

The Sovereignty of God

Tony Eldridge

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the two people who have spent a lifetime teaching me about the sovereignty of God. My father, Henry Eldridge, and my mother, Dixie Eldridge, sacrificed their whole life for my brother and me while ensuring we knew who God was and why we always needed Him. I love you, Mom and Dad. Saying thank you is not enough. I owe you everything.

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Introduction

Sovereignty.

It is not a word we use often. As Americans, it can leave a repugnant taste in our mouths. Why? What exactly causes us to think of this word with such disdain? It's rooted in our history and our national values. Sovereignty is tied to power. The rule of one person over another. It wasn't long after creation that men learned to press their will upon their fellow man. And the one who was the strongest began to express his sovereignty over his neighbor.

If you are the sovereign, you impose your will upon others. You do what you want and answer to no one. Why? Because there is no one to impose his will upon you. Unless, of course, there arises someone stronger than you. Then they become the sovereign. This cycle has played out over and over through one war after another. War, then, became the instrument by which man imposed his sovereignty over others.

In 1776, the American colonies stood up to their sovereign, King George, and a war ensued. With the help of a strong ally, the colonists stood up to their sovereign and took away his rule. And since then, Americans have rejected the notion of the sovereignty of one man over them. The individual is sovereign. The individual chooses who will rule over them and can recall that person at their will.

Americans would no longer bow the knee to any man. They crafted a constitution that separated powers so that power could not be concentrated in any one person. Three equal branches of government, each with its checks and balances on the other two, would ensure that no man would claim sovereignty over them ever again.

So, the rejection of sovereignty was not merely an act of rebellion. It became a national value rooted in our collective consciousness. Over two hundred years have passed under this constitution, and we have not bowed

the knee to any man. Yet, we are a nation born with a collective desire to serve God and His Son, Jesus. We were, by any estimation, a Christian nation, and our national ancestors understood what it meant that God was sovereign. Sovereignty was something they lived under as colonists of King George, and the concept of sovereignty had real-world meaning to them.

But over time, as we became accustomed to not having to bow the knee to any man, I fear that we have lost the understanding of what it means that God is sovereign. That is why I wrote this book. It began with an introspective look as I challenged my beliefs and understanding of what it means to me that God is sovereign. Some of the ideas I learned from the Scriptures made me uncomfortable. As a proud American, fully submitting to another authority unconditionally felt awkward, even unnatural. Indeed, my relationship with the Creator would be more of a 50/50 give and take between He and me. I would do my part, and He would do His part.

And thus was the crux of my woeful misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God. He is sovereign regardless of what I think about the matter. My opinion, my belief, nor my desire has one bearing on the sovereignty of God. In a nutshell, here is what I learned about His sovereignty.

- God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants. Period.
- God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority. Period.
- God has the right to make the rules and the power to enforce those rules on whomever He chooses. Period.

His sovereignty extends to the very nature of what we view as morality and what is good and evil. The sovereignty of God means that He defines what is moral. He is not held to any moral standard. He IS the moral standard. Good is good only because He defines what good is. Evil is evil only because He defines what evil is. He, and He alone, has the power to define for everyone else what good and evil mean, and no standard can hold Him accountable except His own.

Once we believe these fundamental truths of God's sovereignty, it changes everything in our lives. It changes the nature of our relationship with Him. It changes how we live, how we order our priorities, and how we bend our will to His. We understand that our relationship with God is not a 50/50 proposition but rather a 100/0 proposition. It is all Him. He is the Potter; we are the clay.

In the following few pages of this book, we will dive deeply into what sovereignty is and what it is not. We will see how God has demonstrated His sovereignty and explore what His sovereignty means to us. And finally, we will look at what happens to those who accept and reject His sovereignty.

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Hang in there with me because we will learn that as terrifying as it is to stand in opposition to a sovereign God, it is just as strengthening and peaceful to submit fully to His sovereignty. And once we submit fully to His sovereignty, we will find that we can do all things through Him who strengthens us and live fully within His grace.

We can only do this by yielding to His sovereignty and bowing the knee before Him daily. He is our God. He is our Creator. He is our King. He is our Lord. He is our everything.

He is our Sovereign.

Chapter 1: What Is Sovereignty?

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *sovereignty* is defined as *supreme power, freedom from external control, controlling influence*. In this book, we will look at sovereignty from a biblical perspective. Yet, in this case, the dictionary definition aligns well with how the Bible uses the word, especially as it applies to God. To level-set and ensure that we are thinking along the same lines when we use this word, let's consider the facets of what defines the term.

Also, let us understand that there are varying degrees of sovereignty. Think of this as a continuum with some or little sovereignty at one end and absolute sovereignty at the other end of the continuum. So first, let's break down this definition. We will do so by looking at sovereignty in our physical world because I think it may be easier to understand it this way and then apply it to the spiritual world, which may be harder to understand.

Supreme Power

Power is the ability to make and impose decisions upon others. It's where the buck stops. As we said earlier, we can examine sovereignty through a power continuum. For example, in the family unit, the parents exhibit supreme power. When a decision needs to be made and enforced, the parents trump the children. Why? Because they have the power. Parents control the finances, provide the means for survival, and are physically more powerful than the children (at least in the early years of the family unit).

However, when you bring in local governments, you see the power continuum expanding. Cities have power over parents, which limits the parent's sovereignty over their children. And as we move up the governmental structure, sovereignty expands. States have power over the cities, and the federal government often has power over the states. This power is exercised through a series of laws and punishments and backed up

with the ability to use force to impose their will. The more power an entity has, the more supreme its sovereignty.

Beyond a country's national sovereignty, we see this continuum expand more. While, in theory, all nations are sovereign, in reality, some countries extend power over others. A threat of military force can manifest this power if one country doesn't comply with the power imposed by another. It may be displayed by the promise of funds or the threat to withhold aid. Military and economic power have been historical measures of supreme authority. At any given time, one, or a few countries at most, exhibit supreme power over others. This is usually decided after a war where the victor imposes its will over the vanquished.

The supreme power is supreme only to the extent that no other authority can impose its will upon the one with supreme power. This is sovereignty. It is the right, or the ability, to act in whatever way you wish simply because you can act that way, and no power can stop you. Sovereignty due to supreme power doesn't exist because of moral authority. Just because you have supreme power doesn't make you just, good, or even right. A just country can have supreme power just as easily as an evil, tyrannical country which enforces its will through murderous cleansings. Our ideals of fairness or justice have little to do with the reality of sovereignty. Simply, the strongest nation is sovereign over other countries because of might, not right.

Freedom From External Control

Another aspect of sovereignty is the freedom from external control, usually derived from the supreme power we just discussed. This is a crucial yet often neglected concept to understand as we study the idea of sovereignty. Let us go back to our example of national sovereignty. We said that supreme power is often exerted over other countries through military or economic power. The inverse is true as well. A country that possesses true sovereignty is exempt from the external threats of military or economic control. Why? Because the supreme sovereign nation does not fear these threats believing that the threatening country lacks the ability or power to carry out the threats.

When there are no perceived credible threats, the sovereign country continues to act in whatever way it sees fit. If that means it can act just and fairly, it will do so because it can. If that means it can act tyrannically, it will do so because it can. No one, or country, can stop them. And until that changes and someone steps up to challenge this power, sovereignty will rest upon this country.

Let's look at the other end of the continuum to illustrate this point. A company has workers, supervisors, managers, directors, vice presidents, CEOs, and a board of directors. Each is given a certain level of sovereignty over the level below them. But the extent of that sovereignty, or authority, is defined and restricted by the level above them. Workers listen to their

supervisors because their bosses can exert power over them. But the supervisors are free from the control of their workers. Supervisors don't act because their workers can do anything to them. However, they subject themselves to the manager because the manager has that power. And this chain of command works this way up to the board of directors. Each level of the organization is free from the external control of the level below them. So then, whether we talk about countries, companies, or any other structure, sovereignty can be defined as being free from the external control of another.

Controlling Influence

This is an interesting aspect of sovereignty and may challenge our ability to understand its importance, especially as it relates to the sovereignty of God. The first two definitions, *supreme power* and *freedom from external control* are tangible ideas we can easily see and recognize. But controlling influence is a little more nebulous, yet it is still an attribute of sovereignty. It's the idea that one may be sovereign without exerting direct power over another. It is by nature of their attributes that they control others and exercise sovereignty. It is the promise of what someone believes an association with the sovereign will do for them. Let's explain.

The United States is considered by most to be a sovereign nation. It has the power to impose its will on other countries and is free from external control. No other country can force the United States to do what it does not want to do. However, the United States does not always have to threaten military or economic power over other nations to control them. Often, countries will fall in line with the United States' national interests and values simply because the nations are drawn to the power of the United States to put themselves in its good graces. They may do so in hopes that the United States may treat them with deference economically, protect them if needed, or make another nation think twice about exerting its sovereignty over them. It's the "If you mess with me, you are messing with my big brother over my shoulder" idea.

Let's look at the other end of the continuum to illustrate this definition of sovereignty. Consider a young boy at school. He is socially awkward and prone to be picked on as an easy target by his classmates. To mitigate his challenges from stronger classmates, our friend seeks a strong friend who may take a liking to him. He then idolizes and does whatever he thinks this stronger friend may want him to do. You know the type. Or instead of finding a stronger friend, the boy finds a larger organization he can join. It may be a band, sports, or a high school club. We know the adage- there is safety in numbers, right? Isn't this precisely why young people are attracted to gangs? And in all of these cases, the sovereign didn't have to "conquer" the person. They didn't have to threaten them to join or die. The kid was drawn to them because of what he perceived an association with the stronger person or

group would bring to them. Once the association was made, the kid would bring himself into subjection to keep that association.

So then, controlling interest is simply sovereignty exerted over one entity by what it thinks the sovereign entity can do for them.

These aspects of sovereignty- supreme power, freedom from external control, and controlling influence- are easy to see and understand when we look at how our world exerts sovereignty. But how do we see them applied to an Almighty God? If you picked up this book, it's precisely what you are interested in learning more about, isn't it? After all, the book is entitled, *The Sovereignty Of God*, not *An Analysis And Study Of Sovereignty*, right? We want a better understanding of His sovereignty.

I have some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that we will look at God and His sovereignty in light of this definition and hopefully walk away with such a rich and deep understanding of this amazing attribute of God that it will change our lives and how we approach each day. I believe the more we understand God's sovereignty, the easier it will be to align our will to His will, and the easier it will become to live the way God wants His children to live. Living in the sovereignty of God is how we find the strength to conquer the sins we have struggled with over and over. Understanding God's sovereignty is the first step in bringing ourselves into subjection to Him and living fully in His grace. If you are like me, what you learn from His word about His sovereignty will be life-changing.

And here is the bad news. God is God. That means He is above us, and there are some things about Him we may never be capable of figuring out or understanding...

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9 ESV).

What this means for our study is that as powerful as this lesson on sovereignty is or as life-changing as I believe it will be, it will not scratch the surface of the true nature of God's sovereignty. It is simply far beyond our human ability to comprehend fully. That said, I am excited to dive into what we can know about His sovereignty. What the Spirit has revealed is life-changing for us who choose to understand and apply what we learn.

We talked about sovereignty being a continuum. At one end, we have limited sovereignty; at the other, we have absolute sovereignty. In this book, we will explore the extreme to which sovereignty can exist; perfect sovereignty in all its power and glory. Sovereignty in which there is no lack or no imperfection. When we talk about God's supreme power, we talk about the only supreme power. There is simply no greater power that exists. When

we talk about God not being controlled by any external power, we are talking about Him being exempt from the control of any existing power. When we talk about His controlling influence, we talk about an influence so powerful it can perform the impossible in our lives.

By now, you probably have many Bible verses running through your head that demonstrate the sovereignty of God. No doubt, we will examine many of them in this book. But I am most excited about the “So what?” of this study because this is where the power to transform us will come. Consider these questions...

- How can living in the sovereignty of God help me conquer through my battle to overcome sin and temptation?
- How can bowing the knee daily to a sovereign God equip me to persevere through any trial?
- How does my free will intersect with the sovereignty of God?
- How will God’s sovereignty change how I view suffering and unanswered prayers?
- How will God’s sovereignty realign how I look at my fellow man who is created in His image?
- How will the sovereignty of God cause me to reevaluate my role as a steward of God?

This is a taste of what awaits us as we dive into this study. But it all begins with clearly understanding what we are talking about. The definitions and aspects of sovereignty discussed in this chapter are a great starting point. The next chapter will examine the Scriptures’ claims about God’s sovereignty.

I encourage you to read this with pen and paper in hand to take notes and write down your observations and questions. When I first decided to write a book on *The Sovereignty of God*, I thought it would be a quick and easy process; one straightforward and non-confrontational. But the more I dove into the study, the more I realized that this would become the most challenging book I have ever written. I encourage you to take notes because I am convinced you will spend the rest of your life studying this subject and shaping your view on God’s sovereignty over time.

And I ask for your grace. This book is not the book I would have written on God’s sovereignty ten years ago, and I suspect it will not be the same book that I will write ten years from now. As study matures and we live life and gain experiences, it will help shape our understanding of biblical sovereignty. God has designed His word to be something we can spend a lifetime studying and learning from as we grow. I’m sure that most of us would agree that we will never get to a point where we have a perfect and complete understanding of the Word of God; there will always be more we can learn.

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Couple that with the idea that God's ways are higher than our ways and that we can never fully understand every aspect of God, we can see why the fundamental nature of God will be something that we may never be able to understand or explain fully. Some things are meant by God to be taken on faith. It may sound like a cheap copout for an author to say, "I can't explain it; we just have to believe it," but that may end up being exactly what we need to do at times.

But let's dive into the meat of our book. Let's see what God says about His sovereignty through His inspired Word... at least what He has chosen to reveal to us.

Chapter 2: Sovereignty: The Potter and the Clay

What do we think of when we say *God is sovereign*? Perhaps we think of His creative power, or maybe we think of His power in general. God is sovereign because He is powerful. Or perhaps we think of His right to rule. Jesus is sitting on a throne and is called the “Lord of lords and King of kings.” (1 Timothy 6:15). If a ruler is the ruler over all other rulers, then that is a good sign that sovereignty rests upon Him.

Our 1 Timothy 6:15 passage not only speaks to Jesus’ being over all other rulers, but it makes the point that He is sovereign.

“which he will display at the proper time--he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords,” (1 Timothy 6:15 ESV).

So, we see that Jesus is not only sovereign, but He is the only sovereign. {Note: throughout the book, I will refer to the three persons in the Godhead as sovereign, all having divine traits. I make no distinction between the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit when I read about the nature of God. The purpose of this book is not to defend or explain the triune nature of the one true God. I simply accept it in this volume}.

About Jesus being the only sovereign, let’s put a peg in it and come back to this point later in the book. For now, we want to establish what the Bible says about God’s sovereignty and then dive into what that means. Our next verse, Acts 4:24, also attributes sovereignty to God:

“And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea

and everything in them,” (Acts 4:24 ESV).

Again, sovereignty is attributed to God, this time backing up that claim because He is the Creator. Again, more on this later in the book.

Another passage that I want to look at that specifically attributes sovereignty to God is Revelation 6:10. In this passage, the martyrs who have died for the Lord cry out to Him, asking how long it will be until He avenges their blood.

“They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10 ESV).

In this passage, sovereignty is attributed to God because He has the power to avenge those who are overpowered.

The Bible goes into much more detail on God’s sovereignty, but these three verses establish the claim that God is sovereign. So, what does that mean? What justifies God’s claim to sovereignty?

This claim to sovereignty can be made by two distinct arguments that we will spend great detail looking at. One argument is a logical argument that God makes throughout the Bible. “I am sovereign because. . .” He then gives reasons why we should believe in His sovereignty. For example, we will look at passages where God says He has the right over anything He has made. As Creator, He is sovereign over His creation, including us. We may agree or disagree with this logical argument, and many do disagree. Nevertheless, our agreement or disagreement with God’s logical arguments about His sovereignty does not alter the truth that He presents.

We will discuss the second argument for God’s sovereignty by looking at His attributes. For example, we will discuss the all-powerful nature of God. And if God is omnipotent, He is sovereign regardless of any logical argument. We will spend an entire chapter reexamining the book of Job, which, as we will see, is more of a book on God’s sovereignty than a book on suffering. And in that book, God says He is all-powerful, and no one can demand anything from Him.

Now these two arguments, the logical arguments and the arguments about the attributes of God will intersect and interweave throughout the Old and New Testaments. We see that God exerts His sovereignty as Creator because He is powerful enough to create everything out of nothing by His word. This all-powerful attribute gives Him the basis for the logical arguments He makes.

So, God claims sovereignty. What exactly is He claiming? In the Bible, God’s claim of sovereignty is based on His act of creation, His power over creation, and His right to rule over creation. As we will see, His attributes

back up His claims of sovereignty in a perfect and preeminent fashion.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1 ESV).

At the beginning of the first book of God’s revelation to man, God lays down the foundation of His sovereignty: creation. The act of creating in and of itself is an act of sovereignty. We understand that in so many ways. In most countries, a person can receive a patent on their invention or creation. That person has the right to control their creation for a period of time. Even a young child playing with Legos can create his masterpiece and then choose to destroy his masterpiece at will. But if the child next to him creates a Lego masterpiece, he has no right to destroy someone else’s creation.

If God is the creator of all things, then doesn’t it stand to reason that He has complete sovereignty over everything He creates? Think about what has to happen for anyone to be able to speak something into existence from nothing. *Ex nihilo* is the Latin word we may be familiar with in this context. It means “from or out of nothing” (Merriam-Webster). For God to be able to speak something from nothing into existence, He must have power that is above and beyond His creation. At best, man, the pinnacle of God’s creation, can take the building blocks of whatever already exists to combine them into something new. Yet man is not powerful enough to create something from nothing.

Not only does God have the power to create a universe, but He must also have a will to do it. God was not coerced into creating the universe. It was a choice for Him and Him alone to make. He created because He chose to create. Man often coerces his fellow man or animals to make something. A slaveowner often made his slaves create furniture, meals, or many other things. But in the end, it wasn’t the creator who was sovereign. If you work for a company that employs you to create widgets for it, you may be the creator, but they pay you for your creative ability and exert sovereignty over your creation. But with God, He displayed both the power and the will to create.

And as we will see later in the book, God can ensure that His creation acts precisely as He intends for it to act. He directs His creation; He supports and holds together His creation, and He can determine what He wants to do with His creation. In essence, God is sovereign over creation because He can do as He pleases with His creation. Let’s see this born out.

The Potter and the Clay: Over Nations

To illustrate His sovereignty as Creator, God spoke to the prophets and used the illustration of a potter and clay. He did this with both Isaiah and

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Jeremiah. Let's look at what He said to Jeremiah because He walks us through the illustration using a real-life potter and not just imagery.

“The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.” (Jeremiah 18:1-3 ESV).

Jeremiah gets a visual lesson of God's sovereignty. He is instructed to go to the potter's house and watch him create a vessel on his wheel. In this object lesson, Jeremiah observes that the clay vessel has some defect. So, what happens when the potter sees something he does not like with the clay vessel he is creating?

“And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.” (Jeremiah 18:4 ESV).

The potter had some choices to make, didn't he? He could have destroyed the clay vessel and given up on his creation, or he could have left the defect or spoil in the vessel. But in this case, the potter chose to refashion the clay into the vessel he wanted it to be. This potter was sovereign over the lump of clay. Then God speaks to this object lesson:

“Then the word of the LORD came to me: “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.” (Jeremiah 18:5-6 ESV).

God is saying to Israel that He is the Potter and Israel is the clay. As their creator, He can do with Israel whatever He chooses to do with them. He can mold or fashion them into anything He wants them to be. The potter didn't have to consult with the clay to see if it was all right for him to fashion it into something else, did he? Neither does God have to consult and agree with Israel on what He will make of it.

“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.” (Jeremiah 18:7-8 ESV).

God even extends His sovereignty over Israel to all nations. We will look at this in more detail later in the book, but His point here is that just as He is

sovereign over Israel, so is He sovereign as the potter over all nations. He has the power to break up and destroy anytime He chooses.

Put another peg in this verse that we will discuss later. As part of His sovereignty, God is free to devote a nation to destruction, and if that nation repents, God in His sovereignty can choose to relent and spare the nation from the harm He “intended to do to it.” There is so much about free will and the sovereignty of God that many can’t wrap their minds around. And with good reason. God’s sovereignty is so far above our finite ability to comprehend that we may never have all the answers. Spoiler Alert- I will not be able to explain all there is about God’s sovereignty in this book. But I will encourage us to be slow to build elaborate belief systems based on things we think might be true. More on this later. But God not only discusses His sovereignty over nations to break and destroy them, but He also tells Jeremiah that He has the sovereignty to build and plant:

“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.” (Jeremiah 18:9-10 ESV).

As the potter over nations, God can also choose to build up and plant any nation. We say nations rise and fall at God’s will, which is true. God establishes the governments (Romans 13:1). Just as repentance can change the decree of God against the ones He intends to destroy, so can evil from the nations cause God to relent from the good He had “intended to do to it.”

And so, the message of the potter and the clay to Jeremiah is that God is building/planting a nation to be His instrument of wrath against Israel, which he intends to break down and destroy:

“Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’” (Jeremiah 18:11 ESV).

God’s illustration here is that He is sovereign over even the nations. He can do what He intends to do to them because He is powerful enough to do it, He has the will to do it, and He can ensure that it turns out exactly as He intends. Things never get out of God’s control. He never has a miscalculation where He unleashes a monster that does more damage than He intends or inadvertently judges a nation more harshly than He intends. God is in perfect control over everything that He intends, and as we will see later, He will accomplish all of His purposes:

“remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’” (Isaiah 46:9-10 ESV).

The Potter and the Clay: Over Nature

As we said earlier, if God is the creator, then He is sovereign over His creation. Not only did He make it precisely the way He wanted it, but He instructed nature on how it was to behave. He sets the boundaries and creates what we call the laws of nature that they must follow, and nature obeys those laws. He did not endow nature with free will. It acts purely on instincts, yet God has put much of nature under man’s dominion. Man’s dominion over creation is not absolute but rests within the bounds of what the Creator has assigned. Consider the creation story in Genesis 1:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:27-28 ESV).

This dominion was given by God, Who has all dominion or sovereignty over His creation. As we will see later in the book, man has a special place in God’s creation. God made man in His image and created men to be His offspring or children. He endowed man with things He did not endow any other part of creation. As we see here, God grants man a limited portion of his unlimited dominion over creation. As we will spend much time discussing later, God also grants man limited free will from His unlimited free will.

God makes some things greater than man in certain respects (A star will overpower a man who gets too close, angels can overpower a man in a fight, and weather can kill a man when it rages). Still, there is no part of creation, including angels, that God has endowed with more glory and honor than He has endowed upon men. Even the apostle Paul says,

“for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.” (Acts 17:28 ESV).

The point here is that God, in His sovereignty, has made everything exactly the way He wanted it. Man has dominion because God gave him

dominion within the limits He lays down. Man has free will because God gave him free will within the limits He lays down. Man is His offspring because God made us His offspring. But the Bible is also very clear that even though God made man in His image and has given man special glory and honor as children made in His image, we are not divine creatures. We are created beings, and divinity only rests with God.

Whereas God is all powerful because it is His eternal attribute, our power has been gifted to us and limited by God. Whereas God is all sovereign, our sovereignty has been gifted to us and limited by God. Whereas God's free will is unlimited, the free will we have has been gifted to us and limited by God. God's attributes are eternal and part of His nature. Ours are gifted to us by our Creator within limits He ordains.

But to the rest of nature, God's limits are readily seen. In Genesis 1:4-5, God set the boundaries of light and darkness; in Genesis 1:6-8, God set the boundaries of the atmosphere and space over the atmosphere; in Genesis 1:9-10, God sets the boundaries between the earth and dry land (Proverbs 8:29 says that God set the boundaries of the seas at this time as well); in Genesis 1:14-19, God set the boundaries of the sun, moon, and stars as well as the seasons.

Unless God instructs differently, the creation will obey the boundaries set by their Creator. They do so because they were made to do so. God's control over His creation is so precise that He causes everything to work in perfect unison through His creative will. The sun, though violent and inhospitable to life, will never destroy the earth because God has decreed it to serve the earth and His creation upon the earth. It will never spiral beyond God's control or purpose.

How supreme is God's sovereignty over His creation? Consider that the largest star we know of in the universe has a radius 1700 times greater than the radius of our sun and our sun has a radius of 109 times greater than the radius of the earth. We are talking about things so big that we can hardly wrap our finite minds around them. And the nonprofit news organization, *The Conversation*, estimates that there are 200 billion trillion stars in the universe. I have no clue how big that number is, but when you write it out, it looks like this: 200,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. I still have no clue how big that number is. To help feeble minds like mine, *The Conversation* says the number of stars in the universe is ten times the number of cups of water in all the oceans.

Okay, so it must be a supremely sovereign God who can speak this massive number of stars into existence, not to mention the planets, moons, and asteroids that orbit each of them, correct? It's not just in God's creative power that we witness His sovereignty but in His intimate knowledge of His creation that we also see His sovereignty.

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“He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.” (Psalm 147:4 ESV).

We struggle to find names for our children, don't we? Yet God knows every one of the stars He made, and He has given each of them names, all 200,000,000,000,000,000,000,000+ of them. But that's not all:

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (Luke 12:6-7 ESV).

Jesus, who is God the creator, tells us that He knows every sparrow He has created, and He even knows every single strand of hair on every person He has ever created. I have no clue how many billions of souls God has created since Adam and Eve, but His infinite mind knows every hair stand that He created on each of them.

My point in saying all this is that when we speak of God's sovereignty, we speak of things we can hardly wrap our minds around. God is so far above and beyond us that our finite minds will never be able to understand His infinite nature fully. And this observation alone should be enough for us to acknowledge and submit to His sovereignty.

But there's more...

Chapter 3: Fundamental Attributes of Sovereignty

So, we have established that the Bible claims that God is sovereign. Let's dive into that concept further. The purpose of this chapter is to have a clearer understanding of what sovereignty is and how it applies to God. I warn you that some concepts in this chapter may be challenging for you to accept. I understand that. All I ask you to do is prayerfully consider what is said and if you find it true, let it shape you with a better understanding of who God is and what His sovereignty means to you.

In my introduction, I laid out three truths learned about the sovereignty of God. In this chapter, we will explore these three truths further. Understanding these truths is crucial to grasp God's sovereign nature. But if we try to chip away at these fundamental truths about God's sovereignty because they make us feel uneasy, we will end up with a distorted and errant view of His sovereignty. These are the three things we will discuss in this chapter as the fundamental truths of God's sovereignty:

1. God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.
2. God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.
3. God has the right to make the rules and the power to enforce those rules on whomever He chooses.

A cursory reading of these truths may not throw up many red flags, but as we dive into them and understand what they truly mean, we will face bold decisions about how we choose to see our God. Ultimately, it doesn't matter

what I choose to believe; the truth about God's sovereignty is what it is, whether I believe it or not. Whether I write about it correctly or not, the truth about God's sovereignty is what it is. My point is that His sovereignty isn't dependent on what I think about it. It is what it is. Our responsibility is to prayerfully seek to understand what He has revealed about His sovereignty and to be content to let the secret things that He chooses not to reveal remain hidden by Him (Deuteronomy 29:29).

God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.

Let's look at what is wrapped up in this first truth about God's sovereignty. There is so much in this statement alone that someone could write a book on it. But let's examine this at a conversational level and not parse the phrases as an academic exercise. So, what are we saying?

The first concept that's vital for us to understand is God's *authority*. Authority is the right to rule, make decisions, or tell someone else what to do. We understand this in our everyday life. Teachers have authority over children. This means they can instruct the pupil, enforce rules, or decide how best to teach them. But the teacher's authority is limited to what is granted or delegated to them. Teachers must act within the boundaries of the school board, the state, the federal government, and the parents. Their authority over students is carved out or delegated to them, and they must act within those bounds.

Teachers cannot one day decide that students must pass their tests or else be put into prison. Why? Because they do not have the authority granted to put children in prison. This harkens back to the continuum we discussed in chapter one. If there is an entity that can impose rules for you to follow, then your authority is limited. The imposing authority has delegated the scope of your authority and at any time can revoke your authority.

But the authority that makes God sovereign is that His authority is *inherent*. This means it rests entirely in Him and is not delegated to Him from anywhere. Further, God's inherent authority is the source of all delegated authority everywhere. The Bible teaches in very plain terms that any authority exists because it flows from His inherent authority. There is no authority man can claim that doesn't ultimately issue from God's inherent authority.

We touched on this concept when we discussed God as creator and potter. Because God created, He has authority over all of creation, including authority over man. And in His sovereignty, God can delegate authority to the degree He wishes and take back that authority to the degree He wishes.

We see God exercising His inherent authority over man and nature throughout the Old Testament. He raised one nation to break another nation (Habakkuk 1:5-11). He created a fish and commanded it to swallow up Jonah

(Jonah 1:17). He sent the hornets after the enemies of Israel (Joshua 24:12). He caused the sun to stop moving to give Joshua more time to complete the victory in battle (Joshua 10:12-14). All of these situations illustrate God's authority over man and nature.

But God did not have to be granted the authority to do any of these things, nor could anyone prevent Him from exercising any of these acts. The choice to act was His and His alone. This is inherent authority, which is why godly men and women appeal to God and His providential care. We recognize that God has inherent authority over everything, and we pray to the One who inherently can choose to grant or withhold our requests. There is nothing we can pray for outside God's inherent authority; every decision to act or not to act is from God alone.

