

# THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

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# CHAPTER ONE

## GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY DEFINED

“Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Thine; Thine is the kingdom, O LORD, *and Thou art exalted as Head* above all” (1 Chron. 29:11).

The Sovereignty of God is an expression that once was generally understood. It was a phrase commonly used in religious literature. It was a theme frequently expounded in the pulpit. It was a truth which brought comfort to many hearts, and gave virility and stability to Christian character. But, today, to make mention of God's Sovereignty is, in many quarters, to speak in an unknown tongue. Were we to announce from the average pulpit that the subject of our discourse would be the Sovereignty of God, it would sound very much as though we had borrowed a phrase from one of the dead languages. Alas! that it should be so. Alas! that the doctrine which is the key to history, the

interpreter of Providence, the warp and woof of Scripture, and the foundation of Christian theology should be so sadly neglected and so little understood.

The Sovereignty of God. What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the god-hood of God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him what doest Thou? (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in Heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will (Psa. 115:3). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is “The Governor among the nations” (Psa. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the “Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.

How different is the God of the Bible from the God of modern Christendom! The conception of Deity which prevails most widely today, even among those who profess to give heed to the Scriptures, is a miserable caricature, a blasphemous travesty of the Truth. The God of the twentieth century is a helpless, effeminate being who commands the respect of no really thoughtful man. The God of the popular mind is the creation of maudlin sentimentality. The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than of awe-inspiring reverence. To say that God the Father has purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died with the express intention of saving the whole human race, and that God the Holy Spirit is now seeking to win the world to Christ; when, as a matter of common observation, it is apparent that the great majority of our fellowmen are dying in sin, and passing into a hopeless eternity; is to say that God the Father is *disappointed*, that God the Son is *dissatisfied*, and that God the Holy Spirit is *defeated*. We have stated the issue baldly, but there is no escaping the conclusion. To argue that God is “trying His best” to save all mankind, but that the majority of men will not let Him save them, is to insist that the will of the Creator is impotent, and that the will of the creature is omnipotent. To throw the blame, as many do, upon the Devil, does not remove the difficulty, for if Satan is defeating the purpose of God, then, Satan is Almighty and God is no longer the Supreme Being.

To declare that the Creator’s original plan has been frustrated by sin, is to *dethrone* God. To suggest that God was taken by surprise in Eden and that He is now attempting to remedy an unforeseen calamity, is to *degrade* the Most High to the level of a finite, erring mortal. To argue that man is a free moral agent and the determiner of his own destiny, and that therefore he has the power to checkmate his Maker, is to *strip* God of the attribute of Omnipotence. To say that the creature has burst the bounds assigned by his Creator, and that God is now practically a helpless Spectator before the sin and suffering entailed by Adam’s fall, is to *repudiate* the express declaration of Holy Writ, namely, “Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee: the remainder of wrath *shalt* Thou restrain” (Psa. 76:10). In a word, to deny the Sovereignty of God is to enter upon a path which, if followed to its logical terminus, is to arrive at blank atheism.

The Sovereignty of the God of Scripture is absolute, irresistible, infinite. When we say that God is Sovereign we affirm His right to govern the universe which He has made for His own glory, just as He pleases. We affirm that *His right* is the right of the Potter over the clay, i. e., that He may mold that clay into whatsoever form He chooses, fashioning out of *the same lump* one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor. We affirm that He is under no rule or law outside of His own will and nature, *that God is a law* unto Himself, and that He is under no obligation to give an account of His matters to any.

Sovereignty characterizes the whole Being of God. He is Sovereign in all His attributes. *He is Sovereign in the exercise of His* power. His power is exercised *as* He wills, *when* He wills, *where* He wills. This fact is evidenced on every page of Scripture. For a long season that power appears to be dormant, and then it is put forth in irresistible might. Pharaoh dared to hinder Israel from going forth to worship Jehovah in the wilderness—what happened? God exercised His power, His people were delivered and their cruel task-masters slain. But a little later, the Amalekites dared to attack these same Israelites in the wilderness, and what happened? Did God put forth His power on this

occasion and display His hand as He did at the Red Sea? Were these enemies of His people promptly overthrown and destroyed? No, on the contrary, the Lord swore that He would “have war with Amalek *from generation to generation*” (Exo. 17:16). Again, when Israel entered the land of Canaan, *God’s* power was signally displayed. The city of Jericho barred their progress—what happened? Israel did not draw a bow nor strike a blow: the Lord stretched forth His hand and the walls fell down flat. But the miracle was never repeated! *No other city fell after this manner*. Every other city had to be captured by the sword!

