

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 18: What is God's sovereignty?

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Some time ago I was having a conversation with Dr. Archibald Hart, Professor of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary's Graduate School of Psychology. He told me that anxiety is the number one mental health problem for women in the U.S. and is second only to substance abuse for men. He said that modern-day anxiety is not so much being afraid of spiders or not taking risks but rather "manifests itself in the form of restlessness, irritability, drivenness—the idea that when I relax I feel restless. The question is how quickly do you fall asleep? How many hours of sleep do you obtain each night? People today have a great deal of difficulty in being at peace, being tranquil. It's this lack of tranquility (which is related to stress) that constitutes modern-day anxiety and is manifesting itself more in individuals [such as] business executives, the ones manifesting symptoms of anxiety more than anyone else, particularly for panic anxiety. Critical age: about 40. A panic attack simulates a heart attack."

More recently, educators are addressing a significant concern about the rise in depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and social phobias in teen-agers.¹ "The acuity of mental illness among students has sharpened, they say, and it's striking ever younger children, though many quietly bear the stress for years before snapping."² They add that the increasing stress is seen across all subcultures, not just among the affluent but over the whole socioeconomic spectrum; "the trend appears to cut across social class, income level, ethnicity and academic ability."³ Around one in six people experience clinical depression sometime in their lives; most significant mental health issues begin before age 24.⁴

Reflecting on these reports, in addition to the useful contribution many make in the health sciences to aid people in managing the anxieties which arise in their lives, I could not help but think of our greatest resource. "God," the Psalmist writes, "is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.... Be still and know that I am God." (46:1-2, 10)

A child feels no more secure than when enveloped in the arms of a loving father who is perceived as being powerful enough to protect him or her. In this series we've already seen that God's essence is love. How helpful it will be to also recognize two other related characteristics of our loving Father which are essentially one but seen from two perspectives: his sovereign will and his sovereign power.

¹ Sharon Noguchi, McClatchy-Tribune, "Educators: Depression, anxiety, social phobias rise in kids" (Loveland, CO: *Reporter-Herald*, February 16, 2014), p. D4.

² Noguchi, p. D4.

³ Noguchi, p. D4.

⁴ Maria Cheng, The Associated Press, "Test could predict which teens get depression" (Loveland, CO: *Reporter-Herald*, February 18, 2014), p. A10.

God is sovereign.

This characteristic of God refers to his rule and control over all his creation. Everything that exists is the result of God's causing it or allowing it to be; hence he has independent and absolute authority over it all to govern as pleases him. Further, he has been doing so since the beginning and will do so forever. As the one in charge of all beings and what they do, God establishes the parameters in which the universe functions and the rules within which spiritual and human beings live and work. He holds them accountable for not obeying those rules.

God's sovereignty involves two dimensions: his sovereign will and his sovereign power. The former is the exercise of God's authority to accomplish what pleases him, what he sees is best for all, and achieve his purposes. His sovereign power is his total and complete ability to produce what he wills without being thwarted by any being or circumstance in all creation. (Job 42:2) How comforting is that?! What God purposes and promises he provides. What God says he can deliver. Talk about Biblical theology being practical!

God's Sovereign Will

To employ a human analogy, the owner has the right to run his or her business as he or she sees fit, albeit within certain limits. However, having the right doesn't mean the human owner always has the ability to run the business as he or she wills and would like to do so, e.g., due to fair and unfair governmental restraints, limited finances, and employee constraints. God's sovereign will refers to the fact that the Creator, Owner, and Ruler of the universe has the right, the unlimited freedom and prerogative, to set the rules for what he desires and to run the world as he sees best; his sovereign power gives him the ability to carry out whatever he determines to do. His sovereign will also involves certain decrees he has made that will stand for all time and eternity.

It is difficult to discuss God's sovereign will without also considering his power, as we see in Scripture, but we focus mainly on his will in these paragraphs to understand what the Bible means by God's sovereignty. His sovereign will is taught together with his sovereign power implied in such passages as Job 42:2, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted." God alone is sovereign; there is none beside him. Christianity is not a dualistic religion. God and Satan are not peers; Satan is a little peanut compared to God. Satan, the demons in his cohort, and all human adversaries are entirely under God's control. (Job 41:10b-11) Remember also Isaiah 55:8-11, which concludes with the comforting reality: "so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

There is nothing God cannot do that he wills to do. "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." (Isaiah 46:10) The last part of that statement is significant; remember it

when someone who doesn't think carefully enough asks the old question: "If God is all powerful, can he make a rock he cannot lift?" Most, if not all, the people who've asked me that question, do it in a way, and with a smirk and an air of pseudosophistication, that indicates they believe they are profound thinkers who've come up with a deep and weighty insight that no one else has ever considered and that is sure to stump you. The answer of course is that the question is absurd. Always question the premise or premises of a statement. If the statement is based on a flawed premise, or more than one, such as in this case, it is illogical and you are neither obligated to, nor should you, choose between or among the flawed options that flow from the unwarranted premises, one of which in this case is the assumption that God has something to prove and another is the failure to distinguish between God's power and his will. By definition, God's being almighty means that he can do anything *that is in his will to do*. He has no desire or intention of defying the physical, spiritual, and moral laws of the universe that he has created.

Some ask, "Can God sin?" This question is another example of the absurd use of human language and logic; it and the other such questions are answered as above: it is not in his will to sin, for that is against his character and he will not deny himself and compromise his integrity. (2 Timothy 2:13, 1 Samuel 15:29) Though God's rationality is far superior to ours (Isaiah 55:8-9), nevertheless he communicates reasonably and logically so we can understand him. As the great 19th century theologian William Shedd wisely wrote, "God can do anything that does not imply a logical impossibility [where for example] the predicate is contradictory to the subject... These are not objects of power, and therefore it is really no limitation of the Divine omnipotence to say that it cannot create them... A logical impossibility is, in truth, a nonentity; and to say that God cannot create a nonentity, is not a limitation or denial of power."

