

The sovereignty of God.

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None of us will ever rise any higher than our ideas about God! To lose our sense of God's high and awesome character will always lead to a loss of our highest ideals, noblest values and deepest humanity. A. W Tozer wrote 'What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.' Yet it is becoming increasingly popular for theologians (including some who insist on calling themselves evangelicals) to think of God as performing without a script. They say that God is in process. Like the rest of us, he is working things out as he goes along, suffering the vicissitudes of life in this universe and changing his plans to fit the circumstances. There is a creative interchange between earth and heaven which allows human beings to influence God, even to change his mind altogether. God is not sovereign; he is a finite being who does not even know the future, but he is open to possibilities.

Does this modern picture of God square with the biblical revelation? The *bible* itself begins with God. He is the source of everything – the universe, nature and humanity itself all derive from him. Without him there would simply be nothing. The *gospel* too begins with God. The Apostle Paul describes it as 'the gospel of God.' It teaches that God himself is the Author of salvation. He devised the plan by which men and women would be saved before any of us was born, in fact before he made the heavens and earth and even before the first angels burst out in praise of their Maker. If the NT teaches anything it teaches that God was planning the salvation of his people before there was any sin from which they would need saving.

Ephesians 1 describes the big plan of God that puts the cosmos and us humans in our place. It tells us that everything God does, he does for the glory of his own name. That is to say that there is no higher activity of which God is capable than of him being himself and acting as himself and letting everyone and everything see what he is really like. He delights to display his wisdom and power – so he creates a universe in which the sheer beauty and workmanship tell us about his skill and strength. He delights to demonstrate his mercy and love – so he comes in Christ to die for guilty sinners and he forgives them freely and welcomes outright rebels into his family. Ephesians 1:11 tells us that 'he works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.' What is included in God's purpose and plan? Our text says 'everything.' You cannot get more comprehensive than that! Paul uses three Greek words here which, taken together mean that nothing lies outside God's comprehensive plan; he does whatever he does according to his predetermined plan.

This teaching asserts the sovereignty of God. There is often a discussion about the relative freedom or otherwise of humanity. But the real issue is how free God is? The bible teaches that he is the only being that has absolute freedom because he is absolutely sovereign. When we speak about sovereignty we are talking about authority and power. As sovereign, God is the supreme *authority* in heaven and earth. All other authority in the universe is derived from and dependent on God's authority. All other forms of authority

exist either by God's command or by God's permission. Sovereignty means that God rules over his creation with absolute *power*. He determines what is going to happen, and it does happen. God is not alarmed, thwarted, frustrated or defeated by circumstances or by the sin or rebellion of his creatures.

It is usual for us to talk about God's sovereignty in the realms of nature and grace.

God is sovereign in the realm of nature.

John Calvin wrote much about the world as a 'theatre' in which God's glory, that is his qualities, is displayed for all to see. In this he was simply echoing Scripture: 'The heavens declare the glory of God' (Psa.19:1).

He made it.

The universe is his *creation*. He made it out of nothing. Scripture takes us back to eternity past, when God alone existed. "*In the beginning, God*" (Gen. 1:1). God has always existed and is self-existent (Rev. 1:8). He is therefore totally independent of everything else. He alone is totally free and self-sufficient. He does not need humans or anything in all creation (Acts17:25). In short, God is God (Ex.3:14).

We know that God created all things, but have you ever wondered why God created the universe? Or even more, why does God do everything else that he does? God himself tells us in his Word: "*Our God is in the heavens. He does whatever he pleases*" (Ps. 115:3; cf. Dan. 4:35). He does as he pleases, always as he pleases, only as he pleases.

The Reformed tradition has always had a high doctrine of creation, this particularly affects our view of humanity. If a cheap piece of pottery falls from the cupboard, it's no worry--just sweep it up and that's that. But what if the vase is a priceless antique in a museum, a master's signature edition and it is destroyed? Surely this would be a great tragedy. The difference doesn't lie in the quality of the material (both may have been clay pots), but in the greatness of the artist and the uniqueness of the work. So too, humans are not merely spirits caged in the prison-house of a body, but great works of art intended to have a certain enthusiasm and sense of dignity about being human.