After Jesus resurrected from the grave to conquer sin and death, He gave the disposition of all authority:

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” (Matthew 28:18 ESV).

Inherent authority rests in Jesus, our Lord, and Creator. He is not only the leader in the “religious” realm, He is the leader in everything. Yes, He can command our spiritual lives and instruct us on how we should live morally and ethically, but He also sets up nations and tears them down. He grants deliverance and allows His name to be glorified through martyrdom. He can cause the sea to destroy a ship, or He can deliver lives who were shipwrecked at sea. He can do this because He has all authority that inherently resides in Him.

That is why the Psalmist can say,

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3 ESV).

So, *inherent* authority means that God has the right to do what He wishes without anyone's approval because there is no authority greater than His, and His authority cannot be countermanded.

The second concept that's vital for us to understand is that God has the power and ability to do whatever He wants. Again, His inherent authority and His power are so interwoven that they are hard to separate. However, I separate them because both are important for us to understand. Someone may say, “So what? God has inherent authority. It doesn't mean I must listen to Him or submit to that authority.” This is what man has been saying from the beginning of time.

But God is not an impotent God with inherent authority but no way to enforce it. God has the power to back up His authority. Indeed, He has the

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power to do whatever He wishes. Listen to the Psalmist:

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3 ESV).

As the Lord prepared to make His humble entrance into the world He created, His chosen mother, Mary, was told by the angel Gabriel that she would be the mother of the Son of God. She didn’t quite understand how this could happen as a young teenage virgin. This is what Gabriel says to her:

“For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37 ESV).

Immediately, we hear this and say, “Whoa, slow down. Nothing?” We don’t like absolutes. We have learned that there is an exception for everything. But we feel that way because we are finite men. For us, absolutes prove to be elusive. The words “never” and “always” seem to be overgeneralizations. We often project our limitations upon God because we sometimes feel that God is subject to the same generalizations.

But what if Gabriel is correct? What if, indeed, nothing is impossible with God? What would that say about His sovereignty? So often, rather than accept truths about God, we fight hard to prove why He is not what He claims to be. Sometimes we do this with silly and fallacious arguments like, “Can God make a rock so heavy that He can’t lift it?” Now, I’m not going to get into a philosophical argument or defense of these questions in this book. There are a lot of good resources out there for you to consume if you have a burning desire to dive deeper into how to defend against these types of arguments. My point is to acknowledge our tendencies to explain away what we do not want to hear or what we read that may contradict a firmly held belief.

You say, “But the Bible plainly states that it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18). Ok, now we have two verses. One states that there is no limit on God, while the other says God is limited. Which is true? Hang in there with me because before this chapter is over, we will answer this question. But for where we are in the study of the sovereignty of God, I am going to ask you to go with the words of Gabriel that nothing is impossible for God. Free your mind from any circular argument to the contrary, knowing we will deal with it directly in just a few pages. Fair enough? {Note: We can add James 1:13 to the idea that it is impossible for God to be tempted with evil. We will address that impossibility later in this chapter as well}.

To help you with the idea that nothing is impossible for God or that He can do anything, consider these passages:

“But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but

with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26 ESV).

“Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” (Genesis 18:14 ESV).

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 ESV).

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” (Job 42:2 ESV).

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,” (Ephesians 3:20 ESV).

“Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.” (Jeremiah 32:17 ESV).

“Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?” (Jeremiah 32:27 ESV).

All of these passages state that nothing is impossible for God. If these passages are true about God, they speak to His sovereignty. God is sovereign because He has the inherent authority and the power to do anything He wants, and no one can stop Him. That’s supremacy. That’s sovereignty. That’s who our God is!

Let’s briefly see this in action. When Israel was between the proverbial rock and the hard place with the Red Sea on one side and Pharaoh’s army on the other side, God was able to deliver His people (Exodus 14). When a teenage shepherd faced a warrior giant, God gave the giant into the boy’s hand (1 Samuel 17). When three teen boys were thrown into a fiery furnace, God saved them (Daniel 3). When 5000 men, plus women and children, were hungry, Jesus fed them with five loaves and two fishes (Matthew 14). When the Son of God died, God raised Him, never to die again (Matthew 28).

So, when we put it all together, the Bible abundantly backs up the first truth about God’s sovereignty: *God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.*

God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.

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The second fundamental truth about the sovereignty of God is wrapped up in the idea that full sovereignty means that God is not subjected to any other authority. I am confident that I will start to challenge you to think, because if this is true, it will rock the foundations of beliefs that you may be tightly holding on to. This is saying much more than God is the top man on the totem pole. This is an ethical and moral argument as well. What do we mean?

Can we start with the simple assumption that we all agree God is, indeed, the highest ranking being in existence? That's not a stretch, is it? The writer of Proverbs says:

“No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.” (Proverbs 21:30 ESV).

This is a powerful verse that speak to God's sovereignty and to illustrate our point. The proverb tells us God is above all wisdom. The wisest of the wise will never be able to prevail over the Lord. No wisdom will bring God into subjection. Neither will any understanding nor knowledge defeat the Lord. In a courtroom trial, knowledge, testimony, and evidence are all submitted to either convict or acquit someone. But in the case of God, no knowledge can overcome Him. Not that He is good enough at hiding the understanding, but that God is all truth, and truth will always be part of His nature and character. No counsel can prevail against God. Counsel, in this sense, is akin to a lawyer or someone skilled in finding weakness and exploiting it against another to expose their guilt. In a nutshell, this passage is telling us that God can never lose against man, or from the positive, God will always succeed against man. Always.

“remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,” (Isaiah 46:9 ESV).

In this passage, God makes the point most eloquently. It says that God is not only at the top of the food chain, but He is on an entirely different plane from us. He is in a class by Himself. The true sovereignty of God recognizes that God is not only above us in every way, but we cannot be compared to Him in any way. And further, not only is He above us but there is no one or nothing else that can compare to Him. So, if this passage is correct, it means that God inherently is Sovereign over all things because He is so far above and beyond everything else that nothing can compare to Him. This is precisely why God says,

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9 ESV).

If it can be said that God struggles in anything, it is in His ability to get us to understand how far beyond us in every way He is to us. And this struggle is directly related to our finite nature versus his infinite nature. Better stated, it is not God’s struggle to get us to understand; we struggle to understand the magnificent truths about Him that He reveals to us. Here, we must make a few concessions that many of us may find hard to make.

God is infinite; we are finite. God is perfect; we are imperfect. God knows everything; we do good to understand what God reveals to us. Indeed, as Paul puts it:

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Corinthians 1:25 ESV).

This means that our capacity to understand God’s sovereignty, or anything about the fullness of His nature, is limited. Sometimes we will have to take things at face value instead of logically understanding how it all interconnects. It becomes a futile practice to try to understand everything there is to understand about God.

So, we get this first point, don’t we? God is at the top of the food chain. There is none higher. Because this is true, it means that God answers to no man, no power, or no other authority. Simply, no authority exists that can place God under it. It means He cannot be held accountable to anything. I guess that this is where we start to get that strange feeling in the pit of our stomachs. What does it mean that God is not held accountable to anything? We will spend an entire chapter going through the book of Job because this is the main point God makes to Job in the book that bears his name.

Since God is at the top of the Authority-Sovereignty continuum, He gets to make the rules and enforce them on others as He sees fit. We will dive into this last truth about God’s sovereignty at the end of this chapter in detail. But this point is simply that no one can hold God accountable for anything.

No one has the moral or ethical authority to charge God with anything and put Him on trial, yet our society attempts to do this every day. As His children, we must recognize that His sovereignty makes this a futile endeavor. We must not jump on the bandwagon of accusing God because we know He will win against any charge brought against Him. Trying to charge God with anything and forcing Him to answer us is antithetical to His sovereignty. We do not get to make accusations against God. We cannot demand that God give an account of His deeds or give answers to why He did or did not act in a particular way. We simply cannot do it, nor will God allow Himself to yield His sovereignty to us in that way.

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God gets to make the rules because He is sovereign, yet He is not held to any authority. God's sovereignty is limited if he is forced to act a certain way. That would mean there is something greater than Him.

Earlier, I promised to look at a couple of verses about God's sovereignty and the tension in Scripture that nothing is impossible for God, yet some things are impossible for Him. This is where we will look at those passages because we must understand what they are saying and, more importantly, what they are not saying. If we misunderstand them, it may cause us to walk away with an incomplete understanding of God's sovereignty. I fully expect that this is where I may start to lose some people, and I ask that you consider these things prayerfully, and I will continue to do so as well. So, let's remind ourselves of the tension in these verses:

“For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37 ESV).

“so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.” (Hebrews 6:18 ESV).

“Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.” (James 1:13 ESV).

On the surface, these three verses say this: Nothing is impossible for God; it is impossible for God to lie; it is impossible for God to be tempted with evil. How we harmonize these three verses will significantly impact how we view God's Sovereignty. When faced with tension like this, we have three basic ways we can choose to handle it. First, we can use the tension as an apparent contradiction and conclude that the Bible is in error, proving it is a work of man and not the work of a perfect divine being. I reject that option outright and am confident that many of my readers will as well. For those contemplating this option, understand that it is not within the scope of this work to launch into a full-scale apologetic treatment. I would, however, encourage you to search for one of the many great apologetics works that specifically deal with how to reconcile apparent contradictions in the Bible.

That leaves the believers to consider the other options. One option is to view these verses in their absolute sense, which will cause us to choose one primary truth and do some pretty interesting logic acrobatics to harmonize the three. For example, we can hold to the truth that it is impossible for God to lie; therefore, Luke 1:37 doesn't literally mean nothing is impossible for God. We can say the same thing about it being impossible for God to be tempted with evil. That must be true, so Luke 1:37 must mean something different from what it says. Perhaps it means that nothing is impossible for

God to accomplish in the sense of virgins giving birth. We, therefore, elevate one passage and subjugate the other passage.

Or, we can use the same option and flip the reasoning. We can say that Luke 1:37 is true, meaning that Hebrews 6:18 (impossible for God to lie) and James 1:13 (impossible for God to be tempted with evil) must mean something else. Perhaps we reason that lying is a sin, and we know that God cannot sin, or we reason that since evil is not in the presence of God, that is what makes it impossible for Him to be tempted with evil. But this reasoning subjugates God to living under authority. God cannot lie or be tempted because He would be sinning if He did. And once you subject God to any authority, you have limited His sovereignty. You can't have it both ways. You cannot say God has absolute sovereignty and yet force Him to be subject to a moral code.

So, what do I believe? I must find a way to preserve the Scriptures' integrity while maintaining God's supreme authority and sovereignty. So, I hold to these revealed truths. First, God's sovereignty means that He cannot answer to any authority. This is where I know that many may disagree. God has the free will to lie or tell the truth and the free will to be tempted by evil or not to be tempted by evil. No one can tell God He can't or shouldn't do anything. Being sovereign in the way God is sovereign means He can do what He wants and never have to answer for His actions. Being forced to give account to anyone is a surrender of sovereignty.

At the same time, I do believe the scriptures when it says that it is impossible for God to lie and it is impossible for God to be tempted with evil. It is not possible for either of those two things to happen. I believe that with all my heart. And I believe all three verses are equally true, and neither one rises in supremacy over the others. I do not have to use logic acrobatics to explain how one is absolute, and the others are not really saying what they are saying. So, the question becomes, if I believe that nothing is impossible with God and that God can choose to lie or choose to be tempted with evil (because nothing is impossible with God), then what makes lying or being tempted with evil impossible for God?

I believe it's impossible for God to lie or to be tempted with evil because it is not in God's character to do those things. That's a far cry from saying that God couldn't do those things even if He wanted to or that He couldn't do those things because a moral code prevented Him from doing those things. Again, we will spend an entire chapter looking at the book of Job, which I believe teaches this very truth.

There are things that the Bible teaches about God's character that bears this out. First and foremost is that it's a mistake for us to compare God's character to man's. Man often makes plans but fails to follow through on them for whatever reason. Man often tries to live a sinless life with a willing spirit but with a weak flesh that we constantly battle. But God is not like man

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in His character. Consider these verses of distinction:

“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Numbers 23:19 ESV).

“By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.” (Romans 3:4 ESV).

“Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David.” (Psalm 89:35 ESV).

“declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’” (Isaiah 46:10 ESV).

These verses contrast God’s character with ours. God completes what He sets out to accomplish. As I read the Bible, there is only one thing that can cause God to change His purpose, and we will deal with that later in the book in detail. But simply, God will sometimes change His purpose when men ask with a penitent or faithful heart. That change, however, is a free will change from a sovereign God.

Whereas man is often forgetful, God is not. Whereas man is often lazy, God is not. Whereas man often overestimates his ability to complete a task, God does not. Whereas man often encounters opposition that stops his plans, God does not. God will always accomplish His purposes. Man does not.

I threw in the passage in Psalm 89 because it helps us accurately understand the true nature of the impossibility of God to lie. God swears He will not lie to David. And the lie becomes an impossibility for God because of this. God cannot lie because God will not lie. This is what makes God sovereign over man. God cannot because God will not. On the other hand, man often does things, even when he doesn’t want to do them.

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” (Romans 7:18-19 ESV).

Let’s revisit the second truth we are examining. *God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.* If God is supremely sovereign, then this statement must be true. Anything less than this is an erosion of God’s

sovereignty. Ask yourself, if God must act a certain way or not act a certain way, then what power exists to enforce this? The truth is that no power exists that can enforce anything upon God. And yet we try to do this all the time.

We say, “God, you aren’t being fair,” which is a statement of accountability. Or we say, “God, if you are just, then you wouldn’t let a man kill a child,” which is holding God to a standard. Or we say, “God, I do not deserve to suffer from boils, loss of my fortune, and the loss of all ten of my children,” which is an indictment against God to which He must answer.

When we treat God the way we treat each other, we lose the sense of awesome sovereignty that is God’s. We can hold each other accountable. We can hold each other to standards, indict each other for our actions, and force each other to answer for those actions. But we can do none of that to God. We are left with the reaction of Job when he tried to do this to God:

“Then Job answered the LORD and said: “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.” (Job 40:3-5 ESV).

God has the right to make the rules and the power to enforce those rules on whomever He chooses.

The third truth about God’s sovereignty is predicated on the first two being true. If God (1) Has the authority, power, and ability to do what He wants and (2) No one can stop Him from doing what He wants or force Him to act a certain way, then it stands to reason that God has the right to make all the rules by which everything under His authority must act. In this case, everything is all of creation, including man. Simply put, God can make the rules for all of us and enforce those rules however He sees fit.

In nature, God chose to order everything according to rules or laws that we are still discovering. God ordained in nature that gravity holds people to the earth. We call this a natural law. We discovered it, but God ordained it at the creation. Whether talking about the laws of thermodynamics, astrophysics, or even quantum physics, we are all simply discovering the laws God ordained to maintain His creation.

Sometimes we make a correct hypothesis when studying these laws, and sometimes we make a wrong one. But our ability or inability to correctly understand the laws God has ordained does not alter the reality that God ordered everything to make the universe work. I suspect that no matter how smart we grow, we will never be able to understand everything God sets in order for His creation to work the way it does. And the “smarter” we grow, the more we uncover how God designed the world. In essence, we are just learning more about the Creator.

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But seeing God in creation is stuff for another book. Let me end this part of God's sovereignty by reminding us how nature itself testifies to its Creator:

“To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1 ESV).

Let us turn our attention to something that more directly concerns us. God not only showcases His existence through His creation, but He has taken the special step to communicate directly to man regarding His will for us.

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” (Hebrews 1:1-2 ESV).

God spoke to man at various times and in different ways. But He did speak to us. And His speaking to us was for the special purpose of instructing us on how we should live. We divide the history of man into three broad eras defined by how God chose to speak to us. We call these periods dispensations. Roughly, there are three distinct dispensations in which God has interacted with man.

In the first, the Patriarchal dispensation, God spoke directly to the heads of the family and told them how to live their lives. Some listened, but many ignored the voice of the Lord. Adam was told about his work in the Garden of Eden and the prohibition against eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:15-17). In the rest of the book of Genesis, we see God speaking to Cain, Noah, Abraham, and Abraham's descendants through Joseph. God spoke to them by telling them what to do and what not to do. Sometimes they listened, but often they did not. As their sovereign Creator, His right was to give them rules and enforce them however He wished. Sometimes He banished people who sinned, sent a flood to kill them, confound their languages, or rained down fire and brimstone. But the point is that God had the sovereign right to instruct them on how to live and enforce that in any way He saw fit.

When we get to Exodus, we see a transition to the second dispensation, the Mosaic dispensation. God shifts from speaking directly to men, to speaking through the written law and prophets. The Law told people how to live, and the prophets were sent to warn people that punishment was coming when they stopped listening to the written law. This period started when God gave the Law to the first prophet, Moses, and lasted until the coming of His Son, which would usher in the third and final dispensation, the Christian dispensation.

Interestingly enough, God chose a period of silence of approximately 400 years as He transitioned between dispensations. The Israelites spent about 400 years in Egypt as slaves between the first and the second. Between the second and the third, we have what is commonly referred to as the silent years from the writing of the last prophet, Malachi, to the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. This period also lasted about 400 years. Another interesting note is that God spoke to people in each dispensation for at least 2000 years, and in our case, 2000 years and counting.

This takes us back to our passage in Hebrews 1:1-2- God spoke in many ways at various times to people. But the speaking was for a sovereign God to instruct His people on how they should live and to execute whatever judgment upon them He chose if they did not heed His words. A sovereign God has the inherent right to tell people how He wants them to live. And as subjects of the sovereign God, we do not get to pick and choose what laws we will follow and what laws we will not follow. We are bound by the laws our sovereign God lays upon us, whether we choose to follow them or not.

Today, and through the rest of time, we live under the Christian dispensation. God has spoken to us through His Son, Jesus. As we have already discussed, Jesus is not a mere prophet. He is God Himself, who left heaven to live in the world and among the people He created. To nail this point home, consider these verses. They will be at the heart of God's sovereignty over us today:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” (John 1:1-3 ESV).

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.” (John 1:10 ESV).

“yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Corinthians 8:6 ESV).

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15-17 ESV).

These verses demonstrate that the Son of God, the Messiah prophesied about in the Old Testament, was not merely another man whom God would

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raise up, but that Jesus Himself was the God of creation in Genesis 1. If this bedrock of faith is true, then supreme sovereignty rests upon Him, and His words are binding upon man today as the only words by which we must live and the only words by which we will be judged. If Jesus is the God we have been studying about in this book, then how can we walk away with any other conclusion but that Jesus

1. Has the authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.
2. Answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.
3. Has the right to make the rules and the power to enforce those rules on whomever He chooses.

Consider these claims of Jesus:

“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 ESV).

“The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.” (John 12:48 ESV).

“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Matthew 28:18 ESV).

Jesus also depicts Himself as the great Judge of mankind on the Day of Judgment:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:21-23 ESV).

This is seen in more detail in Matthew 25:31-46. In the Judgment Day scenes, Jesus shows us how His words will judge us on the last day while He sits on the judgment seat. But after the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus into heaven, where God seated Him at His right hand on the throne, the Spirit inspired men to write about Jesus and His sovereign role as King and Judge. This is important because we see the triune nature of the three persons of the one true God, all attesting to the legitimacy of Jesus as the sovereign God whose words will judge all men and grant the only access to God the Father. Here is what the Spirit attests to:

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV).

“because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31 ESV).

“on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.” (Romans 2:16 ESV).

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” (Romans 14:10-12 ESV).

So, you have all three persons of the one true God attesting to the sovereignty of Jesus as Judge over man. Jesus speaks of the day when He will judge man. The Father seats Him on a throne at His right hand and gives His Son all authority. The Spirit continues to testify of Jesus’ sovereign role as judge over mankind.

We see in our dispensation that God has chosen to speak to us by His Son. This dispensation will continue until the Father sends His Son back to earth to claim His children and judge all mankind who have ever lived. Someone estimated that between 75 billion and 100 billion souls might have lived since Adam who will stand before Jesus on that Day. Regardless of how many there will be, the Bible makes it clear that ALL will stand before Jesus to give account.

But the fact that there will be a judgment tells us something about sovereignty that we will tackle in the next chapter. If we are given a standard or a law to live by, and there will be a judgment regarding whether we have lived by the law, then there must be a choice we have to obey or not to obey. In the next chapter, we will dive deeply into how a supremely sovereign God who always accomplishes His purposes interacts with a creation possessing the free will to obey or not to obey his Creator. Does man’s rejection of God diminish the Creator’s sovereignty?

Chapter 4: God's Sovereignty and Man's Free Will

As we have seen, God claims sovereignty over all creation. We see He has the inherent authority and power to do all He pleases, and nothing can make Him submit to any standard or stop Him from exercising His authority. This gives Him the right and power to impose whatever standard on creation, including man, He wishes, and He has the power to enforce that standard upon His subjects. Isaiah reminds us about God's sovereignty:

“remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’” (Isaiah 46:9-10 ESV).

If there was ever a proof text on God's sovereignty, this might be it. God is in a class by Himself because no one is like Him. We would expect this from a supremely sovereign being. He has tremendous power that no part of creation has. He alone can “declare the beginning from the end and from times things not yet done.” And His counsel is sure, unable to fail, meaning He will always accomplish everything He purposes.

But is this divine claim of supreme sovereignty valid, or is it an overreach by a powerful being engaging in divine propaganda? If God lays down the law for man, can we assume He wants us to follow that law? Is that His divine purpose for us? If God is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9), and indeed, many will perish (Matthew 7:13), does that mean some of God's purposes do not stand?

Now we have a conundrum the world has struggled with for centuries. Is God sovereign? Does man have free will? If man does have free will and can

choose his way and reject God, does that lessen God's sovereignty because there are indeed some things out of His control? Indeed, can sovereignty exist if someone can stand up to authority and say, "No, I will not do what You say! I will thwart Your purpose for me!"

Some have answered this question by saying God is sovereign and all His purposes will indeed come to pass for us because He has purposed some to obey and some to disobey. This is how they preserve God's sovereignty. We all act the way a sovereign God has chosen for us to act since the foundation of creation. If God has predestined us to be lost, then we cannot change that purpose for our lives. And if we are the lucky ones whom God has predestined to be saved, then there is nothing we can do to alter that purpose. Some may pay lip service to man having free will, but in reality, man will fulfill the destiny God has assigned them. Free will, in this case, is a phantom window dressing.

In a moment, we will look at some of the verses they use to prove their point, and then we will look at what the Bible says about man's free will and how it intersects with God's sovereignty. But before we do, let's take a slight detour that may seem out of place here, but it teaches a vital lesson as we go forward. Let's look at the Sadducees and see how they reached conclusions about some of their beliefs. How Jesus sets them straight will teach us lessons as we examine how we arrive at our beliefs on the free will of man and God's sovereignty.

Why Sadducees Do Not Believe In A Resurrection

In the days of Jesus, there were many sects, all believing something different. You had the Essenes who lived a communal existence which many thought may have been the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls. You also had the Zealots who hated the Romans and believed God would conquer Rome through violence and might. Then you had the two more prominent sects who shared power in ruling the Jewish people through the Sanhedrin: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were the more conservative of the two and followed the law and the oral traditions. In contrast, the Sadducees followed the law alone, limiting their appeal for authority to the first five books of the Old Testament. A significant distinction between them was in their view of the afterlife. Pharisees believed in an afterlife and angels, while the Sadducees didn't.

We see Jesus coming head-to-head with Sadducees on their view that there is no resurrection and no afterlife. The reasoning they used to arrive at this conclusion went something like this: The law taught what was referred to as the Levirate Marriage from Deuteronomy 25:5-10. If a man died without a son, his brother would take the widow as a wife and bear a son for his dead brother. The Sadducees reasoned that this inferred that there is no

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afterlife because if there was an afterlife and a resurrection, how would Levirate Marriages be handled when everyone met back up in the afterlife? This is how they would get Jesus to stumble and prove that there is no resurrection.

Remember, Jesus is God who created man in His image and instituted marriage in Genesis 1 at creation. The Sadducees had no idea the one they were about to test had firsthand knowledge of everything they were about to put to Him.

“The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.” (Matthew 22:23-28 ESV).

Understand, they had settled their authority that there is no resurrection, in part, by how they reasoned this situation through. Jesus tells the Sadducees that there is a resurrection and explains why. Remember, Jesus created man as an eternal being in His image. He was teaching the truth because He was the author of this truth. If you want to know how something works, there is no more qualified source than the creator of that something.

But look at the two charges Jesus lays at their feet which explains the error they made in how they arrived at their incorrect conclusion:

“But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” (Matthew 22:29 ESV).

The first error was in not knowing the Scriptures:

“And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” (Matthew 22:31-32 ESV).

The second error was not knowing the power of God:

“For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” (Matthew 22:30 ESV).

As we go through the rest of this study on the sovereignty of God, I will

harken back to this lesson on the Sadducees' belief that there is no resurrection. Our challenge is not taking a passage, inferring from that passage, and then building a belief system that may not be true. If we make an inference about the sovereignty of God or about how our free will intersects and affects the sovereignty of God, and that inference is incorrect, then we may have a whole house of cards that come crashing down upon us.

And sometimes, we may have to admit that we can't figure out how everything works together because God has not told us. Sometimes we have to take what we read at face value and chalk it up to the power of God. Even though God has given us the ability to reason, there is no shame in saying, "I believe that God's purposes will always stand. I believe that God gave man free will. And I believe that God will not always get what He wants. And I still believe He is supremely sovereign." All of these statements are taught in Scripture, and nothing says we have to be able to fully understand things that may be too wonderful for us to understand.

To some, this may sound like a cop-out for an author. I get it. An author who has trouble backing up his point and says, "Well, you just have to have faith that my point is true," argues from a weak foundation. But sometimes, that foundation is the only correct foundation to stand on. There is no shame in saying that we don't understand how things work, but we believe it by faith.

Okay, back to our predestination framework for defining how God's sovereignty is supreme in light of our rejection of His will. There are many variations to the doctrine of predestination, and whole books can be written on this subject. I will address this at a very high level, understanding that there is much more to dig into. In essence, predestination teaches that God must direct the fate of everyone for His purpose to stand. To be fair, most who hold this position believe that man is a fallen creature with inherited sin, and all, by nature, are worthy of eternal punishment. But rather than condemn the whole race, Jesus selectively exercises His grace to choose whom He will save. Apart from His exercise of grace, these people would be in the same situation as everyone else, deserving eternal punishment.

Here are three passages to illustrate this. And I know that this is a slight scratch of the surface from the deep dive we could easily make if this were the book's purpose.

"even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will," (Ephesians 1:4-5 ESV).

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among

many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” (Romans 8:29-30 ESV).

“who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,” (2 Timothy 1:9 ESV).

All of these verses speak to God’s predestined foreknowledge. The danger in reading passages like these is building a house of cards that comes crashing down when we err because we do not know the Scriptures and start to infer who the predestined are or what God has chosen for them, and then let our err cancel out other passages that teach God has given man free will to make his own choices.

Created In God’s Image and Free Will

At one end of the spectrum, you have a God who has planned out every decision and action His creation will take. This includes every decision and action that man will take. People who espouse this view do so because it is logical that this is the only way God can maintain His supreme sovereignty over creation. The thought is that if you give man free will to choose something that God does not want you to choose, then you are proving that God is not supremely sovereign, which goes against what the Bible teaches about Him. But just as with the Sadducees, a few incorrect inferences here will force us to build a logical house of cards that ends in God having to take control of every decision and outcome to maintain His sovereignty.

But that ignores many Scriptures and, as we will see, assumes that a supremely sovereign God cannot choose to create man with free will and allow man to exercise that free will within His sovereignty. In essence, you make God much less powerful when you say that the only way He can accomplish His purposes is if He controls every decision and outcome. I would argue that you do not know the power of God because a sovereign God is capable of giving man free will and still being able to accomplish His purposes in light of man exercising his free will. That is a powerful God beyond our comprehension!

In the creation, we see God creating everything from plants, animals, and celestial bodies. In other places, we also see He created the heavenly beings (Colossians 1:16), though they are not the subject of the Genesis account. But listen to what God says about the creation of man:

“Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds

of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:26-27 ESV).

On earth, something separates man from all other parts of His creation. To nothing else did He (They: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) say They would make in Their image. It was only man who was given this gift. And we see this gift being bestowed upon man as God allows us to observe man being created in His image:

“then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” (Genesis 2:7 ESV).

Throughout Scripture, those whom He made in His image have been called His children, and He serves as a Father to them. Still, being created in the image of God separates us from all other parts of creation. So, what does it mean that we are created in His image?

God endowed certain attributes of Himself onto man and on no other part of creations {Note: We are speaking of creation in the physical universe, not in the heavenly realm. We share traits with angels that we will discuss later, but even so, God separates man from angels and endows things upon us that He does not endow upon angels.} As we discuss the attributes of Himself that He endows upon man, it is essential that we understand that divinity is not one of those attributes. We may say that God created us with “sparks” of divinity that no other part of creation shares, but this is in no way saying that we are divine. Only God is divine. Jesus told Satan that only God is the One worthy of worship (Matthew 4:10). And as the subject of this book discusses, only God has supreme authority, sovereignty, and power.

But here are sparks of divinity that God endows upon the creation in His image that separates man from all other parts of creation:

- Man is given a portion of dominion/limited sovereignty
- Man is given intellect, knowledge, and reason
- Man is created as an eternal being
- Man is created with an ingrained desire to seek out God
- Man is given limited free will

Each of these attributes makes us different from everything else God created, and, in some way, it can be said that God put a little piece of Himself in us with these attributes. We will look at these things specifically, but we

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will focus our time on the last since it is the one that affects all the others most directly and it is the one that interacts with God's supreme sovereignty the most.