God's Sovereign Power: Omnipotence

In this series on who God is and what he is like, we've looked carefully at many of his attributes or characteristics. In the literature of historic Christian theology, three of his characteristics have been described with the prefix "omni," from the Latin word, *omnis*, meaning all. Two of these attributes we've reflected on are his omniscience, or being all knowing, and his omnipresence, or his being everywhere. In this section we'll consider the third "omni," his omnipotence, or his being all powerful.

The power to bring about what he wills is referred to as God's omnipotence, i.e., his being all powerful; he is almighty. He can back up what he says. In fact in both languages in which the Bible was first written, the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, the word translated "word" (*dabar* in Hebrew and *logos* in Greek) also means "deed." Thus, in the Bible word and deed are a unity. God's word results in concomitant action, and he expects this of us as well. (Recall the many condemnations of hypocrisy and the value placed on doing what we say.)

Throughout his Word God reveals himself as being omnipotent. We see this dimension of his being already in the names he has given himself, e.g., El Shaddai in Hebrew means God Almighty. (Genesis 17:1) The angel, Gabriel, disclosed that “nothing is impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37) He is fully capable and can do all that is within his will to do. (Matthew 19:26; 1 John 5:14-15)

The New Testament reveals that the power of God is seen in Jesus Christ who was crucified and resurrected from the dead and who is “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title than can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything.” (1 Corinthians 1:24; Ephesians 1:19-23) This is why power is not an issue for believers trying to be Jesus’ disciples. This reality frees us from the felt need to engage in such power plays as trying to manipulate and control others.

Further benefits for us

Therefore, we don’t have to worry. All things are under his control. When I become concerned about all the uncertainties, unpredictable variables, and evils in the world, what great comfort emerges when I contemplate the fact that God is sovereign and that he loves us! It doesn’t get any better than that this side of glory!

Stephen Charnock has recorded some helpful observations about God’s sovereignty. “How comfortable it is to think that you have a God that can do what He pleases; nothing is so difficult but He can effect, nothing so strong but He can overrule! You need not dread men, since you have One to restrain them; nor fear devils, since you have One to chain them. Our evils can never be so great to oppress us, as His power is great to deliver us.”

God forbids us to turn to mediums (Deuteronomy 18:10-22), astrology (Isaiah 47:13-15; Jeremiah 10:1-3; Psalm 121), and false gods (Isaiah 41:22-44; 44:6-20). One reason why he forbids us to do so is that he loves us and doesn’t want us to be led astray to those who are not real, who can’t help us. They cannot protect people but can be a part of their destruction.

Throughout the world multitudes of non-Christians live in fear of natural phenomena. How comforted they would be with such texts in God’s Word as Psalm 121:5-8 that assure us that the sun, moon, stars and all else cannot harm us because of God’s sovereign, omnipotent, and all-sufficient care for us. He is always awake and alert to our needs, and he isn’t going away anywhere; he’ll be here for us everywhere and forever!

Let us thank God for his sovereignty. Though sin is pervasive and very influential, nothing will ever occur that God cannot control and use in the accomplishment of his purposes. We don’t have to worry about anything occurring that will destroy us. Even when we do encounter problems, God keeps them manageable; he won’t let anything

become too much for us. God is fully capable of helping us manage and overcome, in one way or another, whatever problems, difficulties, and challenges we experience.

It is because he alone is sovereign, ruling over all, that he is able to give us genuine freedom and is not threatened by our misuse of it. We're more secure in the knowledge that human freedom is exercised under the sovereign control of God. Because God is sovereign, we can be secure in our sense of well being. With that security which comes from recognizing that God is in control of all things (and remembering his other characteristics, especially his love for us and his goodness), we realize that we don't have to try to be in control of everything, including other people, events, and circumstances. We can avoid manipulation. We can affirm and be comfortable in others' freedom. We don't need to try to run their lives. This is undoubtedly one reason why God has revealed in his Word that we should only marry other believers in Christ. (2 Corinthians 6:14) We would be opening ourselves up to many limitations by being unequally yoked with someone with a much more limited psychological and spiritual framework. And there are many other reasons to follow that command Paul gave the Corinthians.

God's omnipotence will continue forever. It will not diminish. (Isaiah 40:28) There will never be an occasion where he will be exhausted, weakened, or out of breath. Therefore, we can count on his ability to help us in all circumstances at all times through all eternity.

God's sovereignty blesses us not only in this phase of life but will also bless us for the rest of eternity. One might ask, "Is there any possibility that multitudes in hell could revolt against God's judgment, storm the new heaven and earth, and corrupt it, filling it with evil forever?" This question presupposes several unwarranted assumptions, such as the likelihood of that amount of cooperation among evil doers, but if a revolt did ever occur, and the forces of evil would try to break out of hell and force their way into heaven to raise havoc there, it would not ever be successful—not even close—God is sovereign and almighty. They would not be able to overturn his decisions. God is not the titular head of a democracy. He is not subject to any person or group; he is sovereign. His Word stands forever. If such a rebellion would ever be attempted, God has the authority and power to execute all his judgments. Further, in Luke 16:26 we read of a "great chasm [that] has been fixed" to prohibit passage between hell and heaven.

No one has any claim on God. No one owns him or ever could. He cannot be bought or bribed.

So let not your heart be troubled. Sleep well tonight, knowing that God is sovereign, that he loves you, and that he will care for you always and through all eternity.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What does it mean that God is sovereign?
2. Explain the difference and relationship between God's sovereign will and his sovereign power.

3. How does it help you, what are some practical benefits, to know that God is sovereign?