He owns it.

The universe is his *possession*. Psalm 24:1 declares, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.' The Prophets call him 'the God of the whole earth' and say that 'the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes' (Isa.54:5; Dan.4:17; 25). The Apostle Paul told the Athenians, 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). One of the implications of this for Christians is that there is no area of life that is out-with his rule. God did not create a separation between the "secular" and the "sacred," as many Christians today often do. Christians were meant to participate alongside non-Christians in every aspect of life. Reformed theology has no place for "Christian cruises" and

"Christian media," "Christian books" and "Christian music." There is no "full-time Christian ministry" and "secular work," but vocations or callings for everyone. In creation, too, there is the gift of "common grace." "The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike," Jesus told the disciples.

He rules it.

The universe is his *dominion*. This means that the Christian God is no distant or aloof deity who created the world but who seldom, if ever, interferes with the goings-on in it. This God is a 'hands-on' God and his rule is all-pervasive and all-powerful. Even Satan is powerless without God's sovereign permission to act. This is what the Book of Job in the OT is all about.

Without sovereignty God cannot be God. If he were subject to any other authority or power then he would have less power and authority than they had. If there was one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God's sovereignty, then we would have no guarantee that a single promise of God would ever be fulfilled. Maybe this one molecule will wreck the course of God's purposes and even prevent Christ from returning!

We see God's sovereignty in his works of providence. This word 'providence' refers to 'God's good government of our world and of our lives.' It lies behind the order we see in the world around us. Christ 'upholds the universe by his word of power' (Heb. 1:3) and Paul argues that 'in him all things hold together' (Col. 1:17). The Heidelberg Catechism defines providence as 'the almighty and ever present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hands, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us, not by chance but by his fatherly hand' (Question 27). Remove the providence of God over nature, and – not only is all sense of security gone – the world is gone; meaningless change would soon replace its order.

The same is true of human society. For all the great diversity and constant change we see around us there are patterns to human life and limits to human evil. Proverbs 16:1 says that although an individual may debate with himself what he's going to say, it is the Lord himself who determines what he actually speaks: 'The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD,' Proverbs 21:1 applies the principle to human affections. 'The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.' He rules over people's actions. 'Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established' (Prov. 19:21).

God is sovereign in the realm of grace.

Sometimes we tend to view sin mainly in terms of actions: doing this or not doing that. But sin, according to Scripture, is mainly a condition which produces actions. "We sin because we're sinners," as the saying goes. Reformed theology takes sin seriously and argues with Paul that believers "were dead in trespasses and sins" and that "the unbeliever

doesn't understand the things of the Spirit of God; neither can he know them...." (Eph.2:1-3; 1Cor.2:14). It is against this background that we talk about the sovereignty of God's grace. We mean by this that salvation is neither initiated by human choice nor appropriated by human effort; it begins and ends with God.

He chose us.

"Just as He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His children....In Him we also have an inheritance, having been predestined according to the will of Him who works out everything in conformity with His own plan and purpose" (Eph.1:4-11). Here, as in so many places, the Bible tells us that God had His eye on us long before we had ours on Him. "Herein is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us." I grew up with the illustration, "God has cast His vote for your soul; Satan cast his, but you must cast the deciding ballot." This, however, doesn't square with the Apostle Paul's remark that, "It does not depend on man's decision or effort, but upon God's mercy" (Rom.9:16). Election is not only a prominent doctrine in the Bible, but is of immeasurable comfort to those who are always anxious about whether they are doing enough to secure their salvation. Election teaches us, in Christ's own words, "You did not choose Me; I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit that would last" (Jn.15:16).

He saves us.