Many other instances might be adduced illustrating the Sovereign exercise of God’s power. Take one other example. God put forth His power and David was delivered from Goliath, the giant; the mouths of the lions were closed and Daniel escaped unhurt; the three Hebrew children were cast into the burning fiery furnace and came forth unharmed and unscorched. *But God’s power did not always interpose for the deliverance of His people*, for we read: “*And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented*” (Heb. 11:36, 37). But why? Why were not these men of faith delivered like the others? Or, why were not the others suffered to be killed like these? Why should God’s power interpose and rescue some and not the others? Why allow Stephen to be stoned to death, and then deliver Peter from prison?

*God is Sovereign in the delegation of His power to others*. Why did God endow Methuselah with a vitality which enabled him to outlive all his contemporaries? Why did God impart to Samson a physical strength which no other human has ever possessed? Again; it is written, “*But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth*” (Deut. 8:18), but God does not bestow this power on all alike. Why not? Why has He given such power to men like Morgan, Carnegie, Rockefeller? The answer to all of these questions is, Because God is Sovereign, and being Sovereign He does as He pleases.

*God is Sovereign in the exercise of His mercy*. Necessarily so, for mercy is directed by the *will* of Him that showeth mercy. Mercy is not a *right* to which man is entitled. Mercy is that adorable attribute of God by which He pities and relieves the wretched. But under the righteous government of God no one is wretched who does not *deserve* to be so. The objects of mercy, then, are those who are miserable, and all misery is the result of *sin*, hence the miserable are deserving of punishment not mercy. To speak of *deserving mercy* is a contradiction of terms.

God bestows His mercies on whom He pleases and withholds them as seemeth good unto Himself. A remarkable illustration of this fact is seen in the manner that God responded to the prayers of two men offered under very similar circumstances. Sentence of death was passed upon Moses for one act of disobedience, and he besought the Lord for a reprieve. But was his desire gratified? No; he told Israel, “*The LORD was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me: and the LORD said unto me, Let it suffice thee*” (Deut. 3:26). Now mark the second case: “*In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live. Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the LORD, saying, I beseech Thee, O LORD, remember now how I have walked before Thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in Thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore. And it came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying, Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of my people, Thus saith the LORD, the God of David thy father, *I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go unto the house of the LORD. And I will add unto thy days fifteen years**” (2 Kings 20:1-6). Both of these men had the sentence of death in themselves, and both prayed earnestly unto the Lord for a reprieve: the one wrote: “*The Lord would not hear me,*” and died; but to the other it was said, “*I have heard thy prayer,*” and his life was spared. What an illustration and exemplification of the truth expressed in Romans 9:15!—“*For He saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*”

The Sovereign exercise of God’s mercy—pity shown to the wretched—was displayed when Jehovah became flesh and tabernacled among men. Take one illustration. During one of the Feasts of the Jews, the Lord Jesus went

up to Jerusalem. He came to the Pool of Bethesda where lay “a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.” Among this “great multitude” there was “a certain man which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.” What happened? “When Jesus saw *him* He, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto *him*, Wilt thou be made whole? The impotent man answer Him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but when I am coming, another steppeth down before me. Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked” (John 5:3-9). Why was this one man singled out from all the others? We are not told that he cried “Lord, have mercy on me.” There is not a word in the narrative which intimates that this man possessed any qualifications which entitled him to receive special favor. Here then was a case of the Sovereign exercise of Divine mercy, for it was just as easy for Christ to heal the whole of that “great multitude” as this one “certain man.” But He did not. He put forth His power and relieved the wretchedness of this one particular sufferer, and for some reason known only to Himself, He declined to do the same for the others. Again, we say, what an illustration and exemplification of Romans 9:15!—“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

