

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

(LESSON FIVE)

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The question may be asked, "Who is regulating affairs on the earth today? Is it God? Is it the Devil? Is it man? It is likely that many persons would readily acknowledge that God reigns supreme in Heaven. That He reigns supreme on the earth is not however so readily acknowledged even by persons who call themselves Christians.

When we examine what is happening in our world today we are confronted with scenes of chaos and confusion on every hand. Everything, everywhere appears to be out of joint, topsy-turvy. We are seeing the fulfilment of Paul's prophecy in **2 Timothy 3:1-5**: "*But understand this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, savage, opposed to what is good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, loving pleasure rather than loving God. They will maintain the outward appearance of religion but will have repudiated its power. So avoid people like these*" (**New English Translation**). Murder and mayhem are pervasive; governments are in trouble; civilization itself seems to be a failure; everywhere there is war. Does all of this convey the impression that God is really in control?

When we examine what is happening in our churches we find that many Christians do not believe in the absolute sovereignty of God. Their scepticism is understandable to a certain degree. They are consistently advised from the pulpits of the churches they attend that the God of heaven is full of gracious intentions; that He is earnestly and sincerely desirous of pouring out His blessings on all persons; that it is and has always been His divine purpose and plan to save every human being that has ever lived. And yet, for some reason, He is unable to carry out what He desires to do, indeed what He has purposed and planned to do, because human beings will not allow Him to do so! If this is indeed the case, then we may come to the conclusion that God is not really sovereign, for His desires, purposes and plans may be effectively prevented either by the Devil or by man.

Who is really in control on the earth? What does the Bible - the Word of God say concerning the sovereignty of God? If we believe the plain and positive declarations of Scripture, no room is left for uncertainty. They state unequivocally that God is on the throne of the universe and that He is directing all things after the counsel of His own will. They declare that God created all things and that He rules sovereignly over all the works of His hands. They proclaim that God is Almighty, and that He unfailingly accomplishes all that He purposes and plans.

The following passages declare the sovereignty of God not only in the general sweep of history but in the particulars of individual lives:

Deuteronomy 32:39

"See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand."

2 Chronicles 20:5-6

"And Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, And said, O LORD God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?"

Job 23:13-14

"But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth. For he performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him."

The **New International Version** renders the passage as follows:

“But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases. He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store.”

The **New Living Translation** provides this rendering: *“But once he has made his decision, who can change his mind? Whatever he wants to do, he does. So he will do to me whatever he has planned. He controls my destiny.”*

Job 42:1-2

“Then Job answered the LORD, and said, I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee.”

The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows: *“Then Job answered the LORD: I know that you can do all things;no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”*

Psalms 22:28

“For the kingdom is the LORD’s: and he is the governor among the nations.”

Psalms 75:5-7

“Lift not up your horn on high: speak not with a stiff neck. For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.”

Psalms 95:1-7

“O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.”

Psalms 103:19

“The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.”

Psalms 115:3

“But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.”

Psalms 135:5-6

“For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.”

Proverbs 16:9

“A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.”

Proverbs 16:33

“The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.”

The **New Living Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall.”*

Proverbs 19:21

“There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.”

Proverbs 20:24

“Man’s goings are of the LORD; how can a man then understand his own way?”

The **New English Translation** renders this verse as follows: *“The steps of a person are ordained by the LORD — so how can anyone understand his own way?”*

Proverbs 21:1

“The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turns it whithersoever He will.”

Isaiah 14:24

“The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand.”

Isaiah 43:13

“Yea, before the day was I am he; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall let it?”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“From this day forward I am he; no one can deliver from my power; I will act, and who can prevent it?”*

Isaiah 46:9-10

“Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.”

Jeremiah 32:26-27

“Then came the word of the LORD unto Jeremiah, saying, Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?”

Lamentations 3:37

“Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not?”

Daniel 2:20-21

“Daniel answered and said, Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his: And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding.”

Daniel 4:17

“This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men.”

Daniel 4:34-35

“And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?”

Amos 3:6

“Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?”

Romans 9:17-21

“For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?”

The **New Living Translation** renders this passage as follows: *“For the Scriptures say that God told Pharaoh, ‘I have appointed you for the very purpose of displaying my power in you and to spread my fame throughout the earth.’ So you see, God chooses to show mercy to some, and he chooses to harden the hearts of others so they refuse to listen. Well then, you might say, ‘Why does God blame people for not responding? Haven’t they simply done what he makes them do?’ No, don’t say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn’t he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into?”*

Ephesians 1:10-11

“That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.”

