignty over all of life, over circumstances, raises two objections in our minds. One, we cannot reconcile God's hand behind the calamity, the sin, the evil, the tragedy, the sorrow, sickness, and awful events that occur. If God is both good and sovereign, how can these things be happening? The second objection that comes to mind is, 'What about the freedom of man?' Surely humans are just puppets then, marionettes on a string that God is conducting, robots with no free will?

Let's look at the first one: How can we reconcile all the sin, evil and tragedy in our world, with the idea that God is sovereignly in control?

As we have seen in Parts 1 and 2 of this series, some take the easy way out, and simply deny that God is sovereign. They construct a theology where God is locked out of the world, and it is up to us to bring back what they claim Satan has stolen from us. All negative events are therefore blamed on Satan, and God's reputation is supposedly saved. But there is no Scripture to support such an idea.

Others pay a passing nod to God's sovereignty, but to them it is a scary, dangerous doctrine, one that might upset their view of God. They suppress their thoughts that God might truly be doing things that are incomprehensible to us, including and sometimes authoring events that we find tragic. But God is not afraid to announce to His creations what He does:

*I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.*

## Isaiah 45:7

God does not create moral evil, but He does often authorise and even author, according to that verse, what we consider to be calamity and tragedy. God is authorised to do what He wants with His created world. As **Job 9:12** puts it: *“Behold, He taketh away, who can hinder Him? Who will say unto Him, ‘What doest thou?’”* No human can say to God, “God, what do You think You are doing?” Listen to God declare His right to do what He wants:

*See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of My hand.*

## Deuteronomy 32:39.

Indeed, if and when God kills a man, He is not murdering – He is taking back what is His, for He gives life in the first place. Only humans can murder, because murder is taking a life which God, the giver of life, has not authorised. God does not have to explain or apologise to His creations when He carries out His plans, though occasionally, graciously – He does.

Even Nebuchadnezzar learned this when he came out of his God-imposed discipline. He says: *“And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, ‘What doest thou?’”* (**Daniel 4:35**).

Here is the humbling fact: God does not have to give an account to us. We cannot judge the correctness of God’s actions, because God is the source of what is correct. You could say, something is correct *because* God does it. All He does is righteous and good. It’s hard to reconcile some of it with our limited knowledge, but that’s where the problem lies – with us. Our knowledge is limited – it is not a problem with God’s character.

We don’t like the fact that God is in control to that degree. It’s okay for Him to be sovereign in creating the world, it’s okay for Him to be sovereign in sending rain and keeping the seasons going, but as soon as He asserts His sovereignty in ruling over our lives, over the very events of the world, humans get very angry. As Spurgeon said, men will allow God to be sovereign everywhere except on His throne.

But this should not be a frightening doctrine to us. It certainly is one beyond the full comprehension of our minds, but that should not scare us off thinking on it. We are not scared to think of the truth of the Trinity – three Persons in one God – so we should not be afraid to meditate on an absolutely sovereign God.

How then can God be in control if there is so much suffering, evil and calamity in the world? Well, in fact, I think no one ultimately doubts that He is in control. Do you ever hear the painful words of even the unbeliever after a tragedy? They cry, “How could God have allowed this?” With such a statement, they admit to their subconscious belief that God is ultimately running things.

The fact that He does is without question. **Proverbs 16:33** says, *"The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD."* In other words, the lot – or the dice, if you will – is thrown, but the result is of God. There is actually no such thing as an accident, something that happened by chance, by good luck, or by bad luck. God has His hand in it.

God orchestrates events – even tragic ones, or terrible ones conceived in the heart of Satan or in wicked humans – to a design only He knows. He even chooses the rulers of the world, good and evil, tyrannical and benevolent. **Daniel 2:21** says, *"And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding."*

The question is, how does a good, holy God allow sinful, evil things to happen?

There is no definite answer, but there are some clues in Scripture. Probably the most general and most satisfying is that God has included evil as a platform to display His glory. Take Israel for an example. Israel's slavery was a terrible thing. They were miserably maltreated by the Egyptians. Why did God permit it? God did so to display how powerful He was in delivering millions of people out of the hand of the most powerful kingdom of the time.

We saw in Part 1 of this series how God permitted awful calamity in Job's life to teach Him more about Himself, that is, to display His glory. Strange as it may seem, calamity, tragedy, and even evil, give God a platform for His glory which probably would not be as clear if they were not present. Especially His attributes of justice, wrath, power, grace and mercy can be seen by all the world in such times.

We say this with reverence, but the mighty glory that God receives for the work of redemption was only made possible by the wilful sin of Adam. But we must underline that God does not author sin. It is the one thing He cannot do – because sin is contrary to His nature. In fact, a simple definition of sin would be 'all that is unlike God.'

However, God has chosen to use the sin of men and fallen angels in a grand plan. The key word is *"works."* We find it in **Ephesians 1:11**, where it says that God *"worketh all things after the counsel of His own will."* **Romans 8:28** tells us that *"all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."*

That's rather like a cook who includes elements that are bitter or unsavoury in themselves, but mix together for a beautiful final product. No one would eat flour by itself. But flour mixed with other things can make a tasty cake. God uses events, situations, and even the choices of humans and angels for a beautiful final product.

Some of those bitter parts He creates Himself – we've seen that. Some of those bitter parts, Satan creates, or men's wickedness creates – but it is His sovereign hand that allows it to be included in the mix. He works it all together. You could say God tolerates the presence of evil for the future greater good that He is working out.