*God is Sovereign in the exercise of His love.* Ah! that is a hard saying, who then can receive it? It is written, “A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from Heaven” (John 3:27). When we say that God is Sovereign in the exercise of His love, we mean that He loves whom He chooses. God does not love everybody\*; if He did, He would love the Devil. Why does not God love the Devil? Because there is nothing in him *to love*; because there is nothing in him to *attract* the heart of God. Nor is there anything to *attract* God’s love in any of the fallen sons of Adam, for *all* of them are, by nature, “children of *wrath*” (Eph. 2:3). If then there is nothing in any member of the human race to attract God’s love,

\*John 3:16 will be examined later.

and if, notwithstanding, He *does* love *some*, then it necessarily follows that the cause of His love must be found in Himself, which is only another way of saying that the exercise of God’s love towards the fallen sons of men is according to His own good pleasure.

In the final analysis, the exercise of God’s love *must* be traced back to His Sovereignty or, otherwise, He would *love by rule*; and if He loved by rule, then is He under a *law of love*, and if He is under a *law* of love then is He not supreme, but is Himself *ruled* by law. “But,” it may be asked, “Surely you do not *deny* that God loves the entire human family?” We reply, it is written, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (Rom. 9:13). If then God loved Jacob and hated Esau, and that before they were born or had done either good or evil, then the *reason* for His love was not in them, but in Himself.

That the exercise of God’s love is according to His own Sovereign pleasure is also clear from the language of Ephesians 1:3-5, where we read, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him *in love*. *Having predestinated* us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself *according to the good pleasure of His will*.” It was “*in love*” that God the Father predestined His chosen ones unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, “according”—according to what? According to *some excellency* He discovered in them? No. What then? According to what He *foresaw* they would become? No; mark carefully the inspired answer—“According to the good pleasure of *His will*.”

We are not unmindful of the fact that men have invented the distinction between God’s love of *complacency* and His love of *compassion*, but this *is an* invention pure and simple. *Scripture* terms the latter God’s “pity” (see Matt. 18:33), and “He is *kind unto* the unthankful and the evil” (Luke 6:35)!

*God is Sovereign in the exercise of His grace.* This of necessity, for grace is favor shown to the *undeserving*, yea, to the Hell-deserving. Grace is the antithesis of justice. Justice demands the impartial enforcement of law. Justice requires that each shall receive his legitimate due, neither more nor less. Justice bestows no favors and is no respecter of persons. Justice, as such, shows no pity and knows no mercy. But after justice has been fully satisfied,

grace flows forth. Divine grace is not exercised at the expense of justice, but “grace reigns through righteousness” (Rom. 5:21), and if grace “*reigns*,” then is grace Sovereign.

Grace has been defined as the unmerited favor of God\*; and if unmerited, then none can claim it as their inalienable *right*. If grace is unearned and undeserved, then none are *entitled* to it. If grace is a gift, then none can *demand* it. Therefore, as salvation is by grace, the free gift of God, then He bestows it on whom He pleases. Because salvation is by grace, the very chief of sinners is not beyond the reach of Divine mercy. Because salvation is by grace, boasting is excluded and God gets all the glory.

The Sovereign exercise of grace is illustrated on nearly every page of Scripture. The Gentiles are left to walk in their own ways while Israel becomes the covenant people of Jehovah. Ishmael the firstborn is cast out comparatively unblest, while Isaac the son of his parents’ old age is made the child of promise. Esau the generous-hearted and forgiving-spirited is denied the blessing, though he sought it carefully with tears, while the worm Jacob receives the inheritance and is fashioned into a vessel of honor. So in the New Testament. Divine Truth is hidden from the wise and prudent, but is revealed to babes. The Pharisees and Sadducees

\*An esteemed friend who kindly read through this book in its manuscript form, and to whom we are indebted for a number of excellent suggestions, has pointed out that grace is something more than “unmerited favor.” To feed a tramp who calls on me is “unmerited favor,” but it is scarcely *grace*. But suppose that after *robbing* me I should feed this starving tramp—that would be “grace.” Grace, then, is favor shown where there is positive de-merit in the one receiving it.

are left to go their own way, while publicans and harlots are drawn by the cords of love.