We can say that salvation is by grace alone in Christ alone, through faith alone. We say that *salvation is by grace alone*. When we use the term "grace alone," what we mean is that our salvation from the wrath of God - our deliverance from hell - is because of something good in God, and not because of anything good in us. The Biblical conception of human nature after Adam and Eve's fall into sin is not a pretty picture. In a democratic culture such as ours, we believe that our vote counts, and that by exercising our right to choose, we can actually and significantly change the world around us. We are all taught from our youth that we have it within ourselves to accomplish anything, if we simply put our minds to it and give it our best effort. And when we become Christians we carry that optimism over into our theology. If God tells us to do something, it must be because we have the ability to do what he commands! Choice becomes everything. It is really quite simple; grace alone doesn't make much sense to someone who thinks that there isn't much wrong with the human condition in the first place. For if people are basically good, why then, do we need grace in order to be saved.

But to those who understand what the bible teaches about the effects of sin, grace alone is our only hope of heaven. And so when we speak of grace alone (*sola gratia*), we are speaking of the fact that God saves us, because of his mercy and graciousness toward us, and not because of something - indeed anything - in us that makes us desirable to God. We really cannot understand grace alone unless we understand what it is, exactly, that sin has wrought upon us.

In Romans 3:10-12 he writes; "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away; they have together

become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." Paul is clear, here, though many of us do not like what he says.

First, he points out that there are none righteous, that is, none without the guilt of sin.

And for the sake of emphasis, he repeats the phrase, "no, not even one."

Next he states that because of sin, there is no one who understands, for as he says elsewhere, sin has darkened our understanding, made our thinking futile, and hardened our hearts to the things of God (Ephesians 4:18 ff).

Third, the result of these blinding effects of sin is that there is no one who seeks God. Even though these words make many of us choke, Paul is utterly clear, because of sin, "no one seeks God." Tough words, but we cannot evade them simply because we do not like them.

And if we do not believe the testimony of Paul, Jesus says exactly the same thing. Speaking to the crowds that followed him after he fed the five thousand and because they saw the miracles and wanted their stomachs filled (John 6:44), Jesus declared, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." In other words, you cannot come to God unless you are drawn, the term translated here as "to draw" is also translated "to drag" elsewhere in the NT, as for example, when Paul is dragged out of the temple against his will in Acts 21:30. And then again in that same discourse in John 6, as if he was not clear enough the first time he said it, Jesus went on to say in verse 65, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." So unless we are enabled to come to Father, we cannot and indeed will not turn to God and embrace Jesus Christ. For we are sinful, we do not seek God, we do not understand God, we do not obey God's law, and indeed says Paul, we cannot. Our hearts are sinful, there are none righteous, not even one, and we sin freely and willingly because we want to.

When all is said and done, what this means is that if God does not do something to rescue us from our predicament, we will perish in our sins. And this is what we mean when we say we are saved by grace alone, because there is certainly nothing in us worth saving and there is nothing that creatures in such a predicament can do to save themselves. Our salvation depends upon God's graciousness and not upon our goodness.

We say that *salvation is in Christ alone*. Everything that possibly can be done for our salvation is done through the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We all know what a substitute is. He stands in for someone else. Christ stood in for us and took the rap that was justly meant for us. Hanging on that cruel Roman scaffold, Jesus Christ was considered the greatest sinner who ever lived, carrying the sins of the world and enduring the outpouring of Divine wrath and hatred for those sins. The cross was the judgment of God on Christ as the believer's substitute. But the storm passed and the resurrection of Christ confirmed Him as the King of creation, the Lord of redemption. "He was crucified for our sins and was raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25). When we think of Christ's work as a whole we think of it as being intentional. Sure his death accomplished a salvation that is infinite in its value. But what was his intention? He had a particular people on his mind as he went to the cross. We hear him pray in the Upper Room; 'I do not pray for the world, I pray for those you have given me out of the world...for their sakes I consecrate myself' (John 17). We call this 'particular redemption.'

We say that *salvation is through faith alone*. The central doctrine of the Reformation was justification by grace alone through faith alone. We believe that by trusting in Christ alone for our salvation, we are declared righteous. All of Christ's perfect obedience is charged to our account and our sins are regarded as having been paid for at the cross. Through faith, we are united to Christ and through that union we share everything in common with Christ Himself. Is He righteous? Then we're righteous! Is He holy? Then so are we! Of course, this does not mean that we share His divine attributes, but everything He accomplished in His life, death, and resurrection is ours.

