

Part 1: Is God Sovereign over Satan?

Is God in control? As a knee-jerk reaction, most Christians will immediately answer, "Yes!" But sadly, many Christians live their lives and face situations as if God is not in control. There is even theology today that suggests that God is in fact not in control of many areas of life. SO in this three-part series, let's talk about the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

God is sovereign. A sovereign is someone who is the final authority, He is the highest ruler. It means that no-one and nothing is higher than Him, beyond Him, or out of His grasp. For God to be sovereign means that everything that happens passes through His hands. It does not necessarily mean that He is the creator and source of all that happens.

For instance – sin. God is not the creator or author of sin. James clearly tells us that *"God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man"* (**James 1:13**). But God does work everything into His final plan – even calamity, tragedy, sickness, suffering, and the rebellion of humans and angels. God works it all together to conform to His plan.

Ephesians 1:11 speaks of *"...Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will"* and **Proverbs 16:9** tells us *"a man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps."* See, God may not author everything, as we see in Job, but the fact that He is the sovereign means that ultimately He permits and allows all that happens. This doctrine affects us profoundly as Christians.

There are some today who believe God is not sovereign over circumstances. So, when a tragedy happens, they resort to saying, God didn't want this to happen, it's not His fault. Well, it may be true that He didn't prefer for it to happen, but to say that He had nothing to do with it makes Him less than sovereign. It means there was something in His universe that was beyond His control.

If there is one thing beyond His control, then He is not totally sovereign, and therefore is not the God He claims to be. Consider how God describes Himself in Isaiah:

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.

Isaiah 46:9-10

How can God do all His pleasure if He is in fact being frustrated every day by man, by circumstances, by Satan, by situations and sickness? He cannot be sovereign and surprised by situations at the same time. He is either sovereign over Satan, sickness, situations, or He is not at all. He cannot be partially sovereign – that is a contradiction in terms.

Some who misunderstand this doctrine say, "Well, this was of the Devil." Now, that may be true, but sometimes what they are saying is that God is not sovereign over Satan – like He has

met His match in Satan, as if Satan is the evil god, and these two gods are fighting it out. But, as we will see today, God is totally sovereign over Satan.

Satan is like an angry dog who you tie to a pole in your garden, and due to his anger and frothing, he ends up mowing your lawn for you. God uses Satan's rebellion to glorify Himself and do all His pleasure. He is not hoping to defeat Satan. Satan is one of His creatures – a fallen angel, who even in his rebellion will end up doing what God wants him to do.

Others misunderstand God's sovereignty over sickness. They say, "God wants you healthy, therefore this sickness is of the devil." Once again, they have denied God's sovereignty. They have said by that statement that God is not in control of your human body, He cannot contain Satan, and He seems unable to even control the germs in His own created world.

So we want to take time to confirm from the Bible that God is sovereign over Satan, situations and sickness. We'll start here:

Is God sovereign over Satan?

We must begin by understanding Satan's origin. The Bible does not teach what is known as dualism. Dualism is the idea that there are always two forces – Good and Evil, so spiritually you must have a god who represents both. Both gods are fighting, and hopefully the good god wins. No, this idea is not supported biblically.

Instead we find that the source of all things – Yahweh – is the true God who created everything. Being in His essence holy, the only thing He could not do is act inconsistently with Himself. In other words, He could not create something unlike himself. He could not create something intrinsically sinful, for He cannot be the author of anything unlike Himself. So, where did Satan come from?

Well, our best clues are in **Ezekiel 28**. There we find God prophetically addressing someone called the king of Tyre, but clearly He is speaking to the spiritual power behind the king of Tyre. That is because the descriptions God uses cannot be applied to any human being. Listen to God as He addresses clearly someone who had been in heaven:

Son of man, take up a lamentation upon the king of Tyrus, and say unto him, thus saith the Lord GOD; Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering; thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee.

Ezekiel 28:12-17

This reference seems to be speaking of Satan. Satan was an anointed cherub, a high order of angels. He walked in Eden, He had access to the inner throne of God, he was full of wisdom and perfect in beauty, till what? "Till iniquity was found in him." It says his heart was lifted up because of his beauty.

Isaiah 14, where Satan is called Lucifer – perhaps his original name – seems to tell us what he felt in his heart. He said to himself, 'I will be like the most High, I will be a god, I will reign where God does, I will receive glory.' How tragic that some so-called Christian theology repeats the very theology of the devil.

The point is that God originally created him perfect. He was the work of God's holy hands – a holy creation. But he chose to sin. He chose to give glory where it was not due – to himself. Jesus says, *I beheld Satan fall like lightning*" (**Luke 10:18**). As soon as Lucifer exalted himself, he fell, and become Satan – the adversary. His existence is now devoted to hating and resisting God – and to reaching his goal of being worshipped.