In a remarkable manner Divine grace was exercised at the time of the Saviour’s birth. The incarnation of God’s Son was one of the greatest events in the history of the universe, and yet its actual occurrence was not made known to all mankind; instead, it was specially revealed to the Bethlehem shepherds and wise men of the East. And this was prophetic and indicative of the entire course of this dispensation, for even today Christ is not made known to all. It would have been an easy matter for God to have sent a company of angels to *every nation* and to have announced the birth of His Son. But He did not. God could have readily attracted the attention of all mankind to the “star”; but He did not. Why? Because God is Sovereign and dispenses His favors as He pleases. Note particularly the two classes to whom the birth of the Saviour *was* made known, namely, the most *unlikely* classes—illiterate shepherds and heathen from a far country. No angel stood before the Sanhedrin and announced the advent of Israel’s Messiah! No “star” appeared unto the scribes and lawyers as they, in their pride and self-righteousness, searched the Scriptures! They searched diligently to find out where He should be born, and yet it was not made known *to them* when He was actually come. What a display of Divine Sovereignty—the illiterate shepherds singled out for peculiar honor, and the learned and eminent passed by! And *why* was the birth of the Saviour revealed to these foreigners, and not to those in whose midst He was born? See in this a wonderful foreshadowing of God’s dealings with our race throughout the entire Christian dispensation—Sovereign in the exercise of His grace, bestowing His favors on whom He pleases, often on the most unlikely and unworthy. \*

It has been pointed out to us that God’s Sovereignty was signally displayed in His choice of *the place* where His Son was born. Not to Greece or Italy did the Lord of Glory come, but to the insignificant land of Palestine! Not in Jerusalem—the royal city—was Immanuel born, but in Bethlehem, which was “*little* among the thousands (of towns and villages) in Judah” (Micah 5:2)! And it was in despised *Nazareth* that He grew up!! Truly, God’s ways are not ours.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN CREATION

“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honor, and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for *Thy pleasure they are and were created*” (Rev. 4:11).

Having shown that Sovereignty characterizes the whole Being of God, let us now observe how it marks all His ways and dealings.

In the great expanse of eternity which stretches behind Genesis 1:1, the universe was unborn and creation existed only in the mind of the great Creator. In His Sovereign majesty God dwelt all alone. We refer to that far distant period before the heavens and the earth were created. There were then no angels to hymn God’s praises, no creatures to occupy His notice, no rebels to be brought into subjection. The great God was all alone amid the awful Silence of His own vast universe. But even at that time, if time it could be called, God was Sovereign. He might create or not create *according to His own good pleasure*. He might create this way or that way; He might create one world or one million worlds, and who was there to resist His will? He might call into existence a million different creatures and place them on *absolute equality*, endowing them with the same faculties and placing them in the same environment; or, He might create a million creatures each differing from the others, and possessing nothing in common save their creaturehood, and who was there to challenge His right? If He so pleased, He might call into existence a world so immense that its dimensions were utterly beyond finite computation; and were He so disposed, He might create an organism so small that nothing but the most powerful microscope could reveal its existence to human eyes. It was His Sovereign right to create, on the one hand, the exalted seraphim to burn around His throne, and on the other hand, the tiny insect which dies the same hour that it is born. If the mighty God chose to have *one vast gradation* in His universe, from loftiest seraph to creeping reptile, from revolving worlds to floating atoms, from macrocosm to microcosm, instead of *making everything uniform*, who was there to question His Sovereign pleasure?

Behold then the exercise of Divine Sovereignty long before man ever saw the light. With whom took God counsel in the creation and disposition of His creatures? See the birds as they fly through the air, the beasts as they roam the earth, the fishes as they swim in the sea, and then ask, Who was it that made them to differ? Was it not their Creator who *Sovereignly* assigned their various locations and adaptations to them!