Man is given a portion of dominion/limited sovereignty

We see this in Genesis 1 in the creation account. God creates a world as a perfect paradise for His image bearer to live. After looking at everything and saying it was good, God creates man in His image and says it is very good. He sets man in a paradise garden and then turns over a portion of His dominion to man.

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:28 ESV).

Dominion was God's and God's alone. Yet He gifted a portion of His dominion to man. We will see that with every unique gift God bestows upon man, He bestows the gifts in a limited fashion. God never relinquishes any gift to man in an unlimited measure. He always maintains sovereignty over the gifts and attributes He gives to man. Dominion was given to man as long as man exercised the dominion under God's dominion. God reserved the right to tell man what to do and what not to do with the gifted dominion. For example, God told Adam and Eve what they could and could not eat. Later, He would tell Cain and Abel what to sacrifice and what not to sacrifice. Dominion, as with any gift from God, must be used according to God's will, and we will be held accountable for how we exercise our dominion.

Man is given intellect, knowledge, and reason

Another gift the Creator gave to His image bearer that separated us from the rest of creation is the ability to reason and think. God has this ability to the fullest, being all-knowing and all-wise. But He has given man a limited ability to know and think according to His will. Moses addresses this limited gift in Deuteronomy:

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 29:29 ESV).

God gives man knowledge that no other part of His creation has or can even understand. He provides us with the ability to reason for good or evil. After the flood, man exercised this reason to do a remarkable, albeit sinful thing:

“And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” (Genesis 11:5-6 ESV).

We know the rest of the story, don't we? God exercised His sovereignty and purpose over man and confused their language so they would have to separate. The Bible contains examples of men creating works of art and literature, weapons and inventions of war, and inventions of good and evil things. Yet, God never granted man unlimited intellect, knowledge, or reason. He still reserved His sovereignty over how they would use these gifts.

Man is created as an eternal being

No other part of the natural world is eternal. When a tree dies, there is nothing of the tree that lives on. And I am sorry to say this, but when your pet dies, there is nothing that lives on. Only man is made an eternal being. This is an aspect of God that is easiest for us to understand. Yet, as with the other gifts God gave to His image bearers, this is also limited. Whereas God is eternal, with no beginning or end, we have a beginning. Whereas God self-exists, we were created. God is eternal because He always was and always will be. He is the great uncreated Creator. His eternal nature is part of who He is. Our eternal nature is, by virtue, a gift from God.

“Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” (Psalm 90:2 ESV).

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 ESV).

And our God intends that man spend eternity with Him, but we must submit ourselves to His authority as we recognize His sovereignty. Whether we go to heaven or hell, reward or punishment, it will be for eternity because we were created never to cease existing—more on this as when we bring a close to the book.

Man is created with an ingrained desire to seek out God

God didn't create man as a side project or as a novelty. He created man to glorify Himself and commune with Man. God desires a relationship with His image bearer. We are more than just His creation. He makes us His children. He becomes our Father. That means He loves us. He truly loves us

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in a way that we could never understand love. And God seeks us to love Him and to pursue a relationship with Him. He made us for that purpose. That's why man turns to something greater than himself in times of tremendous need. Solomon says:

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11 ESV).

God has set eternity in our hearts. God has built into us this longing and desire for something greater. As we will see in a moment, we can choose to ignore this longing, but it is still always there, no matter how hard we try to bury it. This is such a wonderful gift from God that we often overlook. He gives us every advantage to seek after Him if we only use it. This is why king David says:

“I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Selah” (Psalm 143:6 ESV).

Over and over, the Bible talks about our natural desire to seek the Lord to the point that we hunger and thirst after Him. Yet we often deaden this desire and learn to ignore it altogether. And we can grow to a point where we no longer have a desire to seek after Him and His sovereignty, but it's not because He doesn't care. He created us with this desire built-in; if we listen to it, we can find Him and have that relationship we were created to have with Him.

“You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah 29:13 ESV).

Man is given limited free will

Perhaps this is one attribute of being created in the image of God that we often overlook. And as we have seen, some will not accept this. Because with free will, comes responsibility, and many of us would rather make God responsible for our actions. This, however, is not how God created us. This is a hallmark attribute of being an image bearer of our divine Father. God, in His absolute free will, has granted man a limited measure of His free will.

God has absolute free will. This touches on the first fundamental truth of His sovereignty, which says He has the “ability to do whatever He wants.” “Whatever” is the word that encapsulates God's free will. Remember, we said that being sovereign means He can do anything He wants, and no one can prevent Him. He says that He will accomplish all His purposes. With man, however, God has granted us free will in a limited fashion. It might be my

will to be a billionaire tomorrow, but some limitations will likely prevent that from happening. Not so with God.

Let's establish that the Bible shows that God has endowed His image bearers with limited free will, and then we will discuss how this intersects with God's sovereignty.

“So Jesus answered them, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.” (John 7:16-17 ESV).

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,” (Deuteronomy 30:19 ESV).

“And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15 ESV).

We see God placing choices before man throughout the Scriptures. In Genesis 2, God tells Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but He gave them the free will choice of obeying or not obeying. In Matthew 7, Jesus presents two paths, one broad and one narrow. He lets us decide which path to follow. In Revelation 3, Jesus says He stands at the door and knocks, waiting for us to hear and open. It's our choice. He could force His way through the door, but He leaves the decision of opening the door or not to us. And if we had no free will, why would He waste His time knocking at a door that would be impossible for us to open?

So, here they are. Wonderful gifts from a powerful, sovereign God who created us in His image and made us different from every other part of His creation. Sparks of divinity that makes us like Him:

- Man is given a portion of dominion/limited sovereignty
- Man is given intellect, knowledge, and reason
- Man is created as an eternal being
- Man is created with an ingrained desire to seek out God
- Man is given limited free will

But with great gifts comes great responsibility. If we are to glorify God

and seek the relationship with Him we are created to have, we must use the gift of free will to exercise the other gifts in a way that draws us closer to Him.

Does Our Free Will Diminish God's Sovereignty?

Our understanding of how man's free will affects God's sovereignty is at the core of the issue. The follow-through on the logic we build may cause us to say God must be making all the decisions because if man's free will stops God from getting what He wants, that means He is not supremely sovereign. And that concept is so paramount in our belief in God that we will sacrifice any other belief we think may challenge it. The prospect of worshiping a God Who is not supremely sovereign is beyond our willingness to accept.

But we need to remember the admonition God gave the Sadducees when He condemned their lack of belief in a resurrection based on the logic they used to build their case. (1) You do not know the Scriptures. (2) You do not know the power of God. Perhaps all of us need to remember this admonition as we use our God-given gift of reason to create a belief system that may end up being a house of cards because we are mistaken on a few critical facts about God. My advice is to stand firm on what we know and be careful how we use that knowledge to infer what we do not know, no matter how logical it may seem.

So, what do we know from Scripture? We have already seen that God is supremely sovereign and gave man free will to make choices. What we will see is that God does not always get His way. The Bible makes that clear, and even God Himself says as much. Yet, we know that God will always accomplish His purpose. I can confidently say both statements are true because the Bible says so. What I have to be careful not to do is to use my logic to infer something that may be in error and then build the rest of a belief system that stems from that error. This happens with men who believe in predestination and ascribe every action to God and none to man, eliminating any hint of man's free will to make this erroneous system work.

Let's establish from Scripture that God does not always get what He wants. We will deal with the ramifications of this truth on God's sovereignty later. Here are some basic verses that show God does not always get what He wants:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37 ESV).

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness,

but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9 ESV).

“Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11 ESV).

Caution: Here is the first opportunity to build a faulty belief system based on an error of logic.

1. We can be so beholden to our belief that God’s purposes will always be accomplished; therefore, God has purposed that these people will perish though it causes Him grief
Or
2. We can be so beholden to the concept of the supremacy of man’s free will that we say that this is the exception to God being able to accomplish His purposes. Therefore, the purposes He will accomplish must be things that lie outside the free will that God has bestowed upon man.

These false conclusions lead to an erroneous understanding of God’s sovereignty. They both build a belief system pegged on a mistaken belief of what the Scriptures teach. The logic flaw is based on the maxim “If this is true, that that must be true” or “If this is false, then that must be false.” But as Jesus would say, “You err, not knowing the Scriptures.”

What specific maxims do we need to be careful not to peg our belief systems on?

- If man has free will, it is impossible for God always to accomplish His purposes.
- If God always accomplishes His purposes, man can’t have free will.
- If God gave free will to man, then God can never intervene in that free will.

That last one may shock many, and I fear many have pegged their belief on this maxim which doesn’t seem to be supported in Scripture. We will walk through this one at length. But to get us down this path, I want you to reread the three verses I listed above that show God does not always get what He wants. I then want you to think about any other verses you can find that also show that God does not always get what He wants. I suspect any verse you find will somehow be about man choosing not to do what God wants man to do. In no other area will you see that God has a desire that does not happen.

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3 ESV).

In light of everything we have discussed, how do we understand this verse? Does it please God to save all men? Some will say yes, and some will say no based on their desire to support their belief system. But from a fair reading of Scripture, an honest man will be hard-pressed to come away with any other conclusion but that God loves all men and does not want to see any of them lost. He says as much as we have already read.

So, how do we reconcile this without creating a complex, faulty belief system to support a conclusion we want to justify? Could it be that a sovereign God Who can do all things is pleased to create man in His image, endow Him with free will, giving man the choice to obey or not to obey? This is in perfect harmony with what we read in Scripture and in no way diminishes God’s sovereignty. I would argue that it would take a being of supreme sovereignty to create another being with free will and still maintain His supreme sovereignty. How does God do that? Perhaps how He does it is beyond our ability to understand because it is beyond us to know. Maybe we just have to read the Scriptures that say it is so and accept it by faith. But if we try to impose our logic so we can understand it, we may walk away condemned with Jesus’ second criticism of erring because we do not know the power of God.

Is it God’s purpose to create a free will being who can choose to obey or not obey? I would say that Scripture teaches this to be so. Is it God’s purpose to create a being who can reject Him, something He doesn’t wish to happen? I would say that the Scriptures also teach this to be so.

Earlier, we said that being created in the image of God meant that man has been given the gift of limited free will. Whereas God’s free will is unlimited, we said God did not give man unlimited free will. This is true on a couple of levels. First, there are limits to what man can choose because man does not have the power of God to do all he wants. Remember, just because it is my will to be a billionaire tomorrow doesn’t mean it will happen. Second, our free will choices have consequences imposed by a greater Being. I can choose to disobey God, but I cannot choose to be free from the consequences of that free will choice, unlike God, who has no one who imposes consequences upon Him. Any consequences of His unlimited free will choices are consequences He imposes upon Himself. It grieves the Spirit when we sin. That consequence is brought about by what God imposed upon Himself. Unlike us, God never suffers consequences forced upon Him by someone else.

Do you remember when I asked you to think of other passages where God did not get what He wanted? From my reading of Scripture, I am hard

pressed to find any example of this other than when it deals with man's free will choice to obey Him or not. I am careful in what I am about to say, but it seems that the only protected aspect of man's free will is when it comes to choosing whether to accept Him or not. God will never force man to accept Him or to reject Him. Why? It seems that this is what God purposes in His heart.

Could it be that the notion that God never interferes with any aspect of man's free will is also a logical error not found in Scripture? I can read many passages where it seems God's sovereignty overrides man's free will, forcing man to do what God wants him to do. Yet, in none of these examples, I see God overriding man's free will to accept or reject Him, a conclusion that those who hold to predestination believe. If I am correct, it magnifies God's sovereignty over man while showing that God can accomplish His purposes. Simply, I believe it is possible that God can override man's free will in areas other than salvation. And the only reason He doesn't override man's free will in salvation is that God purposed in His heart that it is man's choice to obey or reject Him.

Where can I see examples of God overriding man's free will? A well-known example is with Pharaoh in Egypt. How many times do we see that God hardened Pharaoh's heart?

“But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses.” (Exodus 9:12 ESV).

Now, there are many things we don't know about this hardening of Pharaoh's heart that would make it easy for us to build a belief system based on possible erroneous logic, which may cause us to infer things that are not correct. But here is what we do know. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Later, Moses writes that Pharaoh also hardens His own heart. But the Bible never tells us how God hardened his heart, and that is where we have to be careful in filling in the blanks with what could be faulty inferences. Perhaps God hardened Pharaoh's heart the same way we would say we make someone angry. Just like our actions may make someone angry, so could God's actions with the plagues be the thing that hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Or, maybe God forced Pharaoh's heart to be hardened so that he would reject Moses' demand for Him to let God's people go. Perhaps this way of overriding man's free will is within God's purposes while still allowing Pharaoh to have accepted or rejected God. Suppose Pharaoh had already rejected God (which he had thus the judgments that were about to come upon Him). In that case, God hardening his heart directly would not change his acceptance or rejection of God because Pharaoh had already made that free will decision. Paul may give some support to this when he writes:

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“For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.” (Romans 9:17-18 ESV).

God intended to display His power through Pharaoh, and it is within God’s sovereignty to choose whom to harden and whom to grant mercy to. But nowhere in Paul’s writing does it say that Pharaoh was forced to reject God. That free will decision had been made, and God was now glorifying His name through Pharaoh. Paul said that God blessed Pharaoh with greatness to accentuate His glory through Pharaoh.

But even at the burning bush, when God appeared to Moses, He told Moses about everything that would happen, and God mentioned all the things He would make the people do.

“But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.” (Exodus 3:19-22 ESV).

Notice that God said Pharaoh would not listen unless He compelled Him with a mighty hand. Perhaps it was the mighty hand that hardened Pharaoh’s heart until the power was so great that it broke Pharaoh’s will (with the killing of the firstborn). But He also says He will give Israel favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and the Egyptians would give them great treasure as they left Egypt. God would do that. The Egyptians would have no choice because it was from God. God’s sovereignty overrode the people’s free will because God purposed it in their hearts. Again, the overriding of their free will did not have anything to do with whether they accepted or rejected Him but to ensure His purpose was accomplished (See more on God working through Pharaoh’s heart in Chapter 7: “Ways God Accomplishes His Purposes”).

My point in going over this is that we need to be careful in forcing our inferences upon our belief systems. The Bible does not tell us how God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, just that He did. Can we simply accept that without trying to explain something that the Bible doesn’t explain? Can we be satisfied by knowing the Scriptures and God’s power as Jesus told the Sadducees? If we go too far down a path of inferences to make a belief system work, we may end up with something that ends up denying the very Scriptures we want to support.

Here are some other places where God makes it clear that He will cause people to act a certain way. He doesn't explain how it will happen, just that He will do it. And in no way do any of these examples show that God forces or prevents anyone from accepting or rejecting Him:

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.” (2 Chronicles 36:22 ESV).

“for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.” (Revelation 17:17 ESV).

“For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.” (Habakkuk 1:6 ESV).

God puts things into motion in these passages to carry out His purposes. He doesn't explain how He will do it, and we often see Him use a variety of means to accomplish His purpose, but the result is that God directs the actions of all of these people. God does not have to sit around and hope that these people will act the way He wants them to act in their free will. Cyrus acted because God ordained Him to act. God directed evil people to act in a way that accomplished His purposes. God caused the Babylonians to execute His will upon the Israelites. In each of these cases, we see the preeminence of God's sovereignty over the limited free will He endowed man with at creation. But never do we see God forcing man to accept or reject Him. This is the one free will choice we see through the Old and New Testaments where God never interfered with man's ability to choose.

Please understand the point I am making in this chapter. It's not to explain how God's sovereignty and man's free will work together as much as it is for us to recognize that God can be supremely sovereign and man can have free will given by God. The truth is, I am not sure how it works together, but I suspect it's not because I am too dense to understand as much as it's because God hasn't told us. We use reasoning and logic to try to harmonize the Scriptures, but as we do, we need to be very careful with the assumptions and inferences used to connect the dots. What we do know is that God, in His sovereignty, accomplishes His purposes. Let us not jump to conclusions on what His purposes may or may not be outside of what He has revealed to us, nor let us ignore some purposes and elevate others.

We also know that God gave man limited free will. He gives us the ability

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to make choices about rejecting or accepting Him, and God has never once interfered with that decision, nor will God ever force man to sin. We expect this is a free will choice He will always leave to us. And we know God directs people and nations to act in specific ways to accomplish His purposes without violating their choice to accept or reject Him. Everything else we do to connect the dots are inferences that may or may not be true. Let us guard against elevating our inferences to the level of “thus saith the Lord.”

Chapter 5: God’s Sovereignty Seen In Job

Sovereignty in Satan’s Challenge

We often go to the book of Job to learn about suffering. But would it surprise you to learn that the book of Job is more about God’s sovereignty than suffering? And would it surprise you to learn that even the ancient men who are the subjects of the book of Job used faulty inferences about God to build a belief system that was in error? Perhaps Job himself believed the same things that his friends believed about the divine purpose of suffering until his personal experience shook that belief to its foundation. Let’s summarize how the book begins.

“There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” (Job 1:1 ESV).

The book’s first verse teaches some basic things about Job. First, we learn about his moral character and his relationship with God. He was a man who recognized the sovereignty of God and exercised his free will to serve God and live according to the law God gave to him. The passage tells us that he feared God, and this fear caused him to turn away from evil. What is evil? It is whatever a sovereign God defines as evil. Job was a man who knew how God wanted him to live, and he brought himself into submission to the one who had the right to direct his life.

“There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female

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donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.” (Job 1:2-3 ESV).

The book goes on to detail the wealth of Job. He lived in the same part of the world that Abraham came from, known as the cradle of civilization. This means that Job was not merely a wealthy chieftain of some remote or obscure tribe. He was indeed one of the wealthiest men in the world. In verses 4 and 5, we see just how much Job thought about God’s sovereignty in that he would make sacrifices for his children, “For Job said, ‘It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.’ Thus, Job did continually” (vs. 5). Job knew who God was and who man was in relation to Him. Job understood that God was sovereign and wanted to ensure that He protected his own children as much as he could from falling before the Lord. How often have we prayed for an erring child or for God’s favor upon them? In essence, this is what Job was doing for his children.

Then the scene shifts to heaven, which is a scene ripe for all kinds of inferences we can draw. We are not often given many glimpses into the spiritual realm, let alone given a narrative of what the throne room of heaven is like. In verses 6-12, we get that picture. God is in heaven with His angelic beings, and who should happen to make his way before God? None other than the accuser of God’s people (Revelation 12:10), Satan himself!

Now, our human curiosity wants to know more details, doesn’t it? Does Satan still accuse man before God like he did with Job and Peter (Luke 22:31), or did that end when he was cast down (Revelation 12:10)? I don’t know. Are there times when our suffering comes specifically because Satan asks God for permission, or not? I suspect that still happens, but we don’t know how rarely these situations may have arisen. Perhaps, Satan only spends time before God with prominent people like Job or Peter. It’s a fascinating thing to consider, but at the end of the day, we really do not know how much of this still goes on, and if it does, how many times we will be the subject of a cosmic spiritual contest between God and Satan. But we know it happened here, between God and Satan, over the faithfulness of Job.

“And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” (Job 1:8 ESV).

Satan’s response is, “Yes, I have! Of course, he’s faithful to You. You made him rich and powerful. You have built a hedge around him! But if You stretch out Your hand and touch him, take everything away, he will have no reason to follow You, and he will curse You to Your face!”

God’s response to Satan was, “Okay, you have control over everything he has. Just don’t touch him.” With that, Satan left to rain down tremendous

suffering upon Job.

As we will see in this book, Job will demand an audience with God. He will want to take the stand to defend himself when all the evil befalls him, but he will lament that no one can see God and how impossible it is to stand before an invisible God. It never occurs to him that God has already granted what he pleads for in this book. Satan has made a charge against Job, and God is allowing Job to defend his good name. The trial that Job begs for has actually started, even though he doesn't know it.

Before we get to the suffering of Job and how he and his friends deal with it, let's examine the showcase of God's sovereignty in the first few verses of the book. First, we see God's recognized sovereignty by Job himself. This rich and powerful man understood that despite being one of the most powerful men on earth, he was nothing compared to the God of heaven. Job saw God as sovereign over him. Job realized God had the inherent right to rule over him, tell him what to do, and God had the power to enforce the rules, so he brought himself into subjection to God. He even feared God enough to take action to intercede on behalf of his children before God.

And in the scene in heaven, we see God pitted against Satan. In this scene, we see God's sovereignty further displayed. Notice that it was Satan who had to submit to God. Satan could not act without God's explicit permission, and once that permission was given, Satan had to act within the limitations of that permission. We know that Satan has no regard for God and does everything he can to thwart God, but even he dares not act without the expressed consent of the sovereign God.

So, Satan goes off to do his worst. He acts fully within the limitations God placed upon him, but he stops at the threshold of the limitation not to touch Job's physical body.

In almost immediate succession, everything of value was stripped away from Job with God's permissive blessing. Two bands of raiders take away his oxen, donkeys, and camels, killing all of Job's servants, leaving only one from each attack as the bearer of bad news to Job. In another instance, the fire of God rained down from heaven to burn all of his sheep and kill his servants, except the lone bearer of bad news. Finally, as all of these servants were delivering the terrible news that Job had just gone from being the wealthiest man in the world to becoming bankrupt in the twinkling of an eye, the worst information yet is delivered by the lone survivor of the most tragic event. A great wind, tornado perhaps, struck the house where all ten of Job's children were feasting, and they were all killed.

Can you imagine the numbness that must have washed over Job? Here was a man who had done everything right, served God in fear and humility, and lost everything of value to him, including his children. Would Satan's prediction about Job come true? Was Job's faith and obedience in God only there because God had bought it, or was it a genuine faith and fear of the

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Lord? We soon get the answer:

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” (Job 1:20-22 ESV).

This is what an understanding of God’s sovereignty means in our lives. It doesn’t mean we don’t serve God unless He first serves us. It means we bow down to Him in fear and reverence because of who He is, not what He can do for us. It means that we see God as our supreme authority because He is the Potter, and we are His clay. It is God’s prerogative how to distribute His blessings, and we are owed nothing from Him. This is the ultimate understanding of God’s sovereignty for our lives. He has the power to give and take away, and He can do what He wants with that power. And regardless of how that choice affects me, He is worthy of our worship. Rather than curse God to His face as Satan had predicted he would do, Job humbles himself before the Lord and worships. Why? Because he knew God is worthy of worship because of who He is, not because of what He can do for me. He understood the second truth of God’s sovereignty: *God answers to no man, no power, or any other authority*; therefore, “Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”

Round two in heaven between God and Satan begins over Job. Satan appears again in heaven and presents himself before God, and God again presents Job and his faithfulness to Satan. God describes Job the same way He did before but adds an interesting commentary to His description:

“And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.” (Job 2:3 ESV).

We will talk more about this later when we discuss the foreknowledge of God and His sovereignty in chapter 8, but it’s interesting that had Satan not laid this challenge before God, it didn’t seem that it was God’s purpose to do any of this to Job. God lays this squarely at Satan’s feet, not at His own, although He had allowed it, which is the only way all this suffering could have happened to Job. But Satan sees his opportunity to prove God wrong about Job:

“Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! All that a

man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.” (Job 2:4-6 ESV).

“Okay,” Satan says to God (paraphrase), “Job still holds fast to his integrity because You have protected his body. Let me touch his flesh and bones and see what will become of his integrity! He will curse You to Your face.” God then gives Satan permission to reach out and touch Job’s flesh but again places a limitation upon him that he must obey. God told Satan that he could touch him but not kill him. And Satan gleefully leaves to do what He believes will cause Job to sin before God; at least, he would do his worst to make that happen.

Time out. Is there anything woven into this interaction between Satan and God that illustrates the sovereignty of God? Sure, we see the same things as before. Satan must receive permission, and he has to stay within the limitations placed on him by God. This time, the limitation was that he couldn’t kill Job. One thing that jumps out to me is that unlike men with our limited free will, when God placed a limitation upon Satan, Satan could not choose whether or not to obey. God has been giving man limitations since the day He created man, but man has been given the limited free will to obey or not to obey. When God lays down limitations upon Satan, Satan must comply with those limitations. Otherwise, Satan would have touched Job’s flesh the first time to push him over the edge or killed him the second time when it became apparent that Job would not sin before God. This is God’s sovereignty in practice.

Satan strikes Jobs with boils, or “loathsome sores,” as the ESV translated it, from the soles of his foot to the crown of his head. Do you ever wonder if it frustrated Satan that he could not reach out to take Jobs’ life? Nonetheless, if Job had to live, Satan would make him wish he were dead. We see this in the next chapter:

“After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said: “Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man is conceived.’” (Job 3:1-3 ESV).

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. There was no place on his body where he could rest to find relief. Verse 8 of chapter 2 says that he sat in soft ashes and scraped his sores with broken pottery shards to find a modicum of relief. Think about everything that Job has had to endure in a short period: he lost his wealth, his power, his respect, his children, and now his health. Satan has taken everything away from him... well, almost everything:

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“Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” (Job 2:9 ESV).

Satan must have been giddy with joy when Mrs. Job gave her husband this advice. The accuser of the brethren did know human nature well. I am too afraid to think of how I would have reacted if I was in Job’s situation because, to my shame, I have said a lot worse when faced with a lot less. And though Mrs. Job was wrong and sinful in urging her husband to curse God and die, I understand why she did it. That doesn’t mean that she was justified or that her sinful comment should be overlooked. But you can understand when a grief-stricken mother of ten who lost her children, lost her means of livelihood, and has a husband hanging on to life by a thread is grief-stricken. And when we face grief-stricken people, aren’t we quick to give grace and slow to condemn? But you have to appreciate Job’s mindset, don’t you? This is a mindset that can only be where it is if you understand the sovereignty of your Creator, Who gives and takes away as He pleases:

“But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” (Job 2:10 ESV).

So, Job wins. God wins. Satan loses. But it is not over. May I propose an inference as to why this suffering still plays out in forty more chapters? We ask ourselves, why is it that Job has to continue to endure suffering? Let me be clear that I do not know because God does not say. But there are a couple of reasons that may be true, or it may be a reason that we will never know. Perhaps God is giving Satan time to weaken and wear down Job. We have all been there before, haven’t we? We face a new challenge with strength and resolve, but as time drags on with no relief in sight, we start to lose faith.

“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” (Hebrews 2:1 ESV).

Few things cause us to drift away more than when we have to endure trials. Perhaps this is what Satan was angling for. Or, maybe God knew that Job and his friends, whom we are about to meet, needed to learn a lesson about His sovereignty that they didn’t already know. It seemed that they had made a couple of assumptions about God that were not true, which led them to false ideas about who God was, which was a challenge to His sovereignty. Maybe God was going to take this terrible thing that Satan had incited Him to do against Job and glorify His name and sovereignty in a way that only this circumstance could accomplish. Whether or not this is God’s purpose in allowing the suffering to continue, it was undoubtedly a result, as we see in

the following 40 chapters. This is why I say that the book of Job is more a book on God's sovereignty than a book on suffering.

How Three Friends Despise God's Sovereignty

In Chapter 3, the stress of his shattered life comes bearing down on Job. It's not a chapter of disbelief or from a man whose faith is weakening. It comes from the soul of a man burdened and facing the reality of his broken existence. Job went from the pinnacle of life in every way to a shattered downfall where he lost his wealth, security, respect (as we will soon see), and children. When we face loss, God does not expect us to take it stoically. He understands the pain that loss brings to us. He grieves with us, and it hurts God to see us hurting. I fear that sometimes, we put undue burdens on our shoulders as we try to stoically cope with suffering as though any sign of sorrow or despair over our circumstances is somehow a slight against God or a chink in our armor.

When Jesus suffered because of His imminent death and the cup of wrath and sorrow He would have to endure on the cross, the text tells us just how intense His prayer was:

“And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” (Luke 22:44 ESV).

If Jesus wasn't immune to having an emotional and physical reaction to intense suffering, then perhaps we need to show ourselves and others grace when we endure our own painful moments of suffering. And it wasn't just for Himself that Jesus felt this kind of pain; He also empathized with others. In the shortest verse in the Bible, we read in John 11:35 that Jesus wept. His friend Lazarus had just died, but Jesus knew He was going to raise His friend from the dead, and in a matter of moments, He would be speaking to and sharing a meal with Lazarus that very day. A close examination of the text shows us why Jesus was full of emotion so intense that it made Him cry:

“Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” (John 11:32-33 ESV).

It seemed to be the pain He saw in His friends which caused Jesus to be deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled Him. So, as we read Job 3 and see Job curse the day he was born and speak about how bad his life was, we need to give Him the same grace that the Lord would give him; the same

grace that the Lord gives us when we are hurting and go through the process of coping with our pain.

It's important to note that 3 of Job's friends had come to him when they heard of his tragedy. They came to comfort him. As they approached, Satan had done such a number on Job's body that they didn't even recognize Job. They all wept with him, and then the text tells us that they all sat with him in silence for seven days. Job broke the silence with the curse he made on the day of his birth in Chapter 3. After this, his friends begin to speak.

Before we look at their words, it will help us to understand the prevailing wisdom that people in the days of Job had about God and how He interacted with people. We will see this borne out in the advice and accusations we see them make to Job. But it might be helpful to understand that up until now, it is likely Job shared the same beliefs his friends shared.