So Satan is currently in opposition to God. He has great power too, as an exalted being he always had a degree of power. But it is the book of Job we turn to, to understand that Satan is in fact under God's supervision. Although he is in rebellion to God, such is God's power that he cannot make a move if God does not let him. Read with me this fascinating scene:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them. And the LORD said unto Satan, 'Whence comest thou?' Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, 'From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.' And the LORD said unto Satan, 'Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?' Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, 'Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.' And the LORD said unto Satan, 'Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand.' So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.

Job 1:6-12

Here is the definitive scene that tells us Satan can do nothing without God's power. First, notice there was some day that the sons of God – an Old Testament term for angels – presented themselves before God. What a glorious scene that must have been. Satan is among them, which is interesting. Did he *have* to be there? If so, and I think the context suggests it, it seems that even Satan must present himself before God.

Fitting with that theme, God asks him to give an account of his activities, 'Where have you been?' Satan says he has been walking up and down in the earth, which in Near-Eastern terms was a saying used to suggest that you owned the land. Satan is the god of this world, and when he told Jesus that he had power to give the kingdoms of the world to Jesus, he was not lying. They do belong to him.

However, please see that this does not mean God is fighting to get back in. When people say 'Satan is the god of this world,' they must add – 'but the god of the world has to give an account to the king of the Universe!' Satan is in fact, in Job 1 and 2, giving an account to the God of the

universe! God is in control. Now, God initiates a challenge to the Devil. Not vice-versa. He asks him if he has considered Job.

Satan is an accuser of the saints – he stands before the throne and accuses believers of hypocrisy of sin. He does so to discredit the name of God himself. Here God throws an accusation at the Devil – ‘Satan, you claim people who follow me are phonies. You claim I am not worthy of honour. What do you say about my servant Job, who is mature, holy, hates sin and fears Me?’

Satan’s reply reflects his hard, cynical nature. ‘Do you think Job fears you for Your sake? Please! You hedge him about! You protect him, you bless him. He’s a spoilt brat. He loves what he gets from You; he doesn’t love You.’ Well, the LORD understands the implication and does not hesitate to allow Satan to test his servant for the purity of his heart.

Closely consider again verse 12: *“And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.”* Notice some things from this text:

1. Satan couldn’t get to Job, since God had hedged him about.

If God was not sovereign, Satan wouldn’t speak like that. But Satan declares that God has his impenetrable hedge around Job, making it impossible for anyone to harm him. God is in control.

2. Satan admits it will have to be God who allows anything negative to happen to Job.

He says in verse 11: *“But put forth Thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse Thee to Thy face.”* Satan says to God – you must put forth YOUR hand, YOU must touch him physically, and he will curse You. Satan is admitting a very strong statement: all that comes to a believer must pass through God’s hands first. Sure, it was Satan who was personally behind the calamity, but Satan admits that God must put forth His hand for it to ultimately take place.

We see this truth again when we compare **1 Chronicles 21:1** and **2 Samuel 24:1**. In Chronicles, it says Satan moved David to number the people, but in Samuel, it says the Lord moved David. A contradiction? No – the same truth. Satan may have been the personal one doing the tempting, but since Satan is ultimately under God’s control, Samuel is equally true when it says the Lord did it.

3. Notice, God authorises Satan to go ahead and afflict Job.

God, the Sovereign king, delegates power to even His rebellious creation Satan, saying, *“Behold, he is in your power.”* Note that such is God’s control over Satan, He even gives Satan conditions – *“only upon himself put not forth thine hand.”* Satan is on a leash. He can go no further than God permits.

As the trials begin, Satan does terrible things, but he cannot physically afflict Job, for God has withheld him from doing so. So understand: the fact that Satan is the god of the world, the fact that he is in rebellion, does not mean he is autonomous. He may be rebelling against God, but he is not a self-ruling sovereign who can do whatever he wants.

This does not make him harmless – **1 Peter 5:8** warns us to be sober and watchful because he walks about like a lion – but the fact that he is the god of this world does not mean he can do what he wants. Job very clearly teaches that God had the final say over what happened on earth.

Now, it might seem very confusing for us to try and reconcile these ideas. Satan is a rebel. He does not obey God. Nevertheless, if God tells him to do something, he cannot do otherwise! I said that Satan is like an angry dog on a leash that you tie to a pole. His angry barking and struggling is certainly a headache, but he can do nothing more than the leash allows him to. Satan is a roaring lion, according to Peter, seeking whom He may devour. But he is also a disarmed foe, who can do nothing that God does not allow him to.

God is totally sovereign over Satan. There is theology today that makes God like a father locked outside a house, and peering through the windows, while he sees a criminal, Satan, tormenting His children. That is completely unbiblical. God is totally in control, and has allowed and tolerated a situation where Satan and his demons work to try and deceive and destroy.

Why did He do that? We do not know. We can hardly even speculate. We have only the truth that God seeks to glorify Himself as the overarching principle that will explain it all someday. But people who believe that God is really outside, and Satan is in control, create all kinds of unbiblical theologies. They believe that Satan is behind every sickness, every difficulty, every sin, every negative circumstance. The results of this are numerous and unfortunate.