Many other religious groups believe that somehow, somewhere, we have something to do with our own salvation. We make some contribution. For some that may be as little as "making a decision "or" walking an aisle or saying a prayer; for others, it may demand a great deal more. But in this view, God's grace is seen as a substance, something that is infused or implanted within the believer, to enable him or her to live a godly life. In this perspective, the Holy Spirit and his guidance is the gospel, rather than the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ as our righteousness before God.

That's why the Reformers said that it was not sufficient to say that it was all God's grace from beginning to end. That's a good start, of course, but the Bible requires a further safeguard to the gospel: Not only are we justified (declared righteous or just) before God by grace alone, but it is by grace through faith alone. In other words, we do not become righteous before God, in a process of Christian growth, as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit; rather, we are declared righteous before God *in an instant*, as the merit of the perfect life and atoning sacrifice of our Lord is imputed or credited to our account. What we need is this "alien" or "foreign" righteousness; that is, a righteousness that belongs properly to someone else, but is given to us as though it really were our own. Besides the banking image of credit, the Bible uses the image of a white robe that covers our sinfulness and shame.

It was this robe that God used to cover Adam and Eve, when they realized that their fig leaves would not hide them from God's judgment. And it was this covering that was prefigured in the sacrifices, until John the Baptist declared, "Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

He keeps us.

God has promised two blessings of salvation for the elect. First, he has promised to keep them forever, and never to forsake them. Second, he has promised to work within them so that they will never fall away from him. Both blessings are expressly promised in Jeremiah 32:40: *"I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me."* God has promised to preserve the elect. Once they are saved they are preserved, kept, and guarded by God himself (Ps. 37:28, 2 Tim. 1:12). He will never leave or forsake the elect (Ps. 94:14; Heb. 13:5). Jesus promised that he would never cast out any who came to him (John 6:37). The elect are kept in the same way in which they were saved, namely, by the invincible power of God (1 Pet. 1:5). Jesus says, *"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand"* (John 10:28-30). The elect are eternally secure in the hands of both Christ and the Father.

God keeps them safe from Satan (1 John 5:18); "the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thess.3:3). It is true that on occasion the elect slip and fall into sin. But when they do, God catches them and makes them stand again (Rom. 14:4; cf. Deut. 33:27). Even when the elect let go of God's hand, God's hand does not let go of them: *"though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand"* (Ps. 37:24).

Our response to God's sovereignty.

Humility. The doctrines of grace humble the sinner and encourage the saint by giving God his due place. These doctrines also give great glory to God. God is God, and he will not give his glory to another (Isa.42:8). Reformed theology recognizes that man is man and God is God. We exist for God's glory.

Confidence. Reformed theology invigorates the believer; if God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31). This doctrine motivates our evangelism. It is because God does the work that we can be bold to join him in it, as he commands us to do. We can do so joyfully, knowing that our efforts will never be in vain.

Reformed theology lays special stress on the cultural mandate, which means the obligation of Christians to permeate society and work for the transformation of the world and its cultures. We are called to be in the world and not to withdraw from it. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoners, and such things. Yet, the chief needs of people are nevertheless spiritual, so that social work is therefore no adequate substitute for evangelism. In fact, efforts to help people will only be truly effective as their hearts and minds are changed by the gospel.

Worship. *"The Lord God omnipotent reigns"* (Rev.19:6). God is king over everything that is, was, or ever shall be (Ps. 93:1-2; 103:19). He is the absolute monarch, the King of kings (Rev. 19:16). This is what we mean by the sovereignty of God. He has total authority over everything. Not only did he decree everything that happens in time, but he sovereignly guides all things by his providence (Rom. 8:28). "He works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

The question then arises, "What is the final purpose for which God does all things?" Jonathan Edwards wrote, "The great end of God's works, which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed **one**; and this *one* end is most properly and comprehensively called **the glory of God.**" The final goal of the whole universe is the glory of God. *"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."* (Rom. 11:36). He foreordained all things to display his glory, and everything will give him glory and praise to the end of time (Phil. 2:11).