Understand that God does not consider the evil in our lives as a light thing, like we are simply guinea pigs in a big cosmic experiment. **Lamentations 3:22-23** puts it beautifully: *"But though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men."*

See, it is not Satan who is blamed for our grief – it is God. But the next verse says – He does not do so willingly. The idea is: He does not do so from the heart – He does not enthusiastically enjoy those elements, but in His infinite wisdom, He knows they are necessary. As **Ezekiel 33:11** says, *"As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked."*

Think of a mosaic. In a mosaic, you have dark and light tiles. We are often like ants walking across that mosaic. In the midst of suffering, it is as if we are walking on a dark tile. We cannot see the point of it, or why it is included. But one day, we will be lifted up from that wall, and from God's vantage point, we will now see how the dark tiles blend in with the light ones to make a magnificent mosaic – to the praise of God's glory.

God's glory is the final theme of it all, and it ultimately explains the motives of God's heart. But we are also afraid of that theme, aren't we? When we hear, 'God does what He does for His own glory,' we tend to get a little nervous. We don't want to say it, but it sounds to us like God is being selfish, right?

Well, what we have to realise is that selfishness is really taking the focus off where it belongs. The centre of all things is God. Therefore, selfishness is when men or angels made the centre of their being not God, but themselves. This is impossible for God – because He is the source of all things. Before He created anything, and simply enjoyed His own glory – was He being selfish? Of course not. Selfishness is only possible in a creature, not in the Creator.

Secondly, we must understand that God's glory is the most natural thing in the universe. God's glory is the most beautiful, most perfect thing of all. Indeed, the universe was created to glorify God. Things are only out of sync to the degree that they do not follow this design.

So God glorifying Himself is the best thing that could happen to us, so long as we are submitted to Him. It is like rain upon the mountain – the creatures below enjoy the pure rivers that flow down. As long as humans submit to God, God glorifying Himself will always be to their ultimate benefit.

God is truly sovereign over all circumstances, including evil and good, for a final purpose that will glorify Himself. The only thing He does not do is condone or author sin, though He nevertheless uses the sinful choices of men and angels in His plan.

The second issue then strikes right at our sense of independence. If God is working everything according to His plan – then am I not a robot? Are my choices simply an illusion of free will? Well, Scripture is clear that God's will ultimately triumphs over man's will.

- **Proverbs 19:21:** *"There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand."*

- **Proverbs 16:9:** *“A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.”*
- **Proverbs 21:1:** *“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will.”*

Clearly man has a will, but God has the final say – even with those in authority. God’s will is final. You could say that God will have His way in every person. But at the same time, Scripture is very clear that humans have a will that must be exercised. For example, **Revelation 22:17** says, *“And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”*

How do we reconcile these ideas – that God is totally determinative, but humans are completely responsible for their own actions? How do we reconcile God’s sovereignty with our free will? We don’t. We don’t have to, because Scripture never treats them like warring parties. If Scripture lays them parallel to each other without so much as a comment, we must do the same. So what if it destroys the logic of our puny minds? The truth of the Scripture is more important.

You do not have to try and find a so-called ‘middle-ground’ between the two truths, for in so doing, you will often be unfaithful to both. We hold both, and though the tension may strain us, it is not for us to squeeze the explicit statements of Scripture into our neat theological pigeonholes. Sometimes, as A.W. Tozer put it, we should simply raise our eyes to the heavens and say with trembling, *“O Lord, thou knowest.”*

I see it this way: God, the sovereign king, has delegated to humans the authority to make some of their own decisions. Therefore, our decisions, even when they oppose God’s rule, fall within the sovereign permission that God gave. We are free only to the extent God has allowed us to be, but we are nevertheless treated as a responsible, free agent. You could look at prayer as an example of this.

Is God dependent upon our prayers to move in our lives? Of course not. Yet, He says to us, *“Ye have not because ye ask not” (James 4:2)*. Do our prayers move God, or does God move us to pray for something He is about to do anyway? Is it my will to pray that arranges events spiritually, or is it God’s sovereignty that moves me to pray? Is my prayerlessness then actually God’s doing? These are questions that needn’t be asked or answered. Just obey by praying.

So God has the final say, and God is scripturally always the author and initiator of things, while at the same time, God treats humans as responsible moral agents, who will be judged for their own actions, not for God’s actions on their behalf.

From this truth of God’s total sovereignty, we can gain two great lessons:

### **1. We can take great comfort.**

If God were not sovereign, we should have the fear of a child whose parents are themselves grasping for control. A child’s security rests on the fact that they are sure Mommy or Daddy have the situation in their hands. Though parents know they often don’t, children regard it as a

fact that their mother or father will know the answer, will be able to fix it, or organise it, or make it better. Now, with God it is *true*.

How awful would our universe be if our God were in fact under control of something else – if He had to apply to a higher body for authority, if He in fact could not stop certain events, or arrange others? How futile would our prayers be if God was not able to exercise His total power as He pleases? But the fact that He is sovereign means we can rest in Him.

Jesus sleeping in the boat in the midst of a storm is the picture of resting in the Father's control. We can sleep in the hands of Him who measured out the universe between His thumb and His little finger, according to **Isaiah 40:12**. Our prayers can be prayed in faith, knowing the power and control of the One who hears them. The most terrible events in our lives can be met with the thought that a good God must be working it out for eternal good.

## **2. We remain responsible and wholehearted in our service for God.**

Some who rejoice in God's sovereignty go the other way with it. They figure, "Since God is going to do what He's going to do, why pray? Why evangelise? Why bother?" But that is mixed-up logic. God's sovereignty is accomplished, among other things, in the acts of humankind. It is not for us to puzzle over how God's sovereignty will interact with our will; it is up to us to fulfil our responsibilities.

If God commands you to do something, you need to do it. If God tells you to do something, you do not need the philosophy of how it happens in order to do it. Just go ahead and obey God. May we take great comfort in God's sovereign and wise control over this world. May it be an incentive to work harder, serve more, witness more – knowing He is working it out for final glory and good.