From the advice his friends gave to Job, we learn that they believed in a straightforward reward/punishment paradigm between God and man. If you obeyed God, He would reward you. If you sinned against God, He would punish you. Therefore, by looking at whether people prospered or suffered, you could tell whether they were sinful or obedient to God. Because of how Job handled his friends' accusations against him, I suspect that he, too, probably believed in this reward/punishment paradigm. But the problem came when his personal experience didn't fit into this paradigm. He knew he was faithful and righteous. He knew he had not sinned against God, yet, he was suffering in such a devastating way that it was hard to believe that his lot was caused by anything other than the hand of God against him. Here is the crux of the belief Job and his friends struggled with:

1. God was sovereign as the Creator and all-powerful in the affairs of men.
2. God rewarded good behavior and punished evil behavior.
3. Job's suffering was so complete that it must have come by the hand of God.

Here is where Job and his friends diverge, which we will look at in detail throughout this chapter. Job's friends kept the convention of the paradigm that they believed in. Therefore, the only reasonable conclusion was that Job's suffering resulted from sin against God. The utter harshness and completeness of his suffering meant Job's sin was great against God. The only remedy and course of action for Job, then, was to confess his sin, repent, and God would then shower His blessings upon Job again.

Until now, it is quite possible that Job believed in a similar punishment/reward paradigm. Some of his responses lend to this conclusion with Job. For example, when Zophar stated the obvious in his eyes, he told Job:

“If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure and will not fear. You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away.” (Job 11:14-16 ESV).

Zophar reminded Job about this common belief that God punished the wicked and rewarded the just. He encourages Job to become just, and God would reward Him. Notice when Job responds to Zophar, he doesn't argue the basic assumptions of this belief. He responds rather sarcastically, reminding Zophar that he is not teaching Job anything new:

“Then Job answered and said: “No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?” (Job 12:1-3 ESV).

Job struggles with aligning his suffering with his belief. In all honesty, Job has no clue what he did that could have been so bad to bring down this harsh judgment from God. As he racks his brain to connect the dots between his beliefs and circumstances, Job starts to say things that challenge this paradigm. When he does this, the attacks against him grow bolder and harsher from his three friends, and Job responds just as obstinately in his own defense as they do in their attacks against him. To illustrate, look at these exchanges. In exasperation, Eliphaz quits beating around the bush and accuses Job of specific sins:

“Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities. For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The man with power possessed the land, and the favored man lived in it. You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.” (Job 22:5-9 ESV).

Later, Job responds to these attacks by reminding them that not only isn't he guilty of these charges, but his actions testify to his righteousness:

“When the ear heard, it called me blessed, and when the eye saw, it approved, because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the

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needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth.” (Job 29:11-17 ESV).

So, you have Job and his three friends who seem to believe God rewards the good and punishes the evil. Job’s friends, however, see Job’s suffering as evidence of his evil. On the other hand, Job knows he has been righteous and has done nothing to deserve punishment. And this sets up the very action from God that will cause the sovereign Creator’s anger to burn against the three friends as well as take Job to the woodshed for the way he demanded a defense from God.

Do you remember the mistake that the Sadducees made? First, they erred by not knowing the Scriptures and by not knowing God’s power. Job and his friends made the same mistake the Sadducees made when they built a belief system based on faulty inferences.

The friends’ faulty inference was that God always rewarded the just and punished the evil. We know that isn’t true. Proverbs give us truisms that teach wisdom, but these sayings are not absolutes. That is the point of the book of Ecclesiastes.

“Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11 ESV).

But we also know that:

“Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished, but the offspring of the righteous will be delivered.” (Proverbs 11:21 ESV).

The error the friends made is forgetting time and chance play a part in fortune, misfortune, and God’s sovereignty. God’s sovereignty can override time and chance if He so chooses. Job sees his own circumstances and concludes that sometimes bad things happen to good people and sometimes good things happen to bad people. When he makes this observation, it sets his friends off:

“Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them.” (Job 21:7-9 ESV).

And:

“One dies in his full vigor, being wholly at ease and secure, his pails full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist. Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of prosperity. They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them.” (Job 21:23-26 ESV)

It is to this that Eliphaz makes the specific accusations against Job in chapter 22 we read earlier. We understand what Job and his three friends didn't understand; we know God does not always punish right away or reward right away. The martyred spirits in Revelation 6:10 cried out, asking when the sovereign God would avenge their blood. And 2 Peter 3:9 reminds us God is longsuffering and doesn't always punish immediately as He often gives men time to repent and avoid His wrath.

So, putting a stake in the ground with a faulty premise caused the three friends to come to a false conclusion about God. Their misguided belief meant that they laid the blame for Job's suffering at His feet, and it caused them to falsely accuse an innocent man of doing something he did not do. What was God's response to this?

“After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” (Job 42:7 ESV).

These men did not recognize the basic understanding of God's sovereignty, and I fear it is the same sin we are often guilty of committing. We put our stake in the ground with beliefs and inferences about God and then accuse God of evil if He violates these beliefs, or we say God must behave in a specific way because of these beliefs. Sometimes we end up erring because we do not know the Scriptures (though we *think* we know them), or we do not know the power of God. We must learn from Job's friends that God always gets the benefit of the doubt from us. We must never say God *must* act a certain way or not act a certain way, lest He is guilty of evil. This is about as close to blasphemy as we can get, even though we say these things with a clean heart based on the Scriptures we read. Suppose we are in error in our understanding of Scripture or have an incomplete understanding of Scripture. In that case, we end up attacking God's sovereignty because He does not live up to our inaccurate understanding of His word.

God's sovereignty means we never lay accusations at His feet and never say God must or must not act a certain way. Neither will we ever say if God acts in a certain way, it is evidence of Him being evil. God is free to tell us what He will or will not do, but respect for a sovereign God means we always know where our boundaries are and never cross them. As we will see in a

moment, Job crossed those boundaries, even when he did not accuse God of wrongdoing. There are just some things a created being cannot do to a sovereign God, and accusing Him of evil or demanding that He give a defense for His actions/inactions will always cross the line and cause us to be guilty of profaning His sovereignty.

How Job Crosses The Line With God's Sovereignty

As we see with the three friends, they were guilty of having a faulty view of how God handles rewards and punishments. This led them to lay the blame for Job's suffering at God's feet and to blame an innocent man for something he didn't do. Proverbs 6:19 says one of the seven things that God hates is a false witness that speaks lies. Whether or not they had malice in their hearts, these men were false witnesses against Job.

But Job was not blameless in this either. However, it is essential to know that Job was not guilty of the same sin that the three friends were guilty of, nor was he guilty of the sin that Satan said he would commit if God removed the hedge from around him. Over and over, we see that Job did not sin against God (Job 1:22; 2:10; 42:7). But while Job always maintained God's sovereignty and right to give blessings and withhold blessings (Job 2:10), He did feel entitled to demand that God give account for why He was allowing Job to suffer. All of this gives us insight into how Job viewed the sovereignty of God.

First, we see that Job's acknowledgment of God's supremacy and sovereignty never wavers. He never uses his innocence to accuse God of being wrong or unjust. He wants to know why he is suffering, and he stands up for his righteousness in his defense. In this, Job is consistent throughout the book. He does not budge from his innocence even when his friends urge, shame, and blame him. This seems to compound the very thing that led to his demands on God to explain His actions. This, in turn, led to the whirlwind scene where God monologs with Job to emphasize His sovereignty to Job. Notice Job's appeal to God's power and sovereignty during his suffering:

“If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you?

Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be.” (Job 7:20-21 ESV).

And...

“How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him? Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.” (Job 9:14-15 ESV).

Job understands that God is entirely in control. He can and will do all He desires, regardless of what man may say. Over and over, we see this appeal to God's sovereignty and His power. Job just wants to sit down with God to discuss why this is happening to him. Perhaps, Job thinks, he can lay out his defense, gain the Almighty's understanding, and convince the Almighty to relent His hand against him. The problem Job falls into is in taking this desire to sit with God from a request and an appeal to God's mercy at the beginning of the discourse to a full-blown demand of the Almighty to appear before Job and answer for His actions against Job. And this is where Job crosses the line, which prompts God to appear to Him in the whirlwind:

“Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me.” (Job 23:3-6 ESV).

And in a dramatic fashion, we watch Job's request to speak to God go from an appeal to His mercy to the final crossing of the line that causes Job to make demands of God:

“Oh, that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!) Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!” (Job 31:35 ESV).

So, God's issue with Job differed from the issue He had with the three friends. Let's remind ourselves of the three fundamental truths about God's sovereignty:

1. God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.
2. God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.
3. God has the right to make the rules and the power to enforce those rules on whomever He chooses.

Job consistently acknowledges the first and third truths about God's sovereignty. But in this second truth, Job fails miserably. God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority. In this second truth, God addresses Job, which we will briefly look at in the next section of this chapter. When we do, notice that God does not stand in defense of His actions, as Job demanded of Him. He doesn't owe Job, or anyone else, an explanation for His actions. In essence, the book of Job is God exerting His sovereignty.

God only asks Job what makes him think he can ask or demand anything from the Almighty. And as we see, Job fully and completely gets the point. This happens because Job does understand God's sovereignty and immediately realizes that he has crossed the line. And he realized this while he was poor, in pain, and the father of 10 precious children who had all died in the prime of their life.

And so, in His sovereignty and in His time, God decides to address Job. But it's not the address that Job had been seeking.

God Explains His Sovereignty to Job

An old adage says, "Be careful what you ask for because you just might get it." Man never spoke truer words. Job was about to get what he sought—an audience with the Almighty, except this audience would be held on God's terms, not Job's. I say this because what we see play out at the end of the book is something fundamental for us to understand about God's sovereignty. The sooner we understand this lesson, the better, happier, and more content our lives will be, even in the light of tremendous suffering. And I don't want it lost on us that when God speaks to him, Job is still suffering tremendously in every way a man can suffer.

Another point to consider is the strong possibility that Job may have never expected God to speak to him at all. Think about how much time must have passed since Job was first afflicted. We have no idea how much time passed before round one and round two of Satan's assault on Job. And we know there was travel time for his friends to come to him when they heard of Job's misfortunes. Traveling in their day involved much more than booking the next flight to Ur. And we know they sat silent for a whole week before Job started the dialog. We can read the back and forth quickly, but their conversations may have lasted days, weeks, even months, or more. Perhaps we only have a selection of the entire time they spent together.

My point is that we are often quick to cry out to God, "Why?!" when we are suffering, aren't we? Perhaps we are a little too quick to make demands on God when we know the chances are nil that He will verbally respond to us. How many of us would think twice before crying out to the Lord in our distress if we were 100% confident that He would respond to us from a whirlwind? At least we would choose our words carefully, wouldn't we? I'm not convinced that Job expected God to answer his demand for an audience. He was a broken man crying out in his suffering and misery. But we learn that God is sovereign even when we suffer, and we must respect His sovereignty. Even then, He owes us nothing, and we owe Him everything. And so, I think it may have been a surprise to Job when this happens:

"Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Who

is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me.” (Job 38:1-3 ESV).

And so, the monolog of God begins. When it does, the first thing God addresses is a few fundamental truths we often cavalierly pass by. First, when we make any demands of God, we do so from a lack of knowledge. This stems from the theme of this book. God is sovereign, and when we make demands of Him, we speak from an utter lack of knowledge of who He is in relation to who we are. If we had the proper understanding of this fundamental truth, we would never make the demand to begin with. Second, we will never be prepared to contend with the Almighty if He does decide to spar with us verbally. “Dress like a man” is God’s way of saying to Job, “Man up!” God would quickly show Job that he was way out of his element by challenging God in any way.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements--surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?” (Job 38:4-5 ESV).

Now, we’re not going to go through every question God asks Job in this section, but verses 4-5 of chapter 38 sum up the line of questioning that God lays before Job. In a nutshell, God asks Job what qualifies him to demand any answers from God at all. In quick succession, God reminds Job that they are as far apart as two beings can be. God was there at the beginning of time, He being responsible for the beginning of time itself. Notice what God does not address with Job:

1. **God does not address Job’s complaint.** Nowhere in this monolog does God defend himself to Job. He never mentions Satan’s accusation against Job nor God’s faith in Job.
2. **God does not give Job answers.** God doesn’t ease Job’s confusion by making sense of what is happening to him. This stems from the second fundamental truth of sovereignty: *God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.* Even when God blesses Job at the end of the book, we never see God defending Himself to Job.
3. **God does not apologize to Job for his suffering.** Apologies imply fault. This is not the same as saying, “I’m sorry that you have to endure this terrible ordeal.” We often use this kind of language as we empathize with people. But God could stop and even prevent Job’s suffering, yet He did not.

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So, God never explains to Job why the bad things happened to him. Why do you suppose that is? We have examples in the Bible where God explains why He does or does not do something to people. The main message of the prophets was to explain God's actions if the people didn't repent. God over and over told the kings of Israel and Judah why God would send good or evil upon them. So why didn't He explain the reason these bad things happened to Job? As we said, it is because of the second truth about God's sovereignty we discussed: *God answers to no man, no power, or any other authority*. Job had demanded that God explain Himself and answer why He had allowed him to suffer when he was blameless. It is one thing for a sovereign God to choose to explain His actions as a measure of grace to His creation. It is another thing for someone to demand God defend His actions to us. The sovereignty of God meant that God did not have to listen to or explain Himself to Job. Simply, God, in His sovereignty, chose not to answer Job's demands. And Job understood that. This is why Job placed his hands over his mouth and vowed to withdraw His demands against God. In essence, Job realized that he had overstepped his boundaries with God.

But even in his demand for God to explain Himself, Job acknowledged God was the source of all things and He had the power to do all He wanted. Job believed God controlled all things. Indeed, He wasn't an impotent God who could not affect the outcomes of men. God's power and might were never in question in Job's mind, and neither was His right to do what He wanted to do.

“If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be.” (Job 7:20-21 ESV).

Job's beef with God had to do with why God acted in His power and sovereignty against him, a righteous man. And when God answered from the whirlwind, God began to demonstrate that He was above Job in every way imaginable. God was sovereign over the heavens, the weather, the earth, the cosmos, and all of creation. Not only was God sovereign over these areas of creation, but God had an intimate understanding of them. With the animals, He feared none; not even the behemoth or leviathan, two animals that man greatly feared and left alone. In fact, of the leviathan, God said,

“Will you play with him as with a bird, or will you put him on a leash for your girls?” (Job 41:5 ESV).

In this, God draws a sharp distinction between Himself and Job. Where a man cannot tame such a mighty, ferocious, and terrifying beast,

to God, the leviathan is a pet that He can tame and play with and not fear. And so, the rest of the monolog from God is one thing after another that demonstrates God's supreme power, His supreme knowledge, and His supreme sovereignty.

Job gets it. I contend that Job all along understood God's power. But when God speaks, Job finally understands the essence of sovereignty. The last lesson he learned about God was the lesson that God answers to no man or any other authority. The book of Job ends the way we love these stories to end. The suffering hero is rewarded. But in many stories, we don't see this ending play out on earth this way. In some cases, the suffering hero lies sick and never recovers. Sometimes she never recovers her wealth and dies in poverty and with no honor. Sometimes the hero never has more children after witnessing the devastating loss of his only children.

And so, our question when we read the book of Job is not simply a question of suffering but a question of sovereignty. We may have questions about why things are happening to us, but we must be cautious about where those questions lead. Just because God has the power to change our circumstances or prevent bad things from happening to us doesn't mean He has to take those actions on our behalf. We pray and ask, but it is God's choice alone regarding His actions. Perhaps most of the time, we will never know why things happen the way they do in our lives. We may look back over the things we went through and never see a reason or purpose. What does this tell us about God's sovereignty?

First, it tells us that things may happen for reasons we will never know. And if we did know the reasons, we are not in a position to judge whether God's reasons are justified or not. This is one of the most challenging things for us to come to grips with when we talk about God's sovereignty. May I pose a few thoughts that might be hard to wrestle with?

Let's say the loss of someone I love leads someone I hardly know to understand the Gospel and obey it. Let's say that God, instead of answering my prayers for health and recovery, instead answers someone else's prayer for their loved one to be saved. Is it fair that my loved one has to die so that someone else might be saved?

How, you ask, can the death of my loved one lead to the salvation of a stranger? Well, what if a coworker of my loved one is moved by the death to seek answers to spiritual questions they have been struggling with? Who knows- the point isn't to paint a specific picture but to make the point that we don't often see the connections between how we may be suffering and how that suffering may intersect with someone we may never know. This is where the principle of God's sovereignty lies. God doesn't have to explain things to us, and we don't get to judge the value of God's choices that may impact us.

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Or here is a real one I struggled with for years. Before God blessed my wife and me with three children in our old age, it was hard for us to watch the news and see how some parents would neglect their children, often leading to the death of a child, and wonder why it was so hard for us to have children and why it seemed so easy for abusive parents to have a litter of children. To my shame, I probably followed Job's example of wanting God to explain to me how that was fair. I knew He had the power to give children and to make people barren.

It is one thing to say that God has to answer to no one, but it is another thing to accept God's sovereignty in my life when I don't understand what doesn't seem fair to me. The truth is that we may never know the "why," and all the speculation we do can drive us mad. To understand the lesson of God's sovereignty we learn from Job, we must come to accept God's decisions even when we can't understand the "whys." Remember,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9 ESV).

Sometimes, as with Job, we may never know the "whys." That's when it is all the more important for us to step up in faith and submit to His sovereignty. Job teaches us that God is all-powerful, God controls all, and God never owes us any explanations. It is always incumbent upon us to accept what God does not change in our lives without demanding Him to defend His decisions or without condemning Him for not doing what seems right to us. What helps us do this is remembering that God knows exactly how we feel and we have not fallen through the cracks in His sight, no matter how much pain we may be in. We can always ask, but God chooses whether He will answer or not. If we can learn to live in the sovereignty of God in our lives, then we can endure any hardship, pain, and uncertainty we encounter because we rest in the rock that God is in control, even when we do not see or understand how.

This is the real message we can take away from the book of Job.

Chapter 6: God’s Sovereignty Seen In Daniel 4

I struggled with the title of this chapter. It would be either “God’s Sovereignty Seen In Daniel 4” or “God’s Sovereignty Over The Nations.” In the end, I chose to stick with Daniel 4 because it is the perfect proof-text for the principle of God’s sovereignty over the nations. And while we will spend a lot of time digging into the lessons that God taught Nebuchadnezzar about His sovereignty over the nations, we will also look at many more passages that show this lesson. But here is the crux of what God taught this mighty king after humbling him by showing that God was in control over every nation on earth.

“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

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?” (Daniel 4:34-35 ESV).

After humbling mighty Nebuchadnezzar, the king walks away with some fundamental lessons on the sovereignty of God when it comes to the nations of men. These are the same lessons God teaches elsewhere in His word that we will do good to remember today because our God is still sovereign over the nations in the same way He has always been. Here are the lessons that Nebuchadnezzar learns:

1. **God's Sovereignty over the nations is everlasting:** God is not a god whose sovereignty peaked before man grew too strong in his technological advances. He was always sovereign over the nations, He is sovereign over the nations, and He will always be sovereign over the nations. As we will see in this chapter, this is a fundamental truth about God's sovereignty and how it plays out in the affairs of men.
2. **No one can contend with God's Sovereignty:** Compared to God, all men are counted as nothing. Man will never get to the point where we will challenge God's sovereignty over us. As proud as we might grow in our minds, it will never pose a threat to God. Never. Ever.
3. **God will always do whatever He wants:** Whether in heaven or earth, once God sets His will to act in the affairs of men, no power can prevent His will from being carried out. Man cannot band together to thwart what God ordains in the nations, and no spiritual forces or principalities can alter God's will from happening. Once God determines a path for nations, that path will be carried out. No power can stay His hand.
4. **No power can put God on trial:** Boy, we are seeing a lot of this second fundamental truth of sovereignty: *God answers to no man, no power, or any other authority*, aren't we? This is the same lesson that Job learned in our last chapter, and this is what Nebuchadnezzar walks away learning after God humbles him. This is how Nebuchadnezzar puts it: "none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" We really seem to want to demand that God explain Himself to us, don't we?"

In this chapter, we will look at the lessons Nebuchadnezzar learns, and then we will see how God has been teaching these lessons to us since the beginning of time. When we are done, I hope we will have engrained in our minds the extent of God's sovereignty even today in our world. If we are not careful, it is too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God no longer works in the world in the same way He has always exerted His sovereignty over the nations. And this can lead us to a dangerous place in our thinking regarding God and His sovereignty over us today.

What I am hoping that this book does is look at God's sovereignty wholistically. Even though we look at His sovereignty over creation, us, and nations, the bottom line is this fundamental truth about God: He is sovereign. Period. There are no areas where we can say He is sovereign here but not there, or He is more sovereign here than He is there. God is sovereign physically and spiritually in every aspect of existence, creation, and reality. Once we come to grips with this fundamental truth, it becomes easier to set

ourselves within the order God created. It makes our lives and decisions so much easier, and the nations have always served as the backdrop to God's ultimate sovereignty over the affairs of men when He decides to step in and act. In His sovereignty, He allows men to rule over themselves until He decides to exercise His sovereignty and direct the destiny of nations.

God's Sovereignty Over Babylon

Daniel 4 is one of the most amazing chapters that teach the sovereignty of God. But let's back up and see what leads to this lesson. After the flood, man hadn't taken long to fall away from God. It might be interesting to note that while Abraham was alive, so was Shem, the son of Noah that Abraham descended from. Think about this for a moment. Shem was alive for all but the last twenty-five years of Abraham's life. Shem died when Abraham was 150 years old, and Abraham only lived another 25 years before he died. What does this mean? It meant that one of the eight people who witnessed God's wrath via the flood was still living when men began to fall away and start worshiping idols. Listen to what Joshua said to Israel before he was about to die:

“And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.’” (Joshua 24:2 ESV).

Joshua reminds us that man is quick to turn to his own path and not seek after God. What can we presume as we see this wholesale abandonment of God while even the ones saved in the ark from God's wrath were still alive and living among men? Should we conclude that God is not as sovereign as He claims to be? Certainly not. But it does explain how nations like Babylon can grow so wicked and powerful in the presence of a sovereign God. We will focus on this, and I hope we can apply what we learn to our world today. To lay the groundwork for our study of the sovereignty of God over the nations, let's look at a principle that applies to the individual as well as the nations:

“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.” (Ecclesiastes 8:11 ESV).

As we see men devolve away from God, and we see God's longsuffering with man allowing him to exercise his free will and sin against his God, we may be tempted to question God's sovereignty over man. Some get so caught up in this way of thinking that they walk away with a false idea that God, in

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His sovereignty, caused man to choose the path of sin they followed or caused the nations to act sinfully to accomplish His will. As we discussed earlier in the book, this could not be further from the truth. God's sovereignty over the nations is manifested in His control of what the nation is allowed or not allowed to do by God, not in the sinful choices the nation pursues. Let me say this another way: God is in no way responsible for the sinful choices an individual or nation chooses to make. Equating the sinful choices we make to God's sovereignty is a false teaching that insults the sovereign Creator of the universe. God cannot sin, nor does He tempt or cause any man to sin. This is bearing false witness to the highest degree.

That said, God often accomplishes His will through the sinful actions of a nation. God will often bring His judgment on a people by utilizing a sinful nation. He will then turn around and punish the instrument of His justice, not for being used by Him but for the willful sin they exercised in carrying out His judgment. This is what we read in the book of Habakkuk, especially as it pertains to Babylon. In this book, Habakkuk cries out to God and asks Him how long He will allow the sinful people of Judah to get by with their sins before He brings about punishment upon them.

“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:2 ESV).

The people of Judah had turned into a society full of violence and sin, and Habakkuk didn't understand why God was letting them get away with sin without bringing judgment upon them. God's response to Habakkuk shocked the prophet:

“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.

They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.” (Habakkuk 1:5-7 ESV).

God says to the prophet, “I am going to do something about the sinful disobedience of Judah! I am raising up the Chaldeans, and I will use them to pour out my judgment upon Judah.” These Chaldeans were the same Babylonians we will look at in Daniel chapter 4. The reason this shocks Habakkuk is that this sounds like overkill to him. Listen to how the prophet responds to God:

“You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong,

why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?” (Habakkuk 1:13 ESV).

Habakkuk, in essence, is saying that the Babylonians are way worse than the sinful people of Israel. If anyone deserved the judgment of God poured out on them, it’s these people. The prophet goes on to remind God just how evil the Chaldeans were. And yet, in His sovereignty, God chose to use these evil people to bring the punishment upon the Israelites that He promised to them on Mt. Ebal in the days of Moses and Joshua. But He reminds Habakkuk that He isn’t blind to the sins of this nation, and as a sovereign God, there will come a time in which He would bring judgment upon them too.

“Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.” (Habakkuk 2:7-8 ESV).

This sets the stage for the sovereignty of God to be shown on many fronts. First, God would bring about the promised curse to the people of Judah that they read about in the Law on Mt. Ebal. Second, He would strengthen the instrument of His judgment, the Chaldeans. By removing His protection from Judah, God would open the door for this nation to execute His judgment upon them. And when the time came, God would look at the sins of Babylon and bring about judgment upon them for their sins, as He does with all nations in His time.

The picture the Bible paints of God and His sovereignty over the nations is one of a conductor, setting His will in motion by using the nations of men. We don’t know all the ways that God sets His will in motion. He doesn’t tell us how He does it, but He does tell us that He does it nonetheless. It becomes a dangerous game to play when we try to figure out the secret things of the Lord. We will discuss this in the next chapter, *Ways God Accomplishes His Purposes*. But there is evidence that God often sets up His purposes years, even centuries, before He carries out His purposes.

So, the stage is set. God has purposed in His heart to carry out His curses upon His people and remove them from their land, as He had promised. He gives Habakkuk a heads-up that He will do this via the Babylonians. And while postponing this curse for the sake of a few good kings, His wrath finally fell upon His people. In 586 B.C., He opened the door for the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and its temple and carry away the people into captivity. And the king who presided over this judgment was the one and only Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was the son of the man who founded the new Chaldean empire. His father, Nabopolassar, was a general in the Assyrian army, but he was from the conquered people of the old Babylonian empire. When the Assyrians began to decline, Nabopolassar led a rebellion and created another mighty world power. However, Babylon (the Chaldeans) was not strong enough to conquer Assyria fully, and the world had two major empires fighting each other. The Middle East (an area called the Levant) was the staging ground of a life-and-death battle of the world's major empires. The Assyrians were in decline, but the Babylonians were on the rise. And Egypt was caught in the middle.

Egypt was still a strong nation in its own right, and it began to fear the rise of Babylon, so it tended to want a stronger Assyrian empire to act as a buffer between itself and the rising Babylonians. But as a prince, Nebuchadnezzar's father gave him an army. In 605 BC, he defeated Pharaoh Necho II in a stunning and decisive battle that galvanized Nebuchadnezzar's reputation as a mighty warrior leader like his father. Shortly after this victory over Egypt, his father died, and he returned to Babylon to solidify his power as the next Babylonian King.

Here is how all this plays out in our study of the sovereignty of God. In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar heads back to the Middle East to clean up things and conquer Jerusalem, defeating Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1), who later rebels against Babylon. During the short reign of his son, Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar settled the score with Judah and defeated Jerusalem.

“At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up to Jerusalem, and the city was besieged.

And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to the city while his servants were besieging it,

and Jehoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his mother and his servants and his officials and his palace officials. The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign

and carried off all the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the LORD, which Solomon king of Israel had made, as the LORD had foretold.

He carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land.” (2 Kings 24:10-14 ESV).

This was when Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, as the new king:

“And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin’s uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah.” (2 Kings 24:17 ESV).

During the reign of Zedekiah, Jeremiah was sent to Jerusalem to tell the people that God was raising up the Babylonians to exercise His judgment over Judah for their sins. His message was simple and very unpopular: do not resist the judgment of God. In the eleven or so years of Zedekiah’s reign, they watched the Babylonians grow weaker. The Babylonians had tried to once and for all defeat Egypt for a second time but failed miserably. They watched conquered nations slowly start to rebel, and people began to think that perhaps Babylon was just a paper tiger. These were the political winds that Zedekiah experienced.

“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, ‘You shall not serve the king of Babylon,’ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you.” (Jeremiah 27:14 ESV).

and

“Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon and live. Why should this city become a desolation?” (Jeremiah 27:17 ESV).

Yet, Zedekiah looked to Egypt as the wagon to hitch their star. They so desperately wanted to remove the cruel and burdensome yoke that the Babylonians put upon them that they were blinded to the message of Jeremiah.

“Thus says the LORD, God of Israel: Thus shall you say to the king of Judah who sent you to me to inquire of me, ‘Behold, Pharaoh’s army that came to help you is about to return to Egypt, to its own land. And the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against this city. They shall capture it and burn it with fire. Thus says the LORD, Do not deceive yourselves, saying, ‘The Chaldeans will surely go away from us,’ for they will not go away.’” (Jeremiah 37:7-9 ESV).

The die is cast from the Lord. While the rest of the world hoped that Babylon was a paper tiger, the words of Habakkuk were being fulfilled. God was raising up these people for a single purpose: to execute His judgment upon the people of Judah. This is why Jeremiah lays it on the line for Zedekiah:

“Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the LORD, the God of

hosts, the God of Israel: If you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live.

But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.” (Jeremiah 38:17-18 ESV).

Yet Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, and when it failed, he tried to flee. But it was too late. Rather than God sparing his life in this judgment, his children were slaughtered before his eyes, and his people were led into captivity a second time. Jerusalem was destroyed, along with the temple.