Firstly, one result of this is that they unwittingly demote God in their own eyes. Because they are afraid to embrace the God of the Bible who allows sin, sickness, tragedy and trials to come our way, because they want to create God in their own image – one who does positive things for them all the time, they must blame anything negative on the Devil. They have a childish cause and effect understanding of God: ‘God is good, this is bad, therefore this can’t be from God.’

But **Isaiah 45:6-7** gives us an honest portrayal of God: *“I am the LORD, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.”* God does not create moral evil, but He certainly allows, permits, and sometimes causes the negative and painful things in our lives. We hardly need to read more than a few chapters in the New Testament without running into verses telling us of the benefit of trials, of the usefulness of suffering, of the privilege of God afflicting us.

Sadly, when you run from the idea that God is sovereign over all, and choose to blame all negative things on the Devil, you miss out on the true grandeur of God. You make Him bite-sized, a two-dimensional god that you can swallow. But something you can swallow is seldom something worth worshipping, worth being overawed at – and that is the case with the true God.

Second, by denying that God is sovereign over Satan, people tend to abdicate responsibility for living the Christian life. See, when we see all things as passing through the hands of God, we feel a responsibility to want to learn from the situation, to understand how to be Christlike in it.

We see it as another course in our Father's spiritual curriculum. We then mature as we count it all to joy that we are in a difficulty, and we learn the endurance and maturity God is seeking from us.

On the other hand, if we think all negative things are not from God, we never seek to learn from them. I mean, would you really seek to learn from slander from your enemy? Of course not. Would you try to learn from a purely malicious attack? No. And Christians who do not think that God is sovereign over Satan simply write off all their negative experiences as 'from the Devil,' dismiss them, and move on. Thus they never meditate on what God is trying to teach them, and they remain babes in Christ.

It may be that the trial is from Satan, but it is therefore also from God, because Satan is under God – and if God allowed it, then what am I to learn from it? Many instead resort to blaming their own fleshliness on demons, their own bondage to sin on Satan. So they do not apply the 'put off, be renewed in your mind and put on' process of sanctification from **Ephesians 4:22-24**. They instead think they can be sanctified by an event – by a quick exorcism. It's a 21st century instant-spirituality way of thinking.

Third, by denying that God is sovereign over Satan, some very unbiblical theologies have arisen over how to fight our spiritual warfare. Without getting into all the technicalities – the main thing to know is that the single greatest weapon you have against the devil is Christlike character.

The spiritual armour mentioned in **Ephesians 6** are all character issues – faith, righteousness, sincerity, the gospel, the Word. These do not suggest complicated methodologies, none of which are ever mentioned by any of the apostles in their epistles. See, we are told to *resist* the devil, *not* to confront him all day.

What a lot of people don't realise is that Satan is not like God. He is not omnipresent – he cannot be in more than one place at a time. Yet at any given time, there are probably a million Christians blaming him for their particular trial, binding him, rebuking him and generally treating him like the omnipresent God. As one lady pointed out, if Satan is really getting bound by all these people binding him, who keeps setting him free?!

Read **2 Peter** and **Jude**, and you will find explicit warnings against rebuking and speaking disrespectfully of angelic majesties – even if they are fallen. It's time we read our Bibles, not men's methodologies. So often, because we think Satan is not under God's control, we have a string of unbiblical methodologies, chants, prayers and prophecies which are not far removed from medieval superstitions.

However, if we understand that God is sovereign over Satan, we'll focus on obeying Him, and leave the final victory to Him. Only He is strong enough to do so – that is precisely Christ's point in **Matthew 12:29** – the text used to suggest we must bind Satan! It's clear from that text, that only Christ can do such a thing.

If someone retorts, 'Well, Jesus said we'd do greater things than He would' – then yes, but Jesus was referring to the fruitfulness of our ministries in reaching souls around the world for Christ. Otherwise, if you take it to mean the miraculous, then greater things would mean we must run on water, we must feed 10 000, we must raise 10 people from the dead, we must do greater things than He did in all spheres!

Let us be consistent with Scripture. Sadly, some Christians treat God like a powerless king in a far country, and they spend all their time speaking to Satan and his demons. If they spent more time speaking to God, they would move on with their Christian lives and accomplish greater things for the kingdom.

Finally, I cannot think of a more comforting thought than the fact that God is in control. Someone may say, "Oh, you take comfort in the thought that God was in control of the murder of a man who shepherded you for many years?" Yes, I do. That did happen to me, and I do take comfort in God's control. Would you really gain more comfort out of thinking He was *not* in control? I cannot think of a more frightening thought!

I'd rather have a world filled with tragedy, under the steady hand of the Creator, working it together for good, than a world filled with tragedy, and even the Creator of that world having no final say how it will all turn out. Job himself summed it up for us after God displayed His glory to him:

Then Job answered the LORD, and said, "I know that Thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from Thee."

Job 42:1-2

Let us take comfort and pleasure in the sovereignty of our God, over even our worst enemy – Satan. In Part 2 of this series, we will look at the sovereignty of God over sickness.