*Turn your eye to the heavens* and observe the mysteries of Divine Sovereignty which there confront the thoughtful beholder: “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star *differeth from* another star in glory” (1 Cor. 15:41). But why should they? Why should the sun be more glorious than all the other planets? Why should there be stars of the first magnitude and others of the tenth? Why such amazing *inequalities*? Why should some of the heavenly bodies be *more favorably placed* than others in their relation to the sun? And why should there be “shooting stars,” falling stars, “wandering stars” (Jude 13), in a word, *ruined* stars? And the only possible answer is, “For Thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

*Come now to our own planet*. Why should two thirds of its surface be covered with water, and why should so much of its remaining third be unfit for human cultivation or habitation? Why should there be vast stretches of marshes, deserts and ice-fields? Why should one country be so inferior, topographically, from another? Why should one be fertile, and another almost barren? Why should one be rich in minerals and another own none? Why should the climate of one be congenial and healthy, and another uncongenial and unhealthy? Why should one abound in rivers and lakes, and another be almost devoid of them? Why should one be constantly troubled with earthquakes, and another be almost entirely free from them? Why? Because thus it pleased the Creator and Upholder of all *things*.

*Look at the animal kingdom* and note the wondrous variety. What comparison is possible between the lion and the lamb, the bear and the kid, the elephant and the mouse? Some, like the horse and the dog, are gifted with great

intelligence; while others, like sheep and swine, are almost devoid of it. Why? Some are designed to be beasts of burden, while others enjoy a life of freedom. But why should the mule and the donkey be shackled to a life of drudgery while the lion and tiger are allowed to roam the jungle at their pleasure? Some are fit for food, others unfit; some are beautiful, others ugly; some are endowed with great strength, others are quite helpless; some are fleet of foot, others can scarcely crawl—contrast the hare and the tortoise; some are of use to man, others appear to be quite valueless; some live for centuries, others a few months at most; some are tame, others fierce. But why all these variations and differences? What is true of the animals is equally true of the birds and fishes.

But consider now *the vegetable kingdom*. Why should roses have thorns, and lilies grow without them? Why should one flower emit a fragrant aroma and another have none? Why should one tree bear fruit which is wholesome and another that which is poisonous? Why should one vegetable be capable of enduring frost and another wither under it? Why should one apple tree be loaded with fruit, and another tree of the same age and in the same orchard be almost barren? Why should one plant flower a dozen times in a year and another bear blossoms but once a century? Truly, “*whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did He in Heaven, and in the earth, in the seas, and all deep places*” (Psa. 135:6).

*Consider the angelic hosts*. Surely we shall find uniformity here. But no; there, as elsewhere, the same Sovereign pleasure of the Creator is displayed. Some are higher in rank than others; some are more powerful than others; some are nearer to God than others. Scripture reveals a definite and well-defined gradation in the angelic orders. From arch-angel, past seraphim and cherubim, we come to “principalities and powers” (Eph. 3:10), and from principalities and powers to “rulers” (Eph. 6:12), and then to the angels themselves, and even among them we read of “the *elect* angels” (1 Tim. 5:21). Again we ask, Why this *inequality*, this difference in rank and order? And all we can say is “Our God is in the heavens, He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased” (Psa. 115:3).

If then we see the Sovereignty of God displayed throughout all creation, why should it be thought a strange thing if we behold it operating in the midst of *the human family*? Why should it be thought strange if to one God is pleased to give five talents and to another only one? Why should it be thought strange if one is born with a robust constitution and another of the same parents is frail and sickly? Why should it be thought strange if Abel is cut off in his prime, while Cain is suffered to live on for many years? Why should it be thought strange that some should be born black and others white; some be born idiots and others with high intellectual endowments; some be born constitutionally lethargic and others full of energy; some be born with a temperament that is selfish, fiery, egotistical, others who are naturally self-sacrificing, submissive and meek? Why should it be thought strange if some are qualified by nature to lead and rule, while others are only fitted to follow and serve? Heredity and environment cannot account for all these variations and inequalities. No; it is *God* who maketh one to differ from another. Why should He? “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight” must be our reply.

Learn then this basic truth, that the Creator is absolute Sovereign, executing His own will, performing His own pleasure, and considering nought but His own glory. “*The LORD hath made all things FOR HIMSELF*” (Prov. 16:4). And had He not a perfect *right* to? Since *God is God*, who dare challenge His prerogative? To murmur against Him is rank rebellion. To question His ways is to impugn His wisdom. To criticize Him is sin of the deepest dye. Have we forgotten *who* He is? Behold, “All nations before Him as are nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God?” (Isa. 40:17, 18).