Okay, so I spent an inordinate amount of time discussing history here. But here is what I want us to remember as we transition to the biblical text. Keep these points in mind as we read how God teaches this powerful leader about true sovereignty:

1. **God works on His timetable:** The events we read about in history were set into motion by God long before we read of their fulfillment. It started in the reading of the curses and blessings by Moses and Joshua. Even though God warned the Israelites and showed His longsuffering and lovingkindness to them, their rebellion led Him to bring the promised judgment when they turned away and refused to repent. Even at the very end, God offered a way to avoid the full brunt of His judgment, but His people refused to heed the prophets’ warnings.
2. **God will accomplish His purposes, and man cannot alter it:** When God sent the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity by the Assyrians, there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. I hope our time spent on Babylonian history helped us see the same thing. When the time came in God’s mind to exercise His judgment, He began to shift things in the world to make this happen. He looked at a general in the mighty Assyrian army who came from the conquered region of Babylon and helped Him build a mighty empire to be His instrument of judgment. Habakkuk 1:6 puts it this way: “I am raising up the Chaldeans....” What we spent time studying via history was this verse being put in motion by God. Even though the Assyrians and the Egyptians fought, nothing could ultimately alter the plans God determined to set in motion.
3. **God is always in control:** This was the theme of Jeremiah’s warning to Zedekiah and the people of Judah. God is in control, and you cannot run from Him. God was telling His people precisely what He

was about to do as punishment for their sins, yet in a show of grace, He also offered them the path to accept this punishment in a way that would lessen the pain and suffering. All they had to do was accept the will of God, and He would avert some of the painful parts of the consequences in store for them. They refused and fought against God to the bitter end, and His cup of wrath was poured out upon them in full measure. But God was in control over everything. He foretold it, warned the people, and offered measures of grace, yet everything He set in motion happened as He indicated. Though He offered to lessen the consequences with a show of obedience and repentance, He and He alone made these concessions. No man, throne, army, or power could alter what God set in motion.

This sets us up nicely for our following lessons on God's sovereignty. We have already tasted the evidence that God rules over the nations and now, let's take a deep dive into the life of this monarch whom God raised up for this purpose. God has a lesson He wants Nebuchadnezzar to learn, and by extension, as a lesson for us to learn as well.

Nebuchadnezzar Meets God

In conquering Judah, Nebuchadnezzar begins to solidify his position as the monarch of the sole world power. As we read earlier, he brought people from Judah to his nation to be trained as good subjects of his empire. He did this for a couple of reasons. First, it was a way to help control the political peace in the empire. A politically peaceful empire was much easier to rule. But second, this was in fulfillment of the Lord's promise that the ultimate judgment upon the people was that they would lose their land (Deuteronomy 28:64) and "be scattered among the nations."

Now, here is where we need to be careful in how we determine that God accomplishes His purposes. We will deal with this at great length in the next chapter. But we don't know how God chose the Babylonians to fulfill this role. We know His purpose was set in motion for years (as evidenced in Habakkuk). But whether God picked a people for this role and set into motion the events which led to His judgment, or whether God looked for a people who had the heart to act in the way He needed to carry out his judgment, is something we are not told.

What do I mean? Well, perhaps God was looking for a people who valued the practice of bringing conquered people into their land to fulfill the role of administering His judgment. When Nebuchadnezzar's father began his rebellion against Assyria, perhaps the Lord chose him because He knew that this would be how Nabopolassar's people would treat conquered nations. Or it is just as possible that God set this value into the hearts of the Chaldean leaders. Or perhaps, God taught them through experience that this was the

easiest way to tamp down dissent and control conquered people. I point out that we don't always know the "hows" that God works, and it is a dangerous game to try to figure it out definitively. We run the danger of saying God DOES act in a way that He may not act or that He DOESN'T act in a way that He may act. This was the great sin of Job's three friends.

Nonetheless, we are in Babylon with 4 Jewish youths: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. While Nebuchadnezzar is leaning into his god, Marduk, for victories, these four nondescript Jewish men would be the vessels through which the one true God would teach this king what true sovereignty is. As we will see, Nebuchadnezzar is a very pragmatic man. His father seemed to be a pious man because he attributed success to his god, Marduk, and counseled his people to revere this deity. In the book of Daniel, Marduk and the God of the Jews would go head-to-head, and the God of the subjected people would demonstrate He indeed was the One who controlled all things, even the things of the great empires.

In Daniel 1, we read how the four youths found themselves in the service of this great king and how God began to show favor of them to their captors. We remember how Daniel and his three friends kept themselves pure in this evil land, and God caused them to prosper. When presented before Nebuchadnezzar after going through all the preparations, we read:

“As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.

And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king.

And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.” (Daniel 1:17-20 ESV).

This sets us up for the first lesson God would teach Nebuchadnezzar. In the second chapter, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream. Now, it might be helpful to understand what this king had endured up through this time. Even though he had an early, resounding victory over the mighty Egyptian empire as the crowned prince, he later lost a battle to them, and people began to think he was a paper-tiger king. The people of the Levant began to believe that they could rebel, and soon, his own people began to question his orders. Nebuchadnezzar had to go home, rebuild his army, and crack a few skulls to

secure his leadership. At this time in the book of Daniel, he had pretty much settled the question of who was in charge, but it left him with very little trust or patience with those around him.

In Daniel 2, this king had a dream that troubled him, so he brought in the magicians and spiritual leaders to find out what the dream meant. The people he brought in claimed to have a connection to the gods. Only, he had a very pragmatic request (or demand is a better word):

“if you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its interpretation.” (Daniel 2:9 ESV).

According to Nebuchadnezzar’s way of thinking, if these people truly connected to the gods, then the gods could make the dream known. After all, anyone could make up an interpretation, but if someone could tell him the dream’s details, he would know for certain that person was speaking on behalf of the gods. Well, this didn’t sit well with the court magicians and wise men:

“The Chaldeans answered the king and said, “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean.

The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.” (Daniel 2:10-11 ESV).

Well, we know the story. The king became furious and commanded that all the wise men in Babylon be executed because, in his eyes, they were frauds, and he had no use for more frauds. This is an excellent time to make a connection between chapter 1 and chapter 2. King Nebuchadnezzar probably didn’t know much about the four Jewish youths, except he was impressed with their show of wisdom. In fact, after questioning them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians in the land (Daniel 1:18-20). But the details of their preparation and how they stayed loyal to their God were probably kept from the king. So, when this edict to kill everyone came, Daniel and his friends would not be spared.

But word comes to Daniel about the king’s command, and he seeks an audience with the king to tell the interpretation of the dream. And then, the boys pray that God will give Daniel the interpretation of the dream and tell him the details of the dream. This is precisely what God did. So, when Daniel goes before the king, Nebuchadnezzar asks a straightforward question: “Are you able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its

interpretation?”

Lesson 1 from God on “sovereignty” is about to begin for Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel responds by telling the king that only the one true God in heaven, the one he serves, can know dreams and interpretations, and this God has made it known to Daniel. Now, if this is true, Nebuchadnezzar would be very impressed. No games, no politics, no “yes men”; this was exactly what the king was looking for. After all the palace intrigue he had endured, this would be something he could get behind and count on.

Daniel tells him about the dream and its interpretation. It had something to do with a statue. Put a peg here because that detail will be important in Lesson 2 that God would teach Nebuchadnezzar about “sovereignty.” Well, the king is stunned, impressed, and elated all at the same time. This dream had done a number on him, and now he knew he had the authentic interpretation. Listen to how he responds to Daniel’s interpretation and reciting of the dream:

“Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel, and commanded that an offering and incense be offered up to him.

The king answered and said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.” (Daniel 2:46-47 ESV).

Don’t let this get lost on you. Here was the most powerful man in the world who learned a lesson of absolute sovereignty, bowing down and paying homage to a slave from an insignificant nation he had utterly conquered. What would cause the king to act this way in his court? We know from history that part of the reason may be that Nebuchadnezzar was betrayed, lied to, and rebelled against at every turn. While this wasn’t a wholesale conversion to the one true living God, it was an acknowledgment of this God’s power. He is “God of gods and Lord of kings.”

Whatever it was about Daniel, the king realized he didn’t lie, and a force more powerful than him was with Daniel. God would use the relationship that the two men forged over time to teach Nebuchadnezzar more about the sovereignty of the one true God, but this is where it all started. And Nebuchadnezzar wanted to keep a man like Daniel close, so he promoted Daniel to ruler over the whole province of Babylon and the chief of all the magicians. Perhaps, the magicians in Babylon did not have the envy and jealousy over Daniel that we will find in the Persians. After all, they were a step away from death, and Daniel became their savior. I bet there were a lot of happy people on the day Daniel was promoted. And what was his first official act in his new capacity? Securing promotions for his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

So, God is about to teach Lesson 2 on “sovereignty” to Nebuchadnezzar. Do you remember when I said the dream Daniel made known and gave the interpretation for had something to do with a statue? Well, the king must have been listening and liked what he heard. For our purposes, we only need to know that God told Nebuchadnezzar that he was the head of gold on the statue. The rest of the statue represented other kingdoms of lesser quality and strength.

The next thing the king did was create a golden statue ninety feet tall and set it in the middle of the Plain of Dura. Along with the statue came an order from the king that whenever the music started, everyone would fall down and worship the statue or be cast into a furnace of fire. This furnace may have been one of the two-story furnaces used to create some of the most magnificent tiles he used to adorn the city of Babylon. But there’s a problem... Daniel and his Jewish friends could not bow down and worship anyone but the living God.

Now, Daniel is conspicuously absent in this chapter. Perhaps he was away on business when this decree went down and was not there to influence the king in a way that would allow worshippers of the true God to get around this command. Whatever the reason, Daniel is not mentioned in the chapter, but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are there, and they would be the focal point of God’s next lesson.

Daniel 3:8 tells us that by this time, some leaders in Babylon may have started to grow jealous of the favor and power Nebuchadnezzar gave these Jewish leaders because the Bible tells us that when the music started, some people maliciously told on Daniel’s three friends. Nebuchadnezzar had spent a lot of time dealing with loyal subjects who had turned disloyal to him, so you can imagine what went through his mind when three of his best servants rebelled against him. Daniel tells us that it sent him into a rage. But he was the king, and his word was final. Before passing judgment, he would give them one more chance to obey and prove their loyalty to him. If they did, they could all forget this indiscretion and go on as if nothing had ever happened:

“Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?

Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” (Daniel 3:14-15 ESV).

Is it true? Perhaps there was a bit of disbelief in his tone. “Et Tu, Brute?”

The Sovereignty of God

Could a hint of disappointment of betrayal be what escaped the king's lips? Perhaps. Or maybe he was ready to lay down the law in his court and force capitulation upon these boys. What would happen if he let the conquered servants of another land pick and choose what laws they would and would not obey? No, the king had to get a grip on things fast. So, he publicly gives them one more order and prefaces it by reminding them, "who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?"

Well, we know the story. The boys stood by their God, even though it meant death. And true to his word, king Nebuchadnezzar heated the furnace seven times what it was usually heated. The heat of his rage over this rebellion spilled into his judgment. What made him this angry? Listen to the words of the boys in answer to his demands:

"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18 ESV).

Their answer was simple and to the point. "We serve a God who can deliver us, but even if He doesn't, we won't obey you." Did you see what these three boys did to the most powerful monarch on the planet? They taught him a lesson on sovereignty. Here were conquered slaves who presumed to tell the most powerful man on earth that there was a God who could deliver them from his hand. And further, if their God chose not to deliver them, they would still not obey the king's command and worship the image. They taught Nebuchadnezzar that their God could not only interpret dreams, but He could even save them from the king's hands if He wanted.

Thus, the heating of the furnace to seven times its normal temperature. It was as if Nebuchadnezzar was accepting the challenge. "Okay, let's see what your God can do." Remember, he had conquered nation after nation whose gods proved impotent to stop his army. The burnt flesh of a few rebels would be a wise investment to discourage others who might want to ignore his sovereignty over them. So, they bound the three boys, and a few guards threw them into the furnace. Now, the furnace was hot enough to kill the guards, but look what Nebuchadnezzar saw when he peered into the furnace:

"And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king."

He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.” (Daniel 3:23-25 ESV).

Remember, Nebuchadnezzar was a pragmatist on all accounts and how he responds is in line with his character. He saw the impossible and concluded that he had witnessed the power of a mighty God. So, they took them out of the furnace. As the boys stepped over the dead bodies of the guards who had thrown them in, the king began to examine them. Not only were they not burned, but even their clothes had no scent of smoke on them. Isn't that awesome? God even protected the fibers they wore. Faced with irrefutable evidence of God's deliverance, Nebuchadnezzar had a change of heart. Even Marduk had never done anything like he witnessed from the God of the Jews.

“Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.

Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.” (Daniel 3:28-29 ESV).

Lesson 2 on sovereignty: God is in a league of His own. Not even Marduk could deliver the way that the God of heaven could deliver. Nebuchadnezzar had a long way to go before he would surrender totally to God's sovereignty and even pen the words himself for the next chapter in Daniel's book. But this chapter is a huge step forward for him. The God of the Jews just took a giant leap forward in the king's eyes. Perhaps, the Jewish God was even on par with his god, Marduk. His decree, which forced reverence for the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, said as much. God began making His mark on the most powerful man on earth. In doing so, the king would soon learn that the Jewish God controls everything, including the people who rule upon the earth. God will prove to be the sovereign of even Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar.

But Nebuchadnezzar is not the only audience for Daniel's book, is he? The Jews who were taken from their land also learned that their own God orchestrated these events. Babylon only destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple because God allowed it, not because He was among the impotent gods who could not stand against Marduk's people. And the lesson is left for you and me to learn as well. We will read other passages where God claims sovereignty over the nations, but there are few places where we see this

sovereignty jump off the pages like we do when we read how God deals with Nebuchadnezzar. And in the next chapter, God leaves no doubts about who He is and what true sovereignty means.

The Finger of God Touches Nebuchadnezzar

As we get into Daniel 4, the narrative shifts from Daniel's point of view to Nebuchadnezzar's. There is no mention of how much time has passed. The king opens the chapter with the lessons he learned from God, which forced him to these conclusions.

“King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you!

It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.” (Daniel 4:1-3 ESV).

Wow! What a statement from a man who ruled the world. Here are the lessons of sovereignty that Nebuchadnezzar learned. First, whatever happened to him, God now moved into the preeminent place among all other gods, including Marduk. The God of Daniel was now the “Most High God.” Only one God could occupy that position. Second, this was a God who could work signs and wonders, something an inanimate idol could not do. Third, God worked the signs and wonders that He chose to work. No one coerced Him or forced His hand. And finally, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that the God of Daniel is King over an everlasting Kingdom with eternal dominion. Nebuchadnezzar had buried his father, and there was no doubt that his son would one day bury him, but Daniel's God was eternal and would out-reign all kings of the earth. We will look more into this at the end of his account. So, what led the most powerful monarch on earth to this revelation? He tells us, and it begins with a dream.

This time, he calls for the magicians and tells them about the dream. To their credit, they don't give a false interpretation. Perhaps this was because of some level of integrity, or maybe it was because they were well aware of what king Nebuchadnezzar did to people who lied to him. Whatever the reason, they tell him they have no clue what the dream meant. We know this was a dream for God alone to interpret, so Daniel comes onto the scene. Don't overlook the lesson that God is setting up for the king here. Before God interprets the dream, He ensures everyone gets a chance to give the dream's meaning. Ultimately, no one could stand up after Daniel's interpretation and say, “I knew that. Of course, this is what the dream means.”

I find it interesting that when Daniel comes in, Nebuchadnezzar refers to him as one in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. This is how he viewed Daniel before the dream and before the lesson God was about to teach him about sovereignty. But after hearing about the dream, even Daniel grows alarmed when God gives him the interpretation.

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about a huge tree that was home to all the animals under heaven. This tree provided food and refuge for all living things. But a watcher from heaven came down and commanded that the tree be cut down, its leaves and fruit scatter along with the animals, and let an iron and bronze band be put around the stump. Then the dream turns even stranger. The watcher declares that he will be driven away from man and be like an animal, and he will be given the mind of an animal until this happens:

“The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.” (Daniel 4:17 ESV).

As we will see in a moment, Nebuchadnezzar still had some pride in him, which led him to believe that most of what he had accomplished came from his own hand. He was able to achieve wonderful things and accomplish mastery over men because of his power. But the God of Daniel was about to teach this proud King that He and He alone was calling the shots. At best, Nebuchadnezzar was a pawn in the sovereign God’s hands. This notion would have been insulting to the great king. But God’s word often insults us when it crashes against our pride. So, the watcher gives the objective of the lesson found in the dream, an objective that lies at the heart of this book. *God is sovereign. He and He alone is sovereign. He does what He wants when He wants to do it, and no one can alter or challenge Him.*

Daniel understands this lesson from the interpretation and knows what is in store for the king. Something special seems to have developed between Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel by now. The king made no threats to Daniel and spoke respectfully and with honor to him. A trust had developed between the two, reflected in how they spoke to each other, including Daniel’s response to the dream.

“Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!” (Daniel 4:19 ESV).

So, Daniel gives the interpretation of the dream. Nebuchadnezzar is the

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tree, but there is a sovereign power that can allow the tree to stand or command the mighty tree to be cut down and stripped of power. This sovereign power can even command that the mighty king be reduced to an animal, having everything he valued stripped from him until he acknowledges that there is a God in heaven who is absolutely and supremely sovereign over everything, including Nebuchadnezzar and his mighty empire. Daniel says that God will prove this by taking the kingdom away from him and giving it back in His own time when the king learns the lesson of Who is truly sovereign. Daniel follows with some advice on how the king can perhaps avoid what God has in store for him:

“Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.” (Daniel 4:27 ESV).

Repentance plays a big part in understanding God’s sovereignty. This is precisely what Daniel counsels the king to do. Repentance only happens when one accepts that a standard is imposed on him by a sovereign power. It is the sovereign one who demands repentance and submission. As king, Nebuchadnezzar was used to being the one who could demand repentance of the people he subjugated. He set the terms, and the people had to comply. He enforced his sovereignty and power to require repentance through force. This is how he learned the lessons of sovereignty. He who was the strongest could impose his will on others. And so, this is the method God chose to teach the king the lesson of sovereignty to ensure he got the message. God would impose His sovereignty by force in a way Nebuchadnezzar could not miss.

But alas, the proud king did not heed Daniel’s advice. Were there continuous discussions between these two friends over Nebuchadnezzar’s need to repent? Perhaps. We know that twelve months passed before the dream’s interpretation came to pass. Maybe the king had been spooked enough by the dream to tread carefully for a while, but eventually, his heart of pride reared up, and God fulfilled his word when it did. As he looked over his mighty empire, Nebuchadnezzar was proud of what he had accomplished by his hand. No thought to giving credit to God, even though the Most High God had given him every opportunity to know that he was a pawn in the hands of the sovereign God. And as the prideful words of praise for himself fell from his lips, the dream’s interpretation began to be carried out. Remember, this is not Daniel’s rendition of what was happening. Nebuchadnezzar was penning these words himself as he looked back over these events and recorded his lessons for all to hear. We are reading the testimonial of the monarch in his own words.

“While the words were still in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you,

and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.”

Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws.” (Daniel 4:31-33 ESV).

Think about this. Only a sovereign God could impose His will upon the most powerful man in the world in this way. No army, no wisdom, no riches or power could stop what the sovereign God intends to do. So, the king was driven away to live like an animal until he learned the lesson of God’s sovereignty. God stripped Nebuchadnezzar of everything. God used the language of force so the king could not conclude anything but that Daniel’s God was sovereign and could do whatever He wanted to do, whenever He wanted to do it, upon whomever He wanted to do it. This is sovereignty in its rawest form. And the king learned the third lesson of sovereignty that God taught him; this time, the lesson seemed to have stuck.

“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

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?” (Daniel 4:34-35 ESV).

Nebuchadnezzar was a man whose spirit was broken by the sovereign God of heaven. Kings and people had tried to touch him all his life, but he had always proven stronger, wiser, and luckier than them all. And when faced with an attempt upon his life or rebellion against his will, Nebuchadnezzar always used force to prove his sovereignty over the people and gain compliance with his will. Do you remember what he did to king Zedekiah, the last king of Judah who rebelled against him? He killed his sons before his eyes and then put out Zedekiah’s eyes so that the image of his slain sons would be the last thing he saw. Nebuchadnezzar was telling Zedekiah and all of Judah that he was sovereign and could do as he pleased. But when God

touched this mighty king, God was correcting Nebuchadnezzar's misconception about sovereignty.

God taught the king that he only conquered Judah because Daniel's God had allowed him to accomplish his purposes. It wasn't Marduk who raised up the Babylonians; it was the one true God of heaven, the Most High God, who merely used Nebuchadnezzar as a pawn to accomplish his purposes. When Nebuchadnezzar lost sight of his smallness in the sight of God, God stepped in, touched the monarch, and took everything away from him; his kingdom, health, sanity, power, and sovereignty. And God would not give any of it back until Nebuchadnezzar learned who the true sovereign was.

Where was Marduk when God lifted his hand against Nebuchadnezzar? Where was his mighty army or his wise men? What could his wealth and prestige do for him when the Most High God lifted his hand against him?

The answer, he found, was nothing.

Not a single thing.

And this is the essence of true sovereignty. God acted with absolute impunity. When Nebuchadnezzar praised the Most High God, he learned the lessons we have put forth as the three fundamental truths about God's sovereignty:

1. God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.
2. God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.
3. God has the right to make the rules and the power to enforce those rules on whomever He chooses.

The third fundamental truth of God's sovereignty was learned when Nebuchadnezzar roamed the earth as a beast. God could touch the most powerful man in the world and do whatever He wanted to do to him. This led to the acknowledgment of the first fundamental truth that Daniel's God was the Most High God who "does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth." And finally, Nebuchadnezzar learned that no one could make God answer for His actions. This is the ability to work with the purest of impunity. We see this when Nebuchadnezzar says, "and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'"

Little else is known about Nebuchadnezzar, either biblically or historically. He fades off the world scene, recognized as the most powerful ruler of his day. Was he ever fully converted to Daniel's Most High God? What was his relationship with God when his senses returned to him, and he made these proclamations about God? We simply do not know. That seems to be between God and him. But if the Most High God replaced Marduk as the supreme God in his eyes, it's not hard to understand why the Babylonians

might have erased any evidence of conversion or elevation of the Jewish God from his nation. All we have for this is Daniel 4, penned by Nebuchadnezzar's own hand. Then, perhaps, old lessons were hard to learn, and he may have slipped back into resisting the sovereignty lessons God had taught him. Sound unlikely? Hasn't man been rejecting the evidence of God's sovereignty since the creation? Haven't each of us done it at times in our own lives? The spiritual fate of Nebuchadnezzar isn't revealed to us. All we have is that at one point in his life, he came face to face with the sovereign God Most High and learned there was none like Him.

God not only taught this lesson to Nebuchadnezzar, but He has taught man time and time again that He is supremely sovereign over nations. This lesson is as true today as it was during Nebuchadnezzar's days. God claimed authority, power, and sovereignty over the world. The entire earth is His creation, and He has total control over it. Listen to these passages from the Old and New Testament:

“and said, “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.” (2 Chronicles 20:6 ESV).

God is seen as the One who rules over the kingdoms of the nations. We got an inside look as we focused on Babylon, but the same is true of all nations and kingdoms. Each nation in antiquity set up idols and bowed down to their god. What a futile thing to do. Not because God is stronger than the idols, but because idols are nothing more than rock, stone, and metal that God has created. Only the one true and living God can impose His sovereignty over nations. Isaiah says.

“All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.” (Isaiah 40:17 ESV).

A nation's power is only power as it relates to others. Compared to God, even the mightiest nation is as nothing... less than nothing according to the prophet. This is because God Himself determines the course of a nation. People rule only by His consent. Nations rise and fall according to His will. And when God shuffles the nations of the earth; when He gives power from one people to another; when He brings judgment, it is at His time and according to His pleasure. We sometimes think we know when God will change the balance of power. We look at a nation's sin and evil and become convinced God is about to shake things up. We think this way, partly because we know He can, and we see He has done this in the past.

But we need to be careful when we ascribe actions to God. We are not

Him, and we do not have the wisdom to act in His way. What seems to be a line in the sand that nations cross may end up being nothing but God's longsuffering still playing out. Perhaps God is not done using the evil nation for His purposes. Short of God telling us what will happen to the nations, the fate of kings and kingdoms rests wholly in His hand. Think about how long the Roman empire lasted before it was finally brought down. It existed for a thousand years, and many of those years were full of sin and even attacks against the people of Jesus. Yet that doesn't change the fact that God was in control.

Paul says in Romans 13:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (Romans 13:1 ESV).

Honestly, this is often hard for us to come to grips with, isn't it? Do you mean that an evil nation that kills its babies, turns to all sorts of perverse sexual sins, perverts justice, persecutes the godly, and has no regard for the living God can stay in power? Well, yes, if God wills. God never does tell us when He will make a change in the governments of men, except by the prophets and inspired writers when God chose to make His will known. Perhaps, if the decision were left to us, we would show less grace and more justice than God. Or maybe the opposite would be true. In any case, Paul reminds us of a simple truth: God has instituted governments and authorities, and because of that, we should live in subjection to those authorities.

I know this may not be a popular view among many. It's hard to look into the eyes of a reprobate leader who fights against God and goodness every step of the way and think that God expects us to be subject to that leader. But when Paul wrote this, Rome was not the picture of virtue. You don't have to get past Romans 1 to see the sins God gave them over to. And these Roman leaders were some of the very same men who would bathe the empire in the blood of Jesus' followers. And yet Paul says we should remain subject to them, not because they are good people, but because our sovereign God has set them in that position. We honor them because our God said He wants us to honor them. I am in no way defending evil leaders, but I am fully defending God's command to us. It is not for us to rebel; it is for God to lift up and bring low every leader, every nation, and every government by His sovereignty.

When David was running from king Saul, he refused to lift His hands against the Lord's anointed. It was God, and God alone, Who had the authority and sovereignty to bring Saul low. David understood this and waited for the Lord to lift him up and take Saul down. Even when encouraged by his followers to take Saul's life, David refused. We all can find ways to

justify what we want to do. Unless we have King Jesus sitting on a throne here on earth, we will never have a man we can't make a case that we are justified to rebel against. But Paul tells us that God is sovereign and sets nations and leaders where He wants them to be.

The Israelites in Jesus' day were looking for a Messiah to overthrow Roman rule. But when pressed to take a stand, what did the Son of God tell the people?

“Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they marveled at him.” (Mark 12:17 ESV).

Think about this for a moment. If you believe that Jesus is God, then you have God saying in no uncertain terms to render to the king what the king is due. Not render to the king if he deserves your rendering. Not render to the king if he aligns with God. Jesus told the people to render to Caesar what was due him, even though Caesar would play a part in executing him. And when Jesus came face to face with Caesar's representative, the Son of God and Pilate had this interaction:

“So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.” (John 19:10-11 ESV).

Sovereignty. Jesus tells the truth of His sovereignty before the one He would lay His life down to. Pilate thought Rome had the final sovereignty over Jesus, yet Jesus looked into his eyes and told Pilate that he only had the authority God had bestowed upon him. So, the terrible work of sacrificing Him on the cross was not because Jesus was too weak to stop his execution but because the one true sovereign God would lay down His life and take it up again. Even Rome had to submit to God's sovereign will.

We see in the Old Testament how God continually used the nations to bring about His judgment upon people. But here's the thing, we are not always told how God determines when He uses one nation as his cup of wrath over others. We are not always told how God determines to choose one nation over another. We aren't privy to the secret things of God. We don't have all the details about when God acts. He doesn't have to explain Himself to us when He allows one nation to rise and another to fall. Nebuchadnezzar learned that God works in the kingdoms of men as He pleases, and no one can question Him regarding His choices. That's sovereignty.

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We may never know why God makes quick work of some kings and why He allows other evil kings to have lengthy reigns. We don't know why He sometimes cuts down an individual ruler, like Herod in Acts 12, while allowing the nation to survive, and in other cases, chooses to bring down the entire empire. We don't know why God sometimes erases an entire nation as He did with the Edomites while allowing others to fall from within as He did when He moved Rome from a Republic to an Empire. Here is what we do know: God is sovereign over the nations. Ultimately, He chooses who is in power and for how long. We don't have to figure out how or why; we just need to respect His sovereignty. And that means we never put God on trial to force Him to explain Himself. That was Job's error that prompted God to speak to Him from the whirlwind.

Suffice it to say, at best, we need to remember God is in control. He always has been, and He always will be. He can bring down a leader by worms or by the sword. Even in a democratic republic like ours, there is no shortage of ways that the sovereign God can accomplish His will. He can suppress the vote via weather or by allowing despair to keep people away from the polls. He can let things take their course, allowing voters to choose even an evil candidate according to their will, or He can ensure that the voters pick a person of His choice. How does He do this? I don't know. Understanding how the sovereign God does all He does is beyond me. But I don't have to know how in order to believe He does. In fact, could it not be a sign of faith when we believe without understanding how? Perhaps, we need to have the heart of the Psalmist when he says,

“Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:2-3 ESV).

Chapter 7: Ways God Accomplishes His Purposes

Admittedly, this will be an interesting but challenging chapter to write. We will look at some ways God exercises his sovereignty to accomplish His purposes. But this can also be a dangerous chapter as well. When we start to think about how God accomplishes something, we are bound by our limitations to think about things we know from experience or what we read in the Bible that shows how He exercised his sovereignty to accomplish His purposes. But the danger is when we try to figure out things we may not be able to figure out. Sometimes God tells us how He does things in one instance, but that doesn't mean we can conclude He will always accomplish His purposes that way.

Here is a simple example. We see that God brought judgment upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by raining down fire and brimstone. Does that mean God will always bring judgments upon cities this way? Of course not. We see He has also brought His judgment upon a city by bringing in another nation as He did with Jerusalem by the hand of Babylon. We also see God sent famine or pestilence upon a city as He did when He judged Israel for the sin David committed when he counted the people. When God decided to bring judgment for that sin, He offered David three choices:

“Go and say to David, ‘Thus says the LORD, Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.’” So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, “Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me.” (2 Samuel 24:12-13 ESV).

Famine, sword, or pestilence? Not much of a choice for David, was it? Yet this gives us insight into how God accomplishes His purposes, at least in this case. But the purposes of God are not always judgments or punishments. Sometimes He accomplishes His purposes for good. The reading of the blessings and curses on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim delineated how God would accomplish His purposes when Israel sinned or remained faithful to Him. But I want this chapter to focus on how God accomplishes His purposes; what are the avenues He uses to do this? After all, this is a trait of sovereignty. *God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.* And God says in Isaiah 46:10, *My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.*

This chapter will not strive to present a definitive list of how God accomplishes His purposes as though we can create a reference to index and consult to figure out how God will act in specific circumstances. I do not believe a reference like that is remotely possible to create. But I hope we get a sense that God is not bound to act in any specific way when He accomplishes His purposes. This is where we see God's majesty, power, and awe shine through. He can act in ways we could never fathom.

Another thing I hope we get in this chapter is realizing the danger of thinking we can know what His purpose is apart from Him revealing it to us. Isn't that what Job's friends were guilty of doing? They told Job it was God's purpose to punish him for his sins. And since they believed they knew God's purpose, it led them down a false road that ended with God telling them how angry He was with them for not speaking what was right about Him and instructing them to have Job pray on their behalf.

Think about this for a moment. Is it God's purpose for all men to be saved? We can read a few verses and easily come to this conclusion:

“This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3-4 ESV).

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9 ESV).

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 ESV).

“Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11 ESV).

Reading these verses helps us conclude that it is God's purpose that no one is lost. So, if God always accomplishes His purposes, is it correct to assume that He will ensure that all are saved through His sovereignty? After all, if someone is lost, and it isn't God's will that he be lost, does that mean that God isn't fully sovereign to accomplish His purposes? This is along the track the Calvinistic doctrine takes, and it makes a fatal flaw in assuming that they understand God's purposes. In a nutshell, they say some people will be saved and others will be lost. Since God always accomplishes His purposes, then it must be His sovereign purpose for the people who are saved to be saved and the people who are lost to be lost. Things don't happen outside of His purposes.

But is that really God's purpose? If we are wrong about that, it can lead us down a path of false doctrine that contradicts God's revealed word. This was the error of the Sadducees that led them to the false doctrine of there being no resurrection. Of course, God does not want any to perish. This is His genuine desire. But as we studied in our chapter on God's sovereignty and man's free will, I would contend that it is God's purpose that man freely chooses to accept Him and follow Him willingly. This is His purpose. And God accomplishes His purpose of giving man free will to choose or not to choose. If this is God's purpose, then He has accomplished it. But this brings us to a crucial observation that many will never accept in their understanding of God's sovereignty:

God can still be sovereign and not always get what He wants.

This is fundamental to understanding correctly how God presents His sovereignty to us. The issue at the heart of sovereignty is why God does not always get what He wants. It is not because it is beyond God's power to get what He wants. If He wanted to save all men, regardless of their free will acceptance of Him, He could have done that. If God had desired men to accept Him instead of giving man a choice, He could have programmed us to accept Him, and we would have no choice but to comply. That was within God's power to accomplish. A truly sovereign God has those choices before Him. To limit Him from being able to make any of these choices if He desired would be a sign that He isn't supremely sovereign. So, when we say that God can be sovereign and not always get what He wants, it is not a lack of power or authority that keeps Him from getting what He wants; it stems from His purposes. When God gives man true free will to accept or reject Him, He opens Himself up to be rejected and not getting what He truly wants.

So, where some say that it is God's purpose for those who are lost to be lost and those who are saved to be saved, I would say that it depends on what you mean. If you mean that God's purpose is to give man free will to choose

or reject Him, thus it is His purpose that some will be saved and some will be lost because He is giving them that choice to make, I would agree this aligns with what Scripture teaches. But if you say that God chooses who will be saved and who will be lost separate from the free will choice that He has endowed man with, then I would say this violates the fundamental tenets of faith going back to the time God presented man with the choice of eating or not eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But another aspect of sovereignty is that when God decides something will come to pass, that determination is as good as written in stone. No power can alter that determination. It is not dependent on God being strong enough or smart enough to bring it to pass. God doesn't have to wait until circumstances line up to carry out His will; He has the power to dictate the circumstances needed to carry out His purpose. God is not like a man who makes plans and then overestimates His ability or resolve to carry out those plans. Only one force exists that the Bible tells us can alter God's plans once they have been determined: God. Only God can repent, relent or choose to alter His plans once they are set in motion. Often, this happens through our petitions or repentance. God purposed to destroy the Israelites and make a nation through Moses, but Moses' intercession for the people altered God's purpose. God's purpose to destroy Nineveh was altered when they repented. But this act of being able to change is based on His sovereignty. No one can force God to alter His plans. He chooses to change or not to change according to His will. When He alters His will for us, it is often seen as a show of grace. We deserve His wrath, but our repentance changes God's plans for us. God relents. That is His sovereign right. And God has the sovereign right to determine when He will relent and when He will not relent. We learn this through His Word and how our sovereign God chose to offer His grace through the sacrifice His Son made on the cross.

Wait a minute, you may be asking. What about the verses that say that God doesn't change? What about our proof text that says that God accomplishes all His purposes? Here are just three of them that we can consider:

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8 ESV).

“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Numbers 23:19 ESV).

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” (James 1:17 ESV).

At the heart of these verses, we learn there is a difference between God and man. But do these verses teach that God can't change His mind once He sets His purposes? Does a changed mind mean that God doesn't accomplish what He purposed? Not at all. I believe these verses do not teach that God can never change His mind; instead, they say He isn't subject to man's failings and shortcomings. Man may fail to accomplish his purpose because he is not powerful, smart, or talented enough to do what he set out to do. Not God. Man may forget to accomplish a plan that he has made. Not God. Man may be forced to abandon his plans by a stronger man or by an act of nature. Not God. At every step of the way, God is always in control of what will or will not happen. And once His purpose is set, nothing but He Himself can alter that purpose from happening. There is where we see the sovereignty of God and man's free will make their cosmic dance together. If God's purpose is not carried out in one instance, it may be because man's free will may have influenced Him to have a new purpose. But, in the end, we see God's purposes always being carried out. And this is what I mean when I caution that we need to be very careful we do not assume we always know what His true purposes are because if we are wrong, it can lead us down some dangerous paths that end up challenging the very sovereignty that we claim He possesses.

So, what does all this have to do with our chapter? As we look at ways that God accomplishes His purposes, as we just stated, we should not assume we always know what His specific purpose is in every situation. If His purpose is to bring judgment, He will bring judgment. If His purpose is to show His longsuffering, He will be longsuffering. But once the sovereign God decides to take action, no power can thwart His purposes. And when He takes actions to accomplish His purposes, I see Him doing this in various ways, many I admit that I have no idea how He does it. But here are some broad categories of how God has demonstrated that He has accomplished His purposes in Scripture. Something tells me this will not be a complete list because I believe God still works in ways we can never fathom.

Through Natural Intervention
Through The Heart Of Man
Through Prewriting The Future
Through Circumstances
Through Unknown Ways That We May Never Understand

As we look at each of these ways that God has at His disposal in accomplishing His purposes, there are a few things that I caution against. First, we never read of God superseding man's free will when accepting or rejecting Him. He may cause man to do things he may not normally do (see

chapter on *God's Sovereignty And Man's Free Will*). Still, the Scriptures show repeatedly that the free will to choose to accept or reject Him is something special that He has endowed man with for a specific purpose, and God has never interfered with that, despite what the Calvinist doctrine may teach.

I would also caution against blanket applications of how and when God will choose to accomplish His purposes in ways we will discuss. The gist of this chapter is to give us an appreciation of how the sovereign God has demonstrated the diverse methods He has used to accomplish His purposes in the past. Be it moving the sun backward, causing a donkey to speak, or sending hornets upon a fleeing enemy; we can appreciate the absolute sovereignty it takes to accomplish these things. Still, it does not mean God will always use these methods in every circumstance. Being sovereign and unlimited in power means that He has ways to accomplish His purposes that we may never be able to understand, even if He were to tell us what He was doing. So, as we go through some of the ways God uses to accomplish His purposes, let's focus on His immense power, wisdom, and sovereignty rather than get caught up in trying to figure Him out.

Through Natural Intervention

I guess this will be the one way God uses to accomplish His purposes on which we all might find the most agreement. It is simple, and unless we are coming out of atheism, it is one most of us will heartedly agree with because we don't have to wrestle with principles of free will, determinism, natural laws, or faith as we will with the others. When we talk about God naturally intervening to accomplish His purposes, we are talking about God taking control of His creation to work His will. Here are ways that God intervened with His creation to accomplish a specific purpose He intended to bring about.

The Flood: In Genesis chapters 6 through 8, we read that God had enough of man's sinfulness. He determined to bring judgment against all men and start over with the one righteous man, Noah, and his family. God would bring this judgment about through a flood. God could have chosen to use any means to bring about His specific purpose to judge all men, but He chose to use water. God caused the waters above the heavens to fall, the waters below the earth to erupt, and it rained for forty days and nights. God *caused* that. This would never have happened had it not been for the specific intervention of God. He did all this for a purpose. To put a point on it, He gave us the rainbow as a promise that He will never again accomplish His purpose to destroy mankind with water. Peter tells us in his second epistle (3:7) that God will use fire the next time He destroys the earth instead of water. The first intervention was for cleansing the earth; the second will be for destruction. But the point for our purposes is that God used natural means to accomplish His purpose.

Earth Splitting: In Numbers 16, we read about the rebellion of Korah against Moses. Again, God had a purpose of judgment to accomplish. This time, He chose to have the earth open up and swallow the ones who rebelled against the man He chose as the leader. God could have chosen many ways to accomplish His purposes, even by being longsuffering and giving them time to repent. But, in His time, according to His sovereign purpose, God split the earth and swallowed up the rebels, and then He caused the earth to close back up over them. Purpose accomplished. Remember, it is never left to us to question God as to why He chooses His actions (right, Job?). Here is how this purpose played out:

“And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.” (Numbers 16:31-33 ESV).

Hornets: We referenced this earlier, but when God wanted to deliver a military victory to the Israelites over their enemies, God had many ways He could accomplish that purpose. We will read in Scripture that He, indeed, used a variety of means to accomplish His purpose. In this instance, as the enemies fled, God sent hornets to pursue them and finish them off.

“And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow.” (Joshua 24:12 ESV).

Again, this illustrates that when God has a purpose, He can choose how to intervene in accomplishing His purposes. Does this mean God will always send hornets to dispatch His enemies? No; in fact, we see He is fully capable of accomplishing His purposes in various ways. Hornets were just one of many ways He had at His disposal. Sovereignty means He has the whole creation at His disposal to use in any way He wishes to accomplish His purposes.

A Donkey: In Numbers 22, we read an interesting account where God caused a donkey to speak to his master, Balaam. Balaam was a prophet of God who was instructed to bless Israel even though the king of Moab asked the prophet to curse Israel. Balaam insisted that he could not speak anything but the words God had put in his mouth. Still, he was a man who seemed to be willing to find a loophole for the king’s benefit if it existed. Later, he told the king of Moab that he couldn’t curse Israel, but he gave the king advice on how he could get God to curse Israel Himself. Listen to what the Lord

Jesus Himself says about this in the letter to the church at Pergamum:

“But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.” (Revelation 2:14 ESV).

And yet, God taught Balaam against straying from His purpose by accepting the riches of the King of Moab and cursing Israel. He did this by causing his donkey to speak to Him. God had placed an angel with a drawn sword in Balaam’s path, which the donkey could see, but Balaam could not. Of course, the donkey would not pass by the angel. This made Balaam furious, so he began beating the donkey. This is when we see God doing something unique that represents His utter sovereignty in accomplishing His purpose in this instance:

“Then the angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam’s anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” (Numbers 22:26-28 ESV).

So, God had told Balaam to go with the princes of Moab but only speak the words He would put into his mouth. Apparently, Balaam was angling for a way to obey God while still trying to figure out how to get a huge payday from the king of Moab, so God sent an angel to ensure that Balaam learned to stay true to his mission. He gets the point by learning this lesson from the mouth of a talking donkey. God could have chosen any number of ways to accomplish His purpose, but He showed His control over His creation in this unique way. Balaam learned the lesson and spoke only what God put in his mouth. God’s purpose was accomplished. When the blessing of Israel was over, He told the King of Moab that even though he couldn’t curse God’s people, if the king could get Israel to worship their gods and enter into sexual unions with his people, God would curse them Himself. And that’s precisely what we see happening in Numbers 25, the occasion Jesus referred to in Revelation 2.

Johan and the Fish: God gave the prophet Jonah a message- Speak against the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was a pretty evil city, and Jonah was not a fan. You might think he would relish this opportunity. But Jonah was well aware of God’s propensity to forgive if people repented, and he did not want these people to experience even the slightest bit of God’s mercy (see Jonah

4:2). So, he fled from the presence of the Lord... well, as we often do, he attempted to flee. But God had a purpose that involved Jonah delivering this message. God was not about to let Jonah off the hook, so He created a big fish to accomplish His purpose. The fish swallowed Jonah, and for three days, he prayed in the belly of the fish. After three days, God caused the fish to vomit up Jonah, and the same word of the Lord was before him. After an experience like that, Jonah got the message that he had to do what the Lord said.

This is an interesting study as it relates to God's sovereignty on many levels. God had two purposes. The first was that Nineveh was preached to. The second was that Jonah did the preaching. It was Jonah's will not to preach against Nineveh. He ran from God when given the charge, and even after he did what God said, he complained about having to do it. Yet God overrode Jonah's will in this instance. Remember, God does not give man unlimited free will. Only God has unlimited restrictions and the ability to do anything He wants to do. Man's free will is always limited by what God defines for man. In this case, God wanted Jonah to preach, and in the end, Jonah preached.

This doesn't mean God will never allow a man to refuse His will. We see that, more often than not, man is free to obey or not obey. But what it does mean is that if God purposes in His heart for man to do something, God is powerful enough in His sovereignty to ensure His purposes are accomplished, regardless of what we may or may not want. As we have shown over and over, God never has demonstrated the inclination to override man's ability to accept or reject Him. God never forces someone to accept or reject Him, though He has forced people on many occasions to accomplish His purposes through them. We don't have to like it, but He can work His will through people even if people do not want Him to. This is a hard concept to come to grips with because many of us often feel free will is an all-or-none proposition. The Calvinists certainly do. And if we are not careful, we can swing to the other end of the spectrum by elevating man's ability to do anything we want, despite what God has in store. By doing this, we make ourselves the instrument by which we neuter God's power and His sovereignty. That is a dangerous place for us to be.

The Ten Plagues: We are familiar with the ten plagues that God rained down upon Egypt. Each of these plagues showed God's sovereignty over an aspect of His creation, especially how it related to the power that the Egyptians ascribed to their gods. God sent each plague to accomplish His purpose which He states are more than just to free His people from the yoke of bondage. It was to bring glory to His name, as we will see in a moment. And by doing so, God also ordained that the Egyptians would act a certain way. First, God tells Moses on the mountain, speaking from a burning bush, that He would have to compel Pharaoh to release His people because

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Pharaoh would not do it any other way. And the way He accomplished His purpose through the plagues would cause the men and women of Egypt to find favor with the Israelites and give them riches and provisions as they left. God said it was a way His people would plunder the wealthiest nation on earth through no act of their own. Listen to the words of God about this:

“But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.” (Exodus 3:19-22 ESV).

The ten plagues were more than God peering into the future to see how the Egyptians would react to them; it was God accomplishing the purpose of plundering the people through the plagues He would bring upon the nation. And to put a fine point on this, God had told Abram about all of this over four hundred years earlier:

“Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.” (Genesis 15:13-14 ESV).

We see one more aspect of the plagues that confirm God’s sovereignty to accomplish His purpose when He is about to bring hail upon the land. Six plagues have been sent to Egypt, yet Pharaoh’s heart is still hard, and he refuses to let the people go. This isn’t because Pharaoh is winning or holding out against God and God has to “up His game.” These plagues have been given at the right time for the right purpose. God knew Pharaoh would not capitulate after the six plagues, but He chose those plagues for a particular reason. Listen to how God puts it as He prepares to send the plague of hail:

“For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” (Exodus 9:15-16 ESV).

God is simply saying what we would expect an all-powerful, supremely sovereign being to say. Paraphrasing His words, God said He could have

chosen to wipe Egypt off the face of the map in a moment, but instead, He raised up Pharaoh for this time and purpose to bring glory to His name. And we see repeatedly for over a hundred years afterward that the people of the world heard about what God did to the Egyptians with the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, and they feared God because of it. Just listen to Rahab's words when she encountered the spies Joshua sent into Jericho:

“and said to the men, “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.” (Joshua 2:9-11 ESV).

God knew what He was doing when choosing which plagues to use and when He chose to send them. It was to fulfill a much more diverse purpose than simply to affect the exodus of His people from slavery. He could have done that in a single act if He wanted. And the way He chose to unfold these plagues had a way of hardening Pharaoh's heart until it was time for Him to bring the one plague that would demonstrate His preeminence over Egypt, its gods, and all of creation. With the death of the firstborn of all Egyptians and their animals, God dealt a crippling blow that broke the nation's spirit, including Pharaoh himself. And it would ensure that people for generations would remember what the God of the Israelites was capable of doing. God did all in a way that brought Himself glory, just as He said He would. God accomplished His purpose with the ten plagues.

Through The Heart Of Man

Now, this is the one I am sure some will raise an eyebrow at. You may ask, “What do you mean God will accomplish His purposes through the heart of man?” Fair question, but I would ask we all keep an open mind as we discuss this. First, if the scriptures teach that God does this, let's fight the urge to explain it away as though it really doesn't say what it says and instead strive to understand what it means that God accomplishes His purposes through interacting with the heart of man. And as we do, let's remember the principle we have looked at which shows God doesn't give man unlimited free will, but free will within constraints that He defines. And from everything the Bible teaches, we see God has given man unfettered free will to choose to accept Him or reject Him. In this, God has never interfered.

But God often has forced man into specific actions to accomplish His

will, regardless of what man may have wanted to do. We saw that even though Jonah did not want to preach to Nineveh, God purposed that He would. In the end, Jonah preached. We see a similar thing with Jeremiah, in my opinion. After being beaten and put into stocks, Jeremiah said he could try his best to stop speaking the word of God because of the misery it brought him when he did. But God purposed that Jeremiah continue to preach a message of judgment to a people who were loathed to hear it. Here is how it seemed to him:

“For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” (Jeremiah 20:8-9 ESV).

So, how did God cause the word to burn like a fire in his bones? I don't know. But from this work, God would not let Jeremiah walk away, even though, like Jonah, he tried to avoid it. But in the cases of both Jeremiah and Jonah, God did not force them to accept or reject Him; He just forced them to act in the way He purposed. God can limit our free will when He has a specific purpose He wants to come to pass. This is why we shouldn't have a problem understanding how Isaiah could prophesy about Cyrus, King of Persia (Isaiah 44:28-5:1), some 150 years before Cyrus was born. There are several ways that God could bring about Cyrus being the shepherd for God who brought the Israelites home. But the fact God said it and it happened shows God can affect His purposes through the hearts of men. I believe God is much more than a glorified fortune teller Who can peer into the future to see what will happen. God establishes what will happen in His sovereignty and then makes it come about. And His purpose can never be undone by someone whose heart chooses not to fulfill the purpose He has ordained.

When God wants people to fear, they will fear. When God wants someone to be strengthened, they will be strengthened. When God wants someone to be bold, then they will be bold. In the blessings and curses on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim, God not only talks about what He will do for the Israelites, but He also talks about the hearts of the enemies. They would fear and tremble before the Israelites if the Israelites followed God. But if the Israelites didn't keep the Law of the Lord, it would be their hearts that would tremble and fear. Notice:

“And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you.” (Deuteronomy 28:10 ESV).

This is the effect God would have on the enemies of God's people when the Israelites obeyed. God would put the fear and dread of the people of God in their hearts. But listen to what He said would happen to the Israelites if they did not keep the Law:

“Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and at evening you shall say, ‘If only it were morning!’ because of the dread that your heart shall feel, and the sights that your eyes shall see.” (Deuteronomy 28:66-67 ESV).

What was God saying in these instances? He was saying He would bring about His purposes by putting fear in people's hearts. How does He do this? I suppose through several means we can debate, and a few ways that might be beyond our understanding. God can keep enemies at bay so that there is no fear of them, or He can allow the military to have easy victories to put peace in their hearts. He could raise up a strong protector or give a nation a technological breakthrough that sets them far beyond the other nations. The point isn't to get bogged down in how God can affect the hearts of men but that He can, and does. He has a quiver full of diverse arrows to accomplish this in any way He chooses.

That God can affect the hearts of men to accomplish His purpose shouldn't be something that surprises us. Don't we pray for boldness or courage when we are afraid? Don't we pray for wisdom and discernment when we don't know what to do? The danger we must avoid is thinking God will only answer our prayers in specific ways. Ours is to ask and let God determine how He will answer, not to limit God in answering only in ways we feel He must answer. Listen to the prayer for boldness that the disciples prayed for when being threatened by the government:

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:29-31 ESV).

They didn't tell God how He must answer their prayers. They just prayed for what they needed, and God answered. The passage is clear that it was God who gave them boldness. With Gideon, God gave him boldness by sending him into the enemy's camp by stealth so he could hear them talk about their dreams about Gideon conquering them (Judges 7:13-15). In both

cases, God accomplished His purpose by giving boldness to people in the way He determined. This boldness enabled these men to do what God wanted them to do.

Let's look at another example where God affected the hearts of an army to accomplish His purpose. We are in 2 Kings 7. The Syrians had surrounded Samaria, and famine had set in. The Israelites were so hungry that people resorted to the gruesome act of cannibalism. But Elisha told the King that this time tomorrow, food would be plentiful and cheap. Of course, no one believed the prophet. But God brought about His purpose by affecting the enemy's hearts with a spirit of fear. Even though the enemy was poised to conquer Israel, look at how God delivered them:

“For the Lord had made the army of the Syrians hear the sound of chariots and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, “Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to come against us.” So they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys, leaving the camp as it was, and fled for their lives.” (2 Kings 7:6-7 ESV).

In their haste to leave because of the fear that God put into their hearts, God not only delivered Israel, but the fleeing army left all their food in abundance. The only way this could have happened is if God had intervened. He accomplished His purpose by making the enemies believe something untrue. He put fear into their hearts. He affected the hearts of men to accomplish His purposes.

What should cause us to revere God in His sovereignty is that He can change our hearts to accomplish His purpose. Are you a faithful child of God who wonders if you have what it takes to remain faithful if someone placed a gun to your head? You may not have that courage, but God can give you that courage if you remain faithful to Him. He can provide us with all we need in our time of need. David knew our sovereign God could do things we could not do on our own. God strengthened him, gave him favor in the eyes of the people, and most wonderful of all, God created a new heart in David when he struggled after his sin with Bathsheba.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10 ESV).

Through Prewriting The Future

A critical aspect of God's sovereignty are prophecies that He creates. I refer to it as the prewriting of the future. Sometimes, it's easy to think that God is just an amazing fortune teller, able to peer into the future and amaze us with the unique ability to tell us accurately what will happen. But viewing

God as a glorified fortune teller only limits God's sovereignty. He does far more than see what will happen in the future; He creates the future according to His good pleasure. In our chapter, *Foreknowledge and God's Sovereignty*, we will dive into this in more detail. But for our purpose now, we can understand that a being who can dictate what will happen in every detail is much more powerful and sovereign than a being who can foresee future events but cannot change what is written in time. Such a being is subject to time, and time becomes supremely sovereign.

No, our God is sovereign, even over the events of things to come. When God said,

“declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’” (Isaiah 46:10 ESV),

it is because He is doing the declaring. He is causing things to happen. When He said the Savior would be born in Bethlehem, He set it in motion for time to obey His decree, and nothing could alter His declaration. When God declares something to happen, then it will happen. That is the ultimate sovereignty. As we dive into this aspect of God's sovereignty in more detail in the next chapter, we will see that this does not mean the doctrine of determinism is true because it counteracts the free will God has granted to men. God prewriting history by prophesying things to come does not mean that everything happens only by God's direct will being imposed upon it. When God does speak about the future, it is as if God speaks something into existence from nothing. *Ex nihilo*. The future happens because God has decreed it to happen. That is the essence of prophecy, which is why the Bible's prophecies are always 100% accurate. God never gets it wrong, makes an error, or misreads the tea leaves. It is not because God is perfectly in tune with what will happen but because what will happen is fulfilled by His very decree.

This is not just about prophecies as we think about them, but by every word that proceeds from God's mouth. Once God says it, it happens unless God Himself relents. God is the only power sovereign enough to countermand what God has said. No other power can do that. So, when God brought the people onto the mountains to hear the blessing and the curses read to them, and He said what would and would not happen if they obeyed or disobeyed Him, those things were set in stone. They were set in stone because God Himself would bring about every detail of His promises regarding the blessings and the curses.

When God makes promises to us, we rely on His supreme sovereignty to fulfill those promises. God prewrote history when He said He would give us a home in heaven with Him if we walk with Him. That promise is absolute

in its fulfillment, and nothing can alter that. The promise is not dependent on conditions working out perfectly for God to be able to keep His promise to us; there is no possibility that Satan can thwart God's ability to keep that promise, and there is no chance that God will change His mind once He has committed something to us.

Every promise that God makes to us is a prewriting of history. It is etched in stone. It will come to pass. Since it is impossible for God to lie, we can rest in His sovereignty and know He is reliable, dependable, and predictable. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He never forgets, never overestimates His abilities, and never promises more than He can deliver. The messianic prophecies are more than a guidepost to identify Jesus; they testify to a sovereign God. If even one failed, then God could not be supremely sovereign. If any detail of His prophecies were wrong, even in the slightest, then God could not be supremely sovereign. Only a sovereign God knows "the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done."

And this is where our faith comes in. If God has said it, then we know it will happen. Abraham believed God and God counted it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). When God told him to sacrifice Isaac, He believed God would raise him from the dead because God promised (prewrote history) that Isaac would be the one in whom the promises of God would be fulfilled (Hebrews 11:17-19). We never have to wonder about anything God has promised because His promises are a prewriting of history. And that's what makes God different from everyone else. No other being, including any man, is that dependable, that accurate, that reliable. Even the best among us may have things out of their control that keeps their words from coming to pass. But with God, nothing is out of His control. He is in control. Everything bows to Him and His will. When He says it, time and creation bend to His will, which will always come to pass. Can there be a better manifestation of absolute sovereignty than prewriting the future?

Through Circumstances

God also works His sovereign purposes through the way He arranges circumstances. We have seen this theme through our study woven into the fabric of the lessons we learn. When we talk about God accomplishing His purposes this way, we mean that God can spend whatever time is needed to set up things so His purpose is done, or equally as powerful, God can use whatever current circumstances exist and accomplish His purposes through it. Let's look at an example.

In Judges 13, we read about the birth of Samson. He was the man whom the Spirit of God gave superhuman strength. But Samson was not the most moral man or a man who exhibited the best wisdom and judgment. He was a womanizer and ignored God's law not to intermarry with the people of the

land (Deuteronomy 7:3). Some would have you believe that God caused Samson to sin so He could accomplish His purpose of delivering Israel out of the hands of the Philistines. But we know that cannot be true because James says,

“Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.” (James 1:13 ESV).

To make God responsible for our sins to accomplish His purposes is a violation of the very character of God and makes us guilty of the worst kind of bearing false witness. It was the sin that Job’s friends were guilty of- saying things about God that are not right (Job 42:7). But when you read Judges, it may be tempting to think just that. In the context of the next passage we read, Samson found a woman among the Philistines he found attractive, and he told his parents he wanted to marry her. They tried to talk him out of it and encouraged him to find a nice Jewish girl to settle down with, but Samson was set on getting what he wanted. And then we read this:

“His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.” (Judges 14:4 ESV).

The question becomes, “Did God cause Samson to sin so He could find an opportunity to bring judgment through Samson?” A cursory reading of the verse may seem that way, but it ignores many things we already know about God, His sovereignty, and His character. We already read through James that God does not tempt anyone to sin, so that alone tells us that this verse is not teaching that God caused Samson to love a woman and engage in an illicit relationship to get His way. Is not God powerful enough to choose a righteous way to accomplish His purpose? Would a righteous God engage in unrighteousness to accomplish His purposes? No, laying the responsibility for Samson’s sins at God’s feet is not in harmony with Scripture. Then, what does God mean when He said this was from the Lord?

I submit that God was using the circumstance of Samson’s sin as a way to bring about His judgment upon the Philistines. God, in His sovereignty, could have arranged it for Samson not to sin in this way by also creating circumstances for Him to avoid sin. For example, God could have created a circumstance where a beautiful Jewish girl found her way into Samson’s heart, or He could have made Samson so undesirable that no Philistine girl would have anything to do with him; or He could have put Samson in an isolated place where he didn’t have much contact with the enemies of God’s people until God was about to use him. My point is that there are several ways God

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could have arranged circumstances and still accomplished His purpose through Samson without resorting to causing him to sin.

Yet Samson had a wandering eye and cared very little about anything but pleasing himself and his sexual appetites, so God used this circumstance that existed as an opportunity to bring judgment upon the Philistines. God wasn't going to create circumstances to help Samson avoid this sin because Samson wasn't looking for a way to avoid the sin.

It's not unusual that God used circumstances He did not create to accomplish His will. That God can take a bad situation and use it to accomplish His purposes is another testament to His sovereignty. God does not have to wait until everything is just right to accomplish His purposes. He can take a very evil circumstance and do His mighty work through that situation. Now that's sovereignty!

This happened in perhaps one of the most famous stories demonstrating God's sovereignty. In Genesis, we read the story about Joseph. He was the favored son of Jacob, who treated him with such favoritism it would make his brothers jealous. They despised Joseph so much that they entertained the idea of killing him. Did God intervene to keep Joseph alive so He could accomplish His purpose? Perhaps; I would say probably. But the brothers did sell Joseph into slavery. Over the years, they had come to regret their actions. But during those years, God used the circumstances to put Joseph in a position to save the world from famine.

Did God cause the brothers to sin in order to bring about His purpose He would work through Joseph? I don't believe we can come to that conclusion without impugning the integrity of God. It also skirts the question, "Could God have accomplished His purpose in a way that did not cause a man to be tempted by evil?" Yet God allowed these brothers to do the evil deeds of their own volition while deciding to use it as a conduit for accomplishing His purposes. God could have arranged consequences to keep Joseph from being sold into slavery and still use Him to accomplish His purposes, but He didn't. God chose, in His sovereignty, to use his brothers' sins to do His work in Joseph's life. That's why, when they all were finally reunited, and Joseph was the most powerful man second only to Pharaoh, he could say this:

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."
(Genesis 50:20 ESV).

This is not proof that God caused the brothers to sin to accomplish His purposes; rather, it's an acknowledgment that God, in His sovereignty, can choose even the worst circumstances and use those to accomplish His purposes. This is precisely why Paul can say,

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 ESV).

Now, let’s turn our attention to Judas. Did God make Judas sin when he betrayed Jesus? We see that Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was prophesied in Scripture (Zechariah 11:12-13; Psalm 41:9). I will go into more detail about God’s foreknowledge in the next chapter, *Foreknowledge and God’s Sovereignty*, but here is something I want to propose to you about Judas. Did he have to sin because he was prophesied to sin? Is our only conclusion that of determinism, the doctrine says that events must happen as ordained external to man’s free will? Was Judas destined to sin because God prophesied it to be so? Or did God use circumstances with Judas to accomplish His purpose? The truth is, we don’t understand all the “how’s” when people are prophesied that they will sin. But we need to be careful not to rush to provide explanations we do not truly have. And when we do offer possible explanations, we must do so in harmony with the Scriptures. That is why sometimes we walk away saying, “I believe scripture; I believe prophecy; I believe man has free will, and I believe God accomplishes His purpose.” Those are the bedrocks we build our faith on. There is never an expectation that we understand or figure out everything God does. Sometimes God withholds answers, so nothing is left but faith.

With that in mind, let me propose a way of looking at the sin of Judas I believe harmonizes with scripture. You should not walk away with the idea that I am teaching this is the way I think it did happen because I simply do not know. I am just asking us to think in ways we may have never thought before to help us understand so we don’t have to fret when we come to situations involving the sovereignty of God that we can’t explain.

Perhaps, God exercised His sovereignty with Judas through circumstances. I reject the determinism of Calvinism (wow, too many ‘isms will get you in trouble, won’t they) because determinism violates the principle of man’s free will choice to accept or reject God. But when Jesus chose His apostles, He was the Creator who knew the hearts of all men. Could it be that when He chose Judas, He chose a man who would love money so much that he would do anything to get it? Could Jesus have chosen a man whose character was such that He would not accept the Messiah? Judas was a grown Jewish man who had formed his character and beliefs. John calls him a thief from the beginning, often stealing from the disciple’s moneybag he oversaw as treasurer (John 12:4-6).

Isn’t it interesting that Judas was the treasurer and not Matthew, whom I presume would be more qualified in that position as a tax collector? Thieves have a way of positioning themselves to be close to the money. The

circumstance presented itself when the group had a common purse, and Jesus allowed the thief to be in that position, knowing Judas would steal from Him. My point is that Jesus didn't have to force Judas to do anything wrong. Judas was capable of choosing to do wrong himself. However, Jesus could have chosen a man He knew would act the way he acted; a man with a heart wholly devoted to riches. This could have been the circumstances that Jesus placed Judas in, not as a way to make him stumble but to use Judas' nature to fulfill God's plan. God governed the circumstances, but the choices were still Judas' to make.

“Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.” (John 6:70-71 ESV).

It seems Jesus knew what He was doing when He chose Judas. He knew Judas and his character. Jesus didn't have to make Judas do anything. He didn't make Judas a thief. In light of James' words, it is important to understand that God will not tempt any man to do evil. Judas would have been a thief whether Jesus chose him to be the treasurer or not. Jesus knew Judas' character. I have no problem believing that God could have created the circumstances that the price of betrayal was thirty pieces of silver, as prophesied. Details like this can be in God's hands without violating man's free will. God arranging details of prophetic words coming to fruition in no way suggests that God forces man to sin to fulfill His purpose, even with Judas. God's sovereignty over all things means that He can accomplish His purposes without resorting to making man a sinner.

Wrapping up with Judas, we need to be cautious before we jump in with a definitive explanation where God gives no explanation. By faith, we can believe God prophesied it, man has free will, and God accomplished His purpose. That is what we must believe. How all that happens is speculation on our part. What I went through was simply an exercise to help us understand that we never have to force Scripture to say something to make our speculations plausible. Whether it's our speculations of determinism (Calvinism) or our speculation that the free will God grants to man must be absolute in all ways. By understanding that we can look at things through another lens, we can walk away secure in our belief in what Scripture teaches, and we can find comfort living in the secret things God has not revealed to us.

We talked at length about Samson's circumstances, but the same can be said of Daniel's circumstances as well. God either arranged Daniel's circumstance specifically for him or used the circumstance that Daniel found himself in to accomplish His purpose. Do we have enough information to know definitively which scenario played out? I would say “no,” but you may

feel strongly one way or the other- God created Daniel's circumstances for him or worked in the circumstance that Daniel found himself in. Either way, we see God working through Daniels's circumstances of being a captured slave who was deported to Babylon. From there, it becomes apparent that God maneuvered Daniel into a position of authority.

But here's an interesting question to consider as we look at God's sovereignty as shown in working through man's circumstances. Compare Daniel with Samson. Both were in circumstances that God used to accomplish His purpose. One man was righteous and obeyed God in all ways; the other was a man whom God used despite being a selfish womanizer who despised his vows to God. But let me ask you this... could God have accomplished His purposes if Samson had Daniel's character and Daniel had Samson's character? If Samson was a righteous man who lived fully devoted to God, never looked after foreign women, and refused to violate his vow, could God have still used him to accomplish His purpose of freeing the Israelites from the hand of the Philistines? Most certainly!

And if Daniel was a man who ate the king's delicacies, didn't have the habit of praying publicly three times daily, and spent time with the Babylonian people and visiting their prostitutes, could God have still used him to accomplish His purposes? Again, most certainly. If this is true, we can easily see that God is sovereign and can accomplish His purpose, whatever the circumstance. God didn't have to make Samson sin to accomplish His purpose and didn't have to make Daniel righteous to accomplish His purpose. This is the underlying fallacy of the determinism/Calvinism proposition that God imposes His will to make man good or evil to accomplish His purposes, thus overriding man's free will when choosing or rejecting to do good or evil.

This is also why God can raise up the Babylonians to be the instrument of judgment upon the Israelites, yet turn around and punish them for the atrocities they committed in how they carried out the judgment. God could use them to accomplish His purpose, allowing them to perform the horrors they performed on His people and then justly judge them for the evil they committed. God working through their circumstances did not mean that God forced them to make evil decisions.

As a parent, I often teach valuable life lessons to my kids by letting them experience the consequences of their actions. That doesn't mean I created the circumstance for them, nor does it mean that I approve of the choices they made. For example, if my son wants to go on a weekend outing with his friends to a pro football game and we agreed that he could go, provided he kept his grades up, I may use the circumstance of him missing assignments and not studying to teach him a valuable lesson, knowing He will have to watch his friends drive off without him when the time comes to go to the game. Does that mean that I approve of his behavior of not studying? No.

Does that mean that I wanted him to fail in his studies? Absolutely not. But I can use the circumstance to teach him a valuable life lesson, which is my purpose. At the same time, I can inflict punishment upon him for not keeping his grades up because he did not do what he needed. I may decide to take away his phone, computer, and other privileges until his grades come back up. My point is we often use circumstances to teach life lessons, don't we? We call it the School of Hard Knocks. We don't have to like the circumstances to use them to accomplish our purposes, right? The same can be said of God. He can use bad circumstances to accomplish His purposes or good circumstances to accomplish His purposes. But as a sovereign, all-powerful God, He most certainly can arrange circumstances or use them as they present themselves. In whatever manner circumstances arise, He will never have to force man to sin in those circumstances to accomplish His purpose.

Esther, Ruth, and Rahab were three women in wildly different circumstances that God used to accomplish His purpose. Esther was a Jew in exile who was lifted to the position of Queen of Persia to deliver God's people from the hand of wicked Haman. Ruth was a gentile woman who gave up everything to follow her Jewish mother-in-law back to Israel and become a proselyte and follower of God. God accomplished His purpose through her lineage by bringing Jesus into the world. And Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who hid the Israeli spies. God accomplished His purpose by using Rahab's circumstances to keep the spies safe. Over 1500 years later, the Hebrews writer memorialized her faith (Hebrews 11:31). In these cases, God could have arranged these circumstances Himself in His sovereignty, or He could have used them as they came about. We are not told how the circumstance came about, and we must fight the urge to be dogmatic with our beliefs, no matter how strongly we feel about them. In the end, does it take away from God's sovereignty if He worked His purposes through circumstances He brought about versus circumstances that presented themselves to Him? I would say that it's a stronger case of His sovereignty that it doesn't matter how circumstances arise for Him to be able to accomplish His purposes. He has the power to create or use existing circumstances to accomplish His purposes.

This thinking will help us to avoid questions like, "God, why did you allow this bad thing to happen to me?" God may use a tragedy in our lives to accomplish a purpose for us without having to create the circumstance itself. That said, and many may not like what I am about to say, but it can be possible that God does bring about a tragedy in our lives to accomplish His purpose. He may create a circumstance we do not like to accomplish a purpose for us. God's purposes are not dependent upon Him having to wait for the perfect circumstance to arise before He can do what He wants. We must be careful not to ascribe circumstances to God without a specific

revelation that He brought about a circumstance. This was the sin of Job's three friends that got them in hot water with God.

What are our takeaways when we think about God working His purposes through our circumstances? I submit these for your consideration. First, God can choose to create circumstances or use circumstances that present themselves to accomplish His purpose. In the absence of His revelation about how the circumstance arose, we should be careful when ascribing all circumstances to Him lest it takes us down the road of determinism or causes us to adopt a fatalistic worldview. Second, God is not dependent upon having circumstances to align before He can accomplish His purpose. He can use any circumstance or create any circumstance in His sovereignty to accomplish whatever purpose He has. Third, in whatever way the circumstance arises, man will always be able to exercise his free will to accept or reject God. God will never force man to do evil to accomplish His purposes. James tells us as much, and God is powerful enough and wise enough not to be forced to make man sin to accomplish what He wants to accomplish. To say otherwise is an indictment of God in the worst, most evil manner. It is the ultimate in bearing false witness against the most sovereign God. We need to approach Him in His holiness and awesome power, understanding that His ways are not our ways; they are higher than anything we can imagine. We don't always have to understand how these things work in every detail, but we must always have faith that God will always do what is right and He is capable and competent enough to accomplish all His purposes without forcing man to do evil.

Sometimes our circumstances can be brought about by God to accomplish His purposes, but other times they are brought about by the laws of nature and by time and chance. That is one of the main points of Ecclesiastes. Just because God can work through circumstances doesn't mean He always does. Sometimes we lose our job because the economy is bad, and the consequence of a bad economy is the reason we are unemployed. Sometimes our loved ones get sick because they develop a disease or get injured. But sometimes, we lose our jobs or get sick because God has a specific purpose for us that is greater than we can imagine. Lazarus got sick and died so God would be glorified (John 11:4). But we know that God brought about Lazarus' circumstances because the Holy Spirit told us this is why he died. Unless God tells us why we are sick or why we lose our job, it is dangerous to ascribe those circumstances as being caused by God. But whatever the case, God can still work good in any circumstance. If He brought them about for a purpose, that purpose will be accomplished. We don't need to know the "whys" of what is happening; rather, we need to know that no circumstance can overtake us that God cannot work for His good. So, we pray because we know He is sovereign and can effect change in our circumstances if it is His will to do so. He can also equip us to endure

any circumstance we find ourselves in. For a supremely sovereign God, nothing is impossible.

Through Unknown Ways That We May Never Understand

This book is about understanding a sovereign God, but we know there are limits mortal man has when trying to understand the limitless God. So, we can talk about God accomplishing His purposes through natural intervention, the heart of man, prewriting the future, or through circumstances, but we must conclude that we can only know what we know. Even in these areas, there is only so far that our understanding can take us. That's ok. That only magnifies the greatness of our God. But beyond these areas, God can work in ways that we may never be able to imagine. Do you believe that? Do you feel uneasiness with the fact that God can work in ways we don't understand? Is it important that you understand how God works His purposes for you to feel peace? I get it... I really do. That's human nature. But God has called us to move beyond what eyes can see and what human reason can deduce. I'm not discounting what we see or using the human reasoning God gave us, but I am suggesting that beyond those things lies faith. These are the things we believe that we do not see or things we do not understand. We believe them because God said them, and that is it. This is true when we apply faith to God working His purposes. Let us bask in the glory of God because He can "do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20 ESV).

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1 ESV).

Faith entails the things we hope for and evidence of things not seen. We must be willing to take that step beyond sight with God into the areas that we may not even understand, knowing that because God said it, there is solid ground to step on, even if we do not understand or see where or how the word of God will take us in our lives.

"And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6 ESV).

Believing in God's sovereignty and that He can accomplish all His purposes is our part. We don't have to figure out all the "how's" or "why's." We can leave that to God. And we certainly don't have to force God into acting a certain way to accomplish His purposes. Sometimes we need to give ourselves the grace to let it go and trust that God can accomplish His purposes, even when we can't understand what is going on. This is the

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amazing thing about our sovereign God.

Chapter 8: Foreknowledge And God's Sovereignty

The concept of the foreknowledge of God has been a focus of discussion among many people for a long time. We touched on this subject when we looked at the sovereignty of God and man's free will, but in this chapter, we will focus on what the foreknowledge of God is and what impact His foreknowledge may or may not have on man's destiny. This is such an explosive topic among people in the religious world because depending on how you view the foreknowledge of God, your entire worldview and understanding of God can be formed, reformed, or shaken to its core.

When we talk about the foreknowledge of God, we are talking about His ability to know events before they happen. This may seem pretty straightforward, especially in the light of passages that we have looked at many times, such as:

“remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’” (Isaiah 46:9-10 ESV).

We also spent time in the last chapter talking about how God's sovereignty is seen in prophecy, or His “prewriting” of history. As I indicated, it seems pretty straightforward that, of course, a sovereign God can see into the future. He can do all things. And most of us would agree that this has to be true of a sovereign God. The debate usually comes when we discuss the ramifications of God's foreknowledge for man. Let's start with the premise that God can peer into the future and see events that will happen. Here are some conclusions or ramifications we need to consider, whether we decide

to dismiss them outright or accept them. Our spiritual worldview will be altered depending on what we do with God's foreknowledge. Let's consider the following ramifications of God having foreknowledge, understanding that this will not be an exhaustive list, and many people may have nuanced versions of what we will discuss. This might be a good time to grab some water and an aspirin or two.

Does God's foreknowledge simply mean that God can see into the future? Are events that will happen destined to happen, and God sees them before they happen? This may be the first impulse we have when discussing God's foreknowledge. God knows all, even things that will come to pass. It is a powerful Being who can see into the future to know what will happen. But is that true sovereignty? Does knowing the future mean God is sovereign? If future events will happen and God can see what they are, which is sovereign? Is it God Who is sovereign, or is it time that is sovereign? Can God alter the things that will happen in the future? Yes? Well then, did God know that He would alter the future that He knew would happen?

And this begins the cosmic headache that has plagued man for eons. This will be a headache for us, but not God. I have no doubts that this is elementary to an infinite God. Unfortunately, we will be testing our limits of logic and understanding to keep up with the ramifications. An entire area of physics deals with the space-time realities that Albert Einstein made famous. Spend some time talking about the Theory of Relativity, and you will begin to see where this thinking can take us. But back to our issue. Does God simply know the future, or can He determine the future? Does that mean there is no future until God determines it, or does the future exist apart from God causing it to exist?

Let's take this thinking down a little further (and prepare to get really uncomfortable). Does God know if I am going to heaven? Is that future set because God knows it will happen? If so, does that mean that no matter what I do from now until the day I die, my future will be what God knows it will be now? Is my life nothing more than a script to be played out as fate intends? I use the word fate because that is what we are talking about. If my future is going to happen the way God knows it will, then it becomes my fate. And if my fate is set, then my destiny (another term for fate) becomes fatalistic. Many who espouse a Calvinistic doctrine believe this is the path; only they take God's sovereignty a step further. God is not subject to time but sovereign over time and determines the outcome of everything (determinism).

Perhaps you say, no, God does not determine the fate of men. He can see the choices we will make, but He gives man free will to do what he wants to do. God just knows the choices we will make. Sounds easy enough, but in this instance, you still end with a fatalistic viewpoint. What is going to happen will happen. My series of free will choices will unfold the way they will unfold

for God to know how they will end up for me. Unlike Calvinists, we simply shift the responsibility onto ourselves rather than God for what God sees as our future. So, Jesus standing at the door knocking is something He must do so we can go through the motions of making the free will choices that time has destined us to make. (Hang on, I need that aspirin now).

Do you see the dilemma we might find ourselves in? Once we start down a path of trying to draw logical conclusions about what the foreknowledge of God means, we lock ourselves into only considering things that we are capable of considering. Can I suggest that God is so far above us that He can accomplish things that we might not know how to figure out? Just ask Albert Einstein. Seriously, can we agree that God can do all things, including seeing into the future, without having our lives subjected to fatalism or determinism? Is it possible that the free will which God has given to us is free will indeed and not part of a fatalistic script that we must play out to get to what God already knows will happen to us? And is it possible that what we think we know about how time works is not how time or God's foreknowledge of events truly works? Could other possibilities exist that we may never be able to understand that demonstrate God's sovereignty, man's free will, and God's foreknowledge? If so, that would bear witness to God being higher than us in the most amazing and incredible ways.

As we dive deeper into the questions of God's foreknowledge, I will ask you to consider some verses that may make you uncomfortable. You will have the option to ignore the verses, explain the verses away by saying that they mean something different from what they say, or you can accept them at face value. These will be verses that may challenge the way we view God's sovereignty. And here's the unfair part... I may not have any answers for you except to say that you should consider them when you form your opinions on God's foreknowledge. I apologize ahead of time. But if we are going to tackle a subject like "Foreknowledge and the Sovereignty of God," then we need to be ready to consider all the passages handed down by the Holy Spirit, even if we end up saying, "I believe it, but I can't explain it." This is not a failure on our part but a step of faith into believing the things that are not seen.

First, let's start with something relatively simple. In 1 Samuel 23, the Philistines begin to raid the people of Keilah. David, still on the run from King Saul, seeks the Lord's council, asking if he should attack the Philistines and deliver the people of Keilah. God replies, "Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah." But his men are worried:

"But David's men said to him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Judah; how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?" Then David inquired of the LORD again. And the LORD answered him, "Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines

into your hand.” (1 Samuel 23:3-4 ESV).

David asks God twice about this to ensure he is absolutely sure of what will happen, and God answers definitively that David will succeed. Was this God’s foreknowledge? Yes. Isn’t this the purpose of David’s prayer? Is this often the purpose of our prayers? How discouraging it would be to serve a God Who would answer, “You know, I really don’t know what will happen. David, it’s a 50/50 chance. Yeah, go ahead and try it and let’s see what will happen.” That doesn’t instill much confidence from a God we hold to be sovereign and in control of everything. Or what if, when we ask for healing of a loved one, God answers and says, “Wow, he is pretty sick. I’m not sure he will pull through, but let’s hope for the best.” No, we ask because we know that God not only sees the future, but we believe He can affect the future. This is why David always turned to God. He never lost battles when He sought God’s counsel because God ensured the future when He spoke it into existence.

But was God simply telling David what would happen, or was God telling David that He would make the victory happen? Your answer to this question will determine a lot about how you view the sovereignty of God. But this story gets more interesting, and the Spirit is about to throw us a curve ball, so you might want to have those aspirins ready. Things happen just as God says they will happen (no surprise, right), but then Saul hears that David is in Keilah and sets his eyes on destroying David once and for all:

“Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, “God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars.” And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men.” (1 Samuel 23:7-8 ESV).

So, Saul is determined to rid himself of David once and for all. What does David do? He does what he always does- He seeks the Lord’s counsel.

“Then David said, “O LORD, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, please tell your servant.” And the LORD said, “He will come down.” (1 Samuel 23:10-11 ESV).

God says, “He will come down.” David then repeats his question about the people of Keilah, and God does answer that they will surrender him into Saul’s hand. Are we dealing with the foreknowledge of God here? Most

certainly. David wanted to know what would happen in the future, and he turned to the one Who knew without fail what would happen. God's answer: Saul will come to get you, and the people will betray you. Now, put yourself in David's shoes. The almighty God whom you have total trust in, the One who has redeemed your soul out of every adversity (1 Kings 1:29), tells you that the man who has put a bullseye on your back will come after you. What do you do?

“Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition.” (1 Samuel 23:13 ESV).

He does what I guess we would do. He decided not to wait around for Saul. We can join in with David and praise the almighty, sovereign God who let David peer into the future to avoid death and defeat. But do you see a potential problem we might have to address in verse 13 about the foreknowledge of God? Go ahead and reread. I'll wait for you.

Did you see something that stood out to you? I did. Let me share my observations with you. In verse 11, God said (speaking of Saul), “He will come down.” Did God's foreknowledge allow Him to see this? But in verse 13, we read that Saul learned that David had left Keilah, and “he gave up the expedition.” Interesting. What God said would happen did not happen. Saul did not come down even though God said He would. By now, I can feel the collective defenses of everyone rising. Hang in there with me. As I said, how you view God's foreknowledge will shape how you interpret passages like these. This is where we as humans begin to discuss ramifications based on what we believe.

Some may say God got this one wrong. That is something I assume that most of my readers will not entertain, but perhaps we have some atheists or agnostics reading, so this is a valid point to consider. After all, we cannot close our eyes and pretend the Bible didn't say what it said. The truth is, God said something would happen, and it didn't happen. What does this tell us about God's foreknowledge? Others may say that God meant that if David stayed in the city, Saul would come, and that's why God gave David the heads-up about Saul. But this interpretation relies on us adding context to the reading to get to the conclusion we want to make. What we know: 1. God said Saul would come, and 2. Saul did not come. What we do to harmonize this is from us and our inferences. We may or may not get it right. Our harmonization is not from God but from our human reasoning. But this isn't much different from what we do in other parts of the Scripture to harmonize and interpret God's Word based on context and reasoning. However, when we do this, whether in this case with Saul or in any case, we must always be

vigilant in understanding that employing reasoning sometimes leaves out the “thus saith the Lord” and moves into the realm of our understanding. This is often a necessary way to approach the Scriptures, but we must always be ready to change as we find a better way to interpret Scripture and not elevate our human reasoning to what we read in Scriptures. So, do we interpret God’s foreknowledge with Saul to mean that God knew that IF David stayed, Saul WOULD come down, but IF David left, Saul would NOT come down? Perhaps. But this interpretation requires us to add conditions beyond what the Scriptures overtly say in order to make it work.

The two ways we understand God’s foreknowledge that we looked at above have a lot to do with how we believe God’s foreknowledge operates. In one way we understand foreknowledge, we dismiss God’s foreknowledge altogether because we see that God said something would happen that did not happen. In the other way we understand foreknowledge, we conclude by adding context and reasoning apart from what the Scriptures have said to harmonize what we believe. This may or may not be correct, which is where we must be careful. But are there other possible ways to consider this passage that may still harmonize with Scripture? Let me put forth another way to consider our text with Saul. As I do, keep in mind that I am not definitively proposing this is the way to interpret this passage, but rather to have us all slow down and consider our conclusions once we move beyond what is written to add our reasoning in order to come to an understanding on what a verse is saying.

The one element we have not focused on in shaping a way to interpret this passage is the role that David’s free will played in God’s foreknowledge. Could David’s free will play a part in how we should come to understand God’s foreknowledge? Our second scenario hinted at this as a way to supply context, but could the nature of God’s foreknowledge be strongly linked to the gift of limited free will that God has given man? Is it possible that our free will affects the foreknowledge of God? If this is so, we must remember that God has created this to be so. Man did not develop free will apart from God determining that man was to have free will. This was what the Creator purposed to accomplish for man. Applying this thought to our situation with Saul, could the foreknowledge of God be such that God saw what would happen, but when David exercised his free will and left, God’s foreknowledge then saw something different, namely that Saul would not come? This way of interpreting God’s foreknowledge may be hard even to consider, depending on how you already view God’s foreknowledge. I understand this and only propose that you consider this as you stretch your mind to dive into how you believe God’s foreknowledge is manifested.

Viewing God’s foreknowledge this way doesn’t necessarily take away God’s sovereignty. It simply means that man’s free will may interact with the way God’s foreknowledge is manifested. And it does chop the doctrine of

determinism off at the knees. For people who say God has given free will to man, it is a way to show what influence man's free will has on how God has determined to interact with man. This way of interpreting the text relies on us understanding that God created man with free will that can affect his own future. We must let go of our idea that future events are fated to happen and cannot be altered. Once God sees an event, then nothing can change it. Our question should be, can an almighty, sovereign God create a world where His foreknowledge and man's gifted free will can coexist? If so, He created it to work this way.

Enough philosophizing; how does this way of interpreting Saul's situation play out? Well, is it possible that God sees events happen but cedes man the ability to alter events through the free will He gives man? If so, we may conclude that free will can alter God's foreknowledge only because God created it to be this way. His free will gift to man may truly be more wonderful than many give it credit for. Let's do this. Let's look to see if there are other situations in the Bible where God's foreknowledge sees one event, but the exercise of man's free will alters what God's foreknowledge sees. If we conclude that there is a pattern where man's free will can affect what God sees in the future, then we will have to do something with this. But we will deal with that as we wrap up this chapter. Spoiler alert... I will caution us to stick to what we know and be careful to go beyond that. I hope to fortify our understanding that God's ways are above ours, which means there is no shame in saying, "I just don't know."

In Exodus 32, God becomes furious with the people of Israel because they created a golden calf to worship while Moses was on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments. God was so furious that He told Moses that He would destroy the nation and start over to make a great nation from him to accomplish His purposes:

“And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” (Exodus 32:9-10 ESV).

Here is a question we must address as we consider the foreknowledge of God... Did God mean what He said? Do we believe the text as written, or must we add context to make it fit into our beliefs of how the foreknowledge of God works? Did God intend to destroy the Israelites? If so, this must have been the future He saw for them once He decided to destroy them. Or do we start to add context to make the text mean something it doesn't say? For example, do we say that in God's foreknowledge, He knew that He would not destroy the people, or perhaps He knew that Moses would intercede for them and He would relent? Maybe this is a valid interpretation, but it requires

us to add many conditions and assumptions beyond what the text says. And to what purpose? We do it to reinforce our understanding of what we think the foreknowledge of God means. This becomes even more difficult to do when we see how passionately Moses intercedes for the people, begging God not to destroy them for the sake of His own glory. This is the exercise of Moses' free will. Did it alter the future that God intended for Israel?

“And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.” (Exodus 32:14 ESV).

“The Lord relented.” This tells us that God did intend one thing to happen, but He changed His mind. The way I read this passage, Israel was as good as dead until Moses interceded for them. Yet, in some way, the exercise of Moses' free will influenced the direction that God was going. If we hold to the belief that God must have known that He would change His mind, then we have to deal with the fact that He never meant what He said. He knew all along that He wasn't going to destroy the people. The only way around this is by adding many assumptions not found in the text. I am not saying this is absolutely the wrong way to interpret this passage. It may very well be the correct way, but like it or not, it does move us toward a deterministic view of God's foreknowledge- What will happen, will happen because this is what God sees that will happen. The future is what it is. And if we hold the position that God knew He would change His mind, then of what was He repenting or relenting? Is there truly a change if the future was set?

So, now that we have spent some time detailing the issues we must address, let's briefly look at other examples when God intended to do one thing and, instead, did another. When we are done, we will bring everything together and discuss how we might want to consider how these things affect our view of God's foreknowledge and His sovereignty. What do we do with passages like the one in Jonah where God intends to bring judgment but relents instead?

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.” (Jonah 3:10 ESV).

Did God know that He would relent? Perhaps. Or did God intend to carry out His plans until their free will altered what He decided to do? Again, how we interpret this passage depends on how we understand the foreknowledge of God. Did God give man free will that could change His intentions, or does the foreknowledge of God mean that He knew what man would choose and God followed the path that He foresaw? How much does

the doctrine of determinism trump God's gift of free will to man? I must admit that I am not 100% sure about this. Perhaps this is going beyond what we are capable of understanding about an infinite God whose ways are higher than our ways. But I hope we are all starting to see that we must be very careful before adopting a dogmatic approach that entrenches us into a position that may be beyond our ability to understand. Perhaps the answer is, "I believe the text. I believe in God's sovereignty and foreknowledge. I believe in man's free will. But I do not know how a perfect God, smarter and greater than I can ever be, works all of this in perfect harmony."

Let's turn to another passage. In 2 Kings 20, we read that king Hezekiah becomes sick and is about to die. God sends his prophet, Isaiah, to the king with a dire pronouncement:

"In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, "Thus says the LORD, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.'" (2 Kings 20:1 ESV).

These are definitive statements from a God who sees and knows all. "You shall die; you shall not recover." Did God, in His foreknowledge, know this? We would all have to conclude that yes, He did. This is what God was telling Hezekiah would happen in a very definitive way. God doesn't say that it's likely that Hezekiah would die, but that He shall die. But Hezekiah prays to the Lord, and the Lord hears his prayers.

"And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: "Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD, and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake." (2 Kings 20:4-6 ESV).

Based on the free will act of the king to pray for mercy, God relents and adds 15 years to his life. So, the question is the same... did God, in His foreknowledge, know that Hezekiah would pray and that He would answer his prayers? The text is clear that God said one thing would happen, but another thing actually took place. How we interpret this passage also depends on how we see the foreknowledge of God. Do we lean toward a deterministic view of God's foreknowledge that the ultimate future is what it is and God knows what will happen, or do we understand that there is some connection with God's foreknowledge and the gift of free will that God gives man which

may in some way influence God's foreknowledge? Perhaps this is another time when we have to acknowledge what we know and be careful with the assumptions we bring to the table. Maybe this is also a time when we must walk away and marvel over God's preeminence over man, especially when it comes to understanding things that are too wonderful for us to understand.

Now let's look at a passage where God Himself may be appealing to man to use His free will to alter what will happen. In Jeremiah, God sends His prophet to warn of imminent judgment upon the people for their sins. Jeremiah is the prophet who is prophesying during the time that God will bring the Babylonians against them. As a last-ditch effort to avoid what is about to come, Jeremiah says this:

“Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, “The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you.” (Jeremiah 26:12-13 ESV).

There are many considerations of how we see the foreknowledge of God wrapped up in this verse. Did God foresee the disaster that was to come? Jeremiah said it was pronounced against them. Did that pronouncement come because God foreknew events? Did God know that the people would refuse to repent? If so, why go through the motion of asking the people to do something that He foresaw they would not do? Again, how we answer these questions depends on how we understand the foreknowledge of God. Do we lean toward a deterministic interpretation of God's foreknowledge, or do we understand that somehow, man's free will which God gifted him plays a role that may affect God's foreknowledge?

Let's go to the New Testament and look at Jesus and His foreknowledge. This will assume that you believe that Jesus is God and that even on earth, He had the attributes of deity, such as foreknowledge. We will leave the one item alone that Jesus says He doesn't know, namely the time of His return. He said the Father alone knows that, which I presume even the Holy Spirit doesn't know. This seems to be the prerogative of the Father of the Groom, as it was with Jewish wedding traditions. Let's remind ourselves what we mean when we say foreknowledge. We are talking about knowledge of future events, whether they are destined to happen or events that God will make happen. I am going to list a couple of verses and see if they raise questions as to God's foreknowledge:

“And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching.” (Mark 6:6 ESV).

“When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” (Luke 7:9 ESV).

So, what does it mean that Jesus “marveled?” When someone marvels, they are amazed at something revealed to them. But if God has foreknowledge, is it possible for Him to be amazed or to marvel? If He knew for certain how the people of His hometown would react or how great the Centurion’s faith would be, could He really marvel? Think about it this way... If I watched a movie 100 times, I would probably know every detail of how it ended. What may have been a surprise for me the first time would likely not elicit much more than a yawn from me the 100th time I saw it. Why? Because I know what is going to happen. If I know what will happen, I won’t be surprised, I won’t marvel, and I won’t be amazed. Yet Jesus marveled. Again, how you interpret these passages largely depends on how you view the foreknowledge of God. Both of these verses were predicated on the free will actions of men. Is God’s foreknowledge determinative, or does man’s free will somehow affect God’s foreknowledge?

In looking at passages like all of the ones we looked at in this chapter, I am hoping we see that it’s not easy to simply say, “Yeah, I believe that God can see everything before it happens; He can even see if I am going to sin or remain faithful.” We must be sure we know what we are saying and where we stand on how man’s free will intersects God’s foreknowledge. The reason is simply that many people have bought into a deterministic worldview that says God has determined when and where even the very molecules of dust will fall. Anything short of this would mean that there is a possibility that God could be wrong in His foreknowledge, so the only way God could be truly sovereign is if He is in absolute control of everything.

But is this worldview the only way to see God’s foreknowledge? Is it possible that our sovereign God can see one thing, and man’s free will causes something else to happen? Or does it mean that man has no free will? If God can determine everything that will happen, or at least see everything that will happen, can man do anything that will ever alter that foreknowledge?

This is where we need to take a step back and not get lost in our human reasoning so much that we forget that God’s ways are higher than our ways. Things may happen in ways I may never understand. But if we are not careful, we can build assumptions and follow logical paths that lead us to believe things that are not true. How I see God’s foreknowledge can cause me to adopt Calvinism, or it can cause me to make the free will of man supreme over all. When we read about the foreknowledge of God, I suggest that we anchor in areas that we are sure the Bible has spoken about and be willing to admit that we may not understand how it all works together. I can take by faith what I am confident God knows with ease. None of what we discussed

in this chapter, or even in this book, is a mystery to God. It only perplexes us. So, what can we be confident that the Scriptures teach?

1. God, in His foreknowledge, can know all things. This is what makes Him supreme, sovereign, and omniscient. Nothing is hidden from Him.
2. God has given man free will. Man has been given the freedom to accept or reject God by his own free will, which God will never violate.
3. God's foreknowledge in no way destines man to act along a prescribed path. Every choice man makes concerning accepting or rejecting God is man's choice and man's choice alone to make.
4. God can get sorry that He did something (like make man in the days of Noah), He can repent or change His mind, especially in light of our repentance or prayers.
5. We can amaze and make God marvel with our actions.

These are some of the things that I can believe because the Bible says them to be true. I don't need to know how they work together or how God is affected by the interworking of these truths; I just need to believe them and have faith that God is greater than me. I don't need to give God a crutch by making Him have to determine the destiny of every atom to make Him sovereign, nor do I have to make man's free will neuter the sovereignty of God. Sometimes I just need to be able to walk away from God and say, "Wow! You are truly as far from me as the heavens are higher than the earth."

God is sovereign and powerful enough to give me free will without His foreknowledge affecting my free will. At the end of time, I will give an answer for my words, my actions, and my choices. I will own them. I will not be judged based on what God made or prevented me from doing. Jesus says,

"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:36-37 ESV).

Jesus does not say that we will be judged by the words that God makes us speak. We own them. We speak them of our own free will. Whether or not God knows what we will say or how we will be judged, our free will is intact. And regarding our deeds, Paul says,

"He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury." (Romans

2:6-8 ESV).

We will be judged based on the deeds we choose to do, not by the deeds God forces us to do or by deeds we are destined to do. We can have complete confidence that regardless of how God's foreknowledge is manifested, it will not affect our ability to make the free will decisions God has endowed us to make. Our free will in no way prevents God's foreknowledge, nor does God's foreknowledge prevent our free will. Listening to men try to explain all of this with their assumptions and logic accentuates even more how great God is and how far beneath Him we are. Our sovereign God can do far above what we can even dream about.

I really do wish I could give you a more definitive answer as to how all of this works together, but I cannot. I simply do not know. Perhaps it's because I am too dense or slow to get it. Or maybe I am too careful not to draw conclusions about things to which I don't think we have been given the answers. If it is enough for me to make the five conclusions I listed earlier, it will suffice. But if you are looking for something more definitive, I am afraid I just don't have the answers for you. Hopefully, that is enough for you. But if it isn't, then let me leave you with these things to consider as you continue to study the foreknowledge of God and His sovereignty:

Be careful not to let your assumptions become your "thus saith the Lord."

Be careful not to shift your responsibilities to God.

Be careful not to neuter the sovereignty of God by elevating man's free will over God's ability to know the beginning from the end.

Hopefully, you are leaving this chapter with the purpose I intended when I wrote it. Know God's sovereignty through His foreknowledge without following the masses who strip man of any free will and make God, and God alone, responsible for everything that happens. This is not the God of the Bible who created man in His image and endowed him with the precious gift of free will so we can choose to love Him, obey Him, hate Him, or reject Him.

Chapter 9: Prayers, Providence, Miracles, and the Sovereignty of God

When we talk about miracles or providence, we are talking specifically about God taking action in the physical world to alter an event or situation to accomplish something for His children. This is the definition I am using in this chapter because it directly addresses God's sovereignty. Specifically, it addresses this fundamental truth of His sovereignty: *God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants*. If God is truly sovereign, then there can be nothing outside His ability to accomplish. Where man may say, "I wish I could, but there is nothing more I can do," that sentiment cannot be part of an all-powerful sovereign God's vocabulary.

Here are the definitions I am using in this chapter. I mention them to ensure we are on the same page, so we don't argue about apples and oranges. Everyone has their idea of what they mean when they use words like miracles and providence.

When I use the word miracle, I am referring to something violating God's natural laws. I am not referring to an amazing or improbable event. I mean something impossible happens. Something that cannot be explained through science or nature because there is no explanation. I am also not referring to things that may stump us. Just because we don't know how something happens doesn't mean it's a miracle. If I traveled back in time to the days of ancient Babylon, I might be able to give a dying man medicine to save his life. Just because the Babylonians won't know what was happening doesn't mean it was a miracle. The same is true for us. Just because we don't understand how something happens doesn't make it a miracle. A miracle occurs solely when the laws of nature are legitimately broken or suspended.

Neither am I using the word miracle to describe an amazing, intricate process that is stunningly complex and jaw-dropping. How many times have

you heard about the “miracle of birth”? I get why we use language like this to describe something as amazing as creating life; however, it is still a natural process and not a bonified miracle. Miracles are things like walking on water. That just cannot happen. Things like raising a person from the dead (a bonified dead person, perhaps like someone who was in the grave for three or four days like Jesus and Lazarus were). That just cannot happen. Or things like feeding over 5000 people with five loaves and two fishes. That just cannot happen. And this chapter will not deal with the question, “Have miracles performed through man ceased?” I am going on the belief that God, in His sovereignty, has ceased doing miracles through men to confirm His word, but I believe God can and still does perform miracles according to His good pleasure.

Providence, on the other hand, is when God works through the natural laws to accomplish His purposes. Like a miracle, we are talking about things God brings about specifically through His actions, something that would not have happened had God not stepped in. I understand we often use this word broadly, such as God holds the universe together through His providence. While I agree 100% with this sentiment, we will use the word providence when God intervenes to alter something that will happen or to bring about something that will occur through natural ways. For example, if we are sick and pray for healing, God can choose to heal us through His providence by ensuring the right doctors are assigned to our case (go back to the chapter where we talked about God accomplishing His purposes through circumstances). But God can also make cancer disappear overnight by working a miracle. Some may not believe that God still works miracles today, and that’s okay if you believe that. I just don’t see any evidence this is true.

Concerning providence, God can help us meet the right mate, make the right friends, get a job, find the perfect place we need to raise our family, or a whole host of other things. These providences are often done because we prayed specifically for them, and God answered our prayers. These things would not have happened if God had not stepped in. Again, I understand that in the loosest definition, all things we have can be attributed to His providence. However, for this chapter, I am specifically talking about things that happen because God acted, which would not have happened if He had not acted.

But with providence, we must understand that because God is acting through natural means, we may not always be able to ascribe providence to Him where He altered our future directly. The Ecclesiastes writer says,

“Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11 ESV).

Time and chance happen to us all. But there are strong breadcrumbs that can lead us to know something has happened through the providence of God in our lives. If we pray for something and receive it, we can rightly attribute answered prayers to God's providence. Or, if we can look back over a series of choices we made and circumstances that came about, the hindsight we have can be evidence of God's providence, and it would be fitting to attribute this to God's providence.

As we move through this chapter and look at miracles and providence, it would be a desperately sad condition if we ranked miracles and providence on a hierarchical scale. If we think that miracles are greater than providence or that providence is somehow greater than miracles, we are missing what is going on. Miracles and providence are nothing more than conduits God uses to intervene on our behalf. The amazing thing is that God is working to make things happen for us, not how He chooses to do it. If my child is dying and God answers my prayers to save his life, does it matter if He brings in the only doctor with the skills to save my son (providence) or if He removed cancer from my son's body overnight (miracle)? As a father, I will drop to my knees in thanksgiving that God has answered my prayers and saved my son's life.

But let's spend a little time confirming God is, indeed, powerful enough to do all He purposes. And in His sovereignty, He can choose what to do and what not to do concerning miracles and providences. Being powerful enough to work through providence and miracles is not in and of itself an attribute of sovereignty. Sovereignty means He, and He alone chooses whether or not to act through His providence or miracles. Our attitude toward God is often demonstrated not in His ability to act as we may desperately want Him to act, but in silent response to our pleadings and prayers.

Let's look at a few passages that may help us work on our attitude as we also look at His ability. Our first stop will be the book of James. Here James talks about the importance of keeping the Lord's will in mind:

“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”--yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:13-15 ESV).

I understand that this is talking specifically about someone who makes plans without even thinking about the Lord (See also Luke 12:13-21), but as James says, we need to learn how to live while always saying, “If the Lord

wills, we will live and do this or that.” While this often seems evident to us when things are going well, sometimes we forget when we bring something to the Lord we desperately want Him to do for us, especially when it is tearing at our hearts. In the moments of our deepest despair and hurt, we often forget, “if the Lord wills.” If God does not answer when we know He is capable of answering, we are sometimes tempted to accuse or blame God for something that is not right.

Have we studied about anyone like this already? Isn’t this what Job did? Job didn’t understand why God was letting Him suffer and demanded God explain Himself. Even amidst his deepest suffering, God taught Job He was sovereign and owed Job no answers. The hard truth for us to come to terms with is that, in the end, God is sovereign in choosing how to answer our prayers. God has never promised He would remove all sorrow and pain from our lives, but He has promised He would teach us how to be a new person when we walk through sorrow and pain. He has not promised to keep us from experiencing hardships, but He has promised we will not have to experience hardships alone. God’s decision not to answer our prayers through miracles or providence does not demonstrate a lack of love for us; instead, it is a testament to His sovereignty. Perhaps He is ready to show His love for us in some other way than the specific request we have of Him. Sometimes, when we are hurting the most, it is most challenging to say in our hearts, “not my will, but Yours be done.”

But there is still an amazing thing that being a child of God affords us. I firmly believe our prayers can change the will of God. While we should have a heart that we will always subject our will to His, isn’t one of the purposes of prayer to see if God will, perhaps, bend or change His will because of our petitions to Him? Don’t we seek His providence or even miracles in our lives every time we pray? And is it possible that He will sometimes grant our prayers as His children even if it was not what He intended for us?

We have already looked at a few cases demonstrating that our petitions to God can move Him to change what He intended for us. Do you remember Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20? God said, “Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.” (2 Kings 20:1). Verse one also says God sent Isaiah to Hezekiah to deliver this message, But Hezekiah prayed, and the Lord heard. Based on His petition, the Lord changed His will about Hezekiah and added 15 years to his life.

What about the case of David in 2 Samuel 12? For context, David had sinned with Bathsheba and killed her husband, Uriah. In this chapter, Nathan is sent to confront David and his sin. In a dramatic accusation, Nathan points the finger of guilt at David and says, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7). But notice what God says, through the prophet Nathan, in the very next verse:

“And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into

your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more.” (2 Samuel 12:8 ESV).

What is God saying to David? He is telling David He has provided abundantly for him. God even says, “And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more.” Even though God had chosen to bless David abundantly, had David asked for more, He would have changed what He had given David and added much more. It seems clear our prayers can have an amazing influence on our sovereign God, even to the point of convincing the almighty God, who can do all things, sometimes to change His will simply because we ask Him to do so.

Need more evidence? We talked about God’s anger toward Israel when they made the golden calf to worship in place of Him in Exodus 32. Do you remember what God told Moses in His anger? Let me remind you:

“Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” (Exodus 32:10 ESV).

Let me ask you, did God mean what He said to Moses? Did He intend to consume Israel and start over with Moses? I would be very careful in indicating anything beyond what the text says lest I come too close to accusing the sovereign God of lying. I would take the text for what it says. So, if it was God’s will to consume Israel and start over with Moses, as God Himself said, then isn’t it amazing when we understand what effect Moses’ prayer had on God? His intercession for the people of Israel seemed to change God’s will. God relented the harm He intended for the people.

“And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.” (Exodus 32:14 ESV).

What did the Lord relent from? Clearly, He relented from what He intended to do to the people. He changed His will because a child simply asked. It was God’s sovereign prerogative to change His will or carry His will out. No one can ever force God to change His will. God is always able to change His will and has shown repeatedly He is open to the prayers of His people and our prayers can sometimes change His will. To some, it may sound too much to accept that our prayers can change the will of God. But we don’t have to look far to see this is precisely what can happen. And not only can it happen, but God often invites us to pray so that we can, if not change, at least move Him to set His will in line with our petitions. Some may think it presumptuous that our prayers can affect the will of God, and I agree God knows more than us. That’s why I believe the Scriptures point us to His

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sovereignty and not simply His will. If God chooses to answer or deny our request, it is because, in His sovereignty, He actively makes that decision, not merely because He has already decided. Otherwise, what is the purpose of verses like these:

“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6 ESV).

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.” (James 5:13 ESV).

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7 ESV).

“So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” (Acts 12:5 ESV).

“Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray.” (Psalm 5:2 ESV).

“And he said, “O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the young woman to whom I shall say, ‘Please let down your jar that I may drink,’ and who shall say, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels’--let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.” Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham’s brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder.” (Genesis 24:12-15 ESV).

In all of these verses and the ones we looked at before, we have seen prayers that have caused God to change His mind, as well as prayers that have asked God to answer petitions (we do not know whether God’s will was changed or not). My point in mentioning all these things is we often forget God invites us to pray and asks what we want of Him. We do so because we know He has the power to accomplish all we ask, but we also do so respecting His sovereignty in whether to answer our petitions or not. There is never a situation so dire we should feel it’s too late to go to God for help.

God, if in His sovereignty chooses to answer our prayers with a “yes,” He will do so in whatever way He wishes. He can answer through providence,

or He can answer through miracles. It is not up to us to dictate how God answers or even that He will answer us. It is up to us to ask and then respect His sovereignty and accept His will. This chapter is not as much about the mechanisms of God's providence and miracles as it is about the attitudes behind the requests. We ask. God answers. We accept. This is the heart in which we bring our petitions to God. Just how much can our petitions move God? Listen to what James says:

“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.” (James 4:2 ESV).

“You do not have, because you do not ask.” I sincerely desire that all of us appreciate the great gift we have in bringing our petitions before the most powerful, sovereign Being in existence, the Being Who is so sovereign He can do all that is in His heart. Nothing is too difficult for Him to accomplish. Nothing is too powerful to keep Him from achieving what He wants to accomplish. And this powerful, sovereign Being has whispered in our ear, “Ask Me what you want of Me.” We ask in faith, knowing He can do all things, and we submit to His sovereignty in the answers He gives.

Chapter 10: What Will I Do With The Sovereignty Of God?

Well, we have traveled through my journey in how I look at the sovereignty of God. I have no doubts if you were to write a book on this subject, you would have chosen different verses to consider and may have come to different conclusions on some of the things I put forth. I have tried not to take stances on things that were based on assumptions without mentioning that these were my conclusions. And I have tried to counsel all of us to think before we build a belief based on our conclusions that go beyond the revealed Word of God. If we can do this, then it will help us stay open to learning and adjusting our beliefs as we let Scripture continue to mold us rather than put down pegs of assumptions we live and die on.

When I started the book, I said there were a few questions a study on the sovereignty of God would help us answer. To remind us of those questions, I will repeat them here:

- How can living in the sovereignty of God help me conquer through my battle to overcome sin and temptation?
- How can bowing the knee daily to a sovereign God equip me to persevere through any trial?
- How does my free will intersect with the sovereignty of God?
- How will God's sovereignty change how I view suffering and unanswered prayers?
- How will God's sovereignty realign how I look at my fellow man who is created in His image?
- How will the sovereignty of God cause me to reevaluate my role as a steward of God?

We will take the time to look at these questions specifically, but let's pull everything together and summarize the main points of what we have learned as we traveled our journey together. First and foremost, we gave a definition of sovereignty we used throughout this book. This was a definition we used the dictionary to help us verbalize while seeing that the elements of the definition were indeed found in the Scriptures as we saw how it applied to God.

1. God has inherent authority, power, and ability to do whatever He wants.
2. God answers to no man, no power, or to any other authority.
3. God has the right to make the rules and the power to enforce those rules on whomever He chooses.

This book sought to show God within these fundamental truths of sovereignty. We learned God's sovereignty means He has unlimited power to do anything He purposes. No power outside Him can cause Him to act a certain way or prevent Him from acting a certain way. God is truly in a class of one; there is none like Him. There is no exception to this. Man may defy God, but only because God, in His sovereignty, allows man to defy Him. And in a time of His choosing, God will exert His sovereignty over the disobedient by causing every knee to bow and every tongue to confess. No power can defy the sovereign God in perpetuity. There will be a day of reckoning in which the sovereign God will exert His sovereignty, and all disobedience will be brought fully under His subjection.

We learned God is held to no external standard. He is never put on trial, and no one can condemn Him. He never has to answer to any authority. The only standard that bears upon God is His own standard and His character. For example, God cannot lie because it is not in His nature to lie and not because He must obey an external standard. Sovereignty means that He and He alone is the ultimate source of all standards, and He can apply His standards upon whom He wishes. But no one can apply standards to God or force Him to live by anyone else's rules.

We learned God is just, loving, good, gracious, and merciful because those attributes define Who He is and not because He is expected to be those things by anyone. God does not live up to a standard; instead, He is the standard everyone must live up to. God's sovereignty means He has the power and authority to make the rules and requires obedience to His rules. His rules are not subject to our approval or our acceptance.

We learned God's sovereignty is inherent, meaning His sovereignty comes from Himself and is not granted by anyone or anything else. His unlimited, omnipotent power backs up his sovereignty. When it comes to man, God has

the right, power, and ability to determine every aspect of our lives and to expect our obedience to Him. Yet, in His sovereignty, our great God has demonstrated His perfect love for us, manifested by His selfless sacrifice, amazing grace, and tremendous mercy toward us.

This is our sovereign, perfect God. So, what does this mean for me?

How can living in the sovereignty of God help me conquer through my battle to overcome sin and temptation?

As we have seen in our study, it is not God's purpose for sin to reign over us. We understand God will allow us to choose our path, but because of His sovereignty, there will be a day of reckoning, and we will be judged by our actions. Yet, He has given us everything we need to overcome sin. He will transform us into a new creature through His grace and love if we choose to let Him. He will give us the strength to resist and overcome because Jesus has taken away the penalty due to us for our sins. When we accept His grace, we live with power, strength, and the ability to strengthen the spiritual man and subdue the carnal man. With Jesus as our High Priest, sin will not conquer us as long as we continue to walk in Him. Our dependence upon His sovereignty means He cannot fall short of helping us in our time of need. Because of His sovereignty over sin and death, we have confidence in Him to aid us in our time of need.

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16 ESV).

How can bowing the knee daily to a sovereign God equip me to persevere through any trial?

If God is truly sovereign, then there is no other place to go but to Him for a way to persevere through all trials. When Jesus asked the disciples if they would leave Him as others were leaving Him,

“Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:68-69 ESV).

In His sovereignty, God can either strengthen us to persevere, or He can remove the trial. It is His sovereign choice which He will choose. Whichever He decides, we can say with all confidence, “I can do all things through Him Who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” (Philippians 4:11-12 ESV).

We bow the knee to our sovereign God because through Him and Him alone, we can find the strength to do the things we cannot do without Him. We bow the knee to Him because when we are overwhelmed, He can shoulder our burdens for us (1 Peter 5:7). We bow the knee daily to Him because when we are not strong enough to continue, He gives us strength. We bow the knee because He “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” (Ephesians 3:20).

How does my free will intersect with the sovereignty of God?

God, in His sovereignty, has gifted man the ability to choose how to live our lives. He did not make us robots or mindless creatures. He made us with the ability to choose Him. Ultimately, God’s sovereignty will have the last word in our lives. Whether we choose to obey or not, we cannot deny the God who has the right to instruct us on how to live. We cannot ignore the standard that He sets before us with impunity. While the choice is ours to make, the consequences for good or evil will also be ours to own. So, while God will give us free will and is gracious in His longsuffering, there will come a time when His longsuffering will end. That will be the day of reckoning for the choices we have freely made. His sovereignty will have the last word over our lives and our eternity.

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness,” (2 Peter 3:9-11 ESV).

How will God’s sovereignty change how I view suffering and

unanswered prayers?

When we understand the sovereignty of God, we realize sovereignty means it is God's prerogative alone how to answer our prayers and what sufferings we will face. As Job learned, we can always ask God for relief, but we are never in a position to question Him or demand answers from Him. We cannot charge Him with wrongdoing or sin in how He chooses to respond to our prayers or suffering. We must remember God comes from a position of infinite love for us and infinite wisdom in all things. He can see things we cannot see, and He can use us and our circumstances for His glory in ways we may never be able to see. Truly, we are as far apart as the earth is from the sky. When we understand His sovereignty, we can say, "Not my will, but Yours be done," even when we have to say it when our sweat is as great drops of blood. We may not be able to see it, but we must trust that what God allows us to endure is for a reason. And we have this promise from Him: He will always step in to limit the trials and temptations if they reach a level that will break us. He can do this by stopping the trials, giving us the strength to endure, or changing our circumstances. We believe this because we know our God is sovereign, even over the suffering and unanswered prayers we endure.

"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13 ESV).

How will God's sovereignty realign how I look at my fellow man who is created in His image?

When we understand God's sovereignty over creation, including the creation of man, we come to believe He created man in His image. That means every man, woman, and child we meet is someone special. When we look into the eyes of any person, we should not see the things separating us; instead, we need to see the common bond we all share. When we begin to hate the politician who is against everything we believe, do we see the man or woman who is created in the image of God? We can hate what they stand for, but does that cause us also to hate the person God made in His image? When we see a person doing despicable acts, do we hate the person, or do we see a lost, wretched soul who has separated Himself from God by his sins? Do we see an image bearer of God walking toward eternal damnation and desperately want to pull Him to safety because he is made in the image of God? This is precisely how Jesus and Stephen could both say, "God, forgive them," as these people hated them to the point of murdering them.

Understanding the sovereignty of God teaches us to love the way He loves and to see all men the way He sees all men.

How will the sovereignty of God cause me to reevaluate my role as a steward of God?

God calls us all to be His stewards, placing talents into our hands according to our abilities. He determines our talents, but we choose what to do with them. We can ignore them and do our own thing. We can put them aside for now and party while the master is away. We can bury them in a hole to dig them up and return them to Him when He returns. Or we can bless God for the value He sees in us to make us a steward. If we understand His sovereignty, we will realize we always have value and we can always give value to God. Understanding the sovereignty of God means we see that we never fall through the cracks with God. We can never pull the wool over His eyes with our stewardship. We are never forgotten, never underestimated, and never mistreated. He puts us exactly where He wants us, and He can be glorified in whatever stewardship we perform for Him. Just listen to what the sovereign God says about our stewardship:

“But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.” (1 Corinthians 12:18 ESV).

And

“For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.” (Mark 9:41 ESV).

No matter how great or small our stewardship is, when we understand His sovereignty, we will serve Him in the best way we know how. We will long to serve Him because we eagerly desire to hear the words of our Lord say to us,

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:21b ESV).

And these are some of the questions that I said we would discuss in our study of the sovereignty of God. I hope and pray this book has caused you to take a deeper look at what God’s sovereignty means and how magnificent our God truly is. Perhaps we have underestimated Him at times and forgotten just how amazing and awesome our God truly is. Perhaps we have let our

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culture paint a picture of a weak, passive, and permissive God we can easily manipulate. Perhaps we have ignored the words of warning He has left for us and come to believe, “I can do what I want. God loves me and will never condemn me for this or that.” Through this study, I hope we realize we should not see God as someone we can do as little as possible for and still be accepted by Him; instead, we are in awe of His sovereignty, and we seek earnestly to always be in His presence.

If we do this and fully respect God’s sovereignty over all things, we will respond in humility to Him, and He will lift us up. We will recognize our weaknesses, and He will make us strong. We will come to Him every day with our hands outstretched because we know He is the provider of everything we need daily. We will walk with Him daily because we know He will lift us up when we fall. And we will know that when we serve a sovereign God, who else is there we can go to but Him?

May God bless you as you grow deeper in your love and complete submission to the most sovereign God!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Eldridge has written five books, including, *The Sovereignty of God* and *Tuesdays With Tony*, a collection of spiritual posts he publishes on Facebook. He has been a full-time minister and taught Bible classes at various churches. He currently attends the Campbell Road Church of Christ in Garland, TX. He is married to his wife of 23 years, Emily, and he has 16-year-old twin boys, Connor and Landon, and a 6-year-old son, Ryder. Tony and his family live in Wylie, TX.