Ezekiel 29:18-20

“Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon caused his army to serve a great service against Tyrus: every head was made bald, and every shoulder was peeled: yet had he no wages, nor his army, for Tyrus, for the service that he had served against it: Therefore, thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will give the land of Egypt unto Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and he shall take her multitude, and take her spoil, and take her prey; and it shall be the wages for his army. I have given him the land of Egypt for his labour wherewith he served against it, because they wrought for me, saith the Lord GOD.”

The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows: *“Son of man, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made his army labor hard against Tyre. Every head was rubbed bald and every shoulder rubbed bare; yet he and his army received no wages from Tyre for the work he carried out against it. Therefore this is what the sovereign LORD says: Look, I am about to give the land of Egypt to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He will carry off her wealth, capture her loot, and seize her plunder; it will be his army’s wages. I have given him the land of Egypt as his compensation for attacking Tyre, because they did it for me, declares the sovereign LORD.”*

Isaiah 10:5-7

“O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few.”

The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows: *“What sorrow awaits Assyria, the rod of my anger. I use it as a club to express my anger. I am sending Assyria against a godless nation, against a people with whom I am angry. Assyria will plunder them, trampling them like dirt beneath its feet. But the king of Assyria will not understand that he is my tool; his mind does not work that way. His plan is simply to destroy, to cut down nation after nation.”*

It should be very clear from the passages we have considered that when we make reference to the sovereignty of God, we mean the supremacy 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 Lord of all, and that He does according to His will in heaven and in the earth. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is Almighty, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and immutable so that it is utterly impossible for his purposes and plans to be thwarted. If we believe that His original plan has been frustrated by sin, we are stripping God of His almightiness, His omnipotence, His omniscience, His omnipresence and His immutability. We are, in effect, denying His sovereignty and dethroning Him. We would then be practical atheists.

The sovereignty of the God of the Bible is absolute. When we say that God is sovereign we are affirming that He has the right to govern the universe, which He has made for His own glory, just as He pleases.

We are agreeing that His right is the right of the Potter over the clay and that He may mould that clay into whatsoever form He chooses, fashioning out of the same lump one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour. We are declaring that He is under no rule or law outside of His own will and nature, that He is a law unto Himself, and that He is under no obligation to give an account of His actions to us.

God is sovereign in all His attributes. His sovereignty is exercised as He wills, when He wills, where He wills. God is Sovereign, and being Sovereign He does as He pleases. If God is sovereign in all of His attributes, then it follows that He is sovereign in the exercise of His mercy. In **Exodus 33:19** He said to Moses *"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy."* Mercy is not a **right** to which human beings are entitled. Mercy is that wonderful 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. For a sinful human being to speak of himself or herself as **deserving** mercy is arrogance and a contradiction of terms.

In His sovereignty, God bestows His mercies on whom He pleases and withholds them as seems good unto Himself. In **John 5**, we have an account of the healing of an impotent man. Verses **1-6** read as follows: *"After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?"*

Why did our Lord not heal all the sick people who were there? Why was this one man singled out from all the others? The man did not ask to be healed and he certainly did not deserve to be healed! Here we have a case of the sovereign exercise of Divine mercy. The Lord exerted His power and healed this one man and for some reason known only to Himself, He declined to do the same for the others. *"What shall we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not! For he says to Moses: 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then, it does not depend on human desire or exertion, but on God who shows mercy"* (**Romans 9:14-16 New English Translation**).

God is sovereign in the exercise of His grace. This is so of necessity, for grace is favour shown to the undeserving. Grace has been defined as the unmerited favour of God. Since it is unmerited, then, no one can claim it as their right. If grace is unearned and undeserved, then no one is entitled to it. If grace is a gift, then, no one can demand it. Therefore, since salvation is the gift of the grace 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 God's grace is illustrated consistently in the Bible. One may be tempted to ask whether or not God is partial in the distribution of His gifts. Does God not have the right to be partial? In **Matthew 20:15**, in relating the parable of the servants our Lord put these words in the mouth of the Lord of the vineyard: *"Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?"*

The **New Living Translation** renders the verse as follows: *"Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?"*

The incarnation of God was undoubtedly one of the greatest events in the history of the universe, and yet when it happened it was kept secret from the vast majority of humanity. It was not even made known to the majority of Jews. It was only revealed to some shepherds in Bethlehem and wise men from the East. These two classes of persons are noteworthy. In the first case we have illiterate shepherds and in the second case we have heathens from a distant country. Herod, the Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes were all by-passed. What a display of Divine sovereignty!

Luke 3:1-2 furnishes us with another example: *“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.”*

Why did God’s Word not come to Caesar or Pilate or Herod or Phillip, or Lysanias or Annas or Caiaphas? Human reasoning would suggest that all these persons would have been far more qualified and influential than John. And why reveal the Word to a man living in the wilderness? Who is going to journey into the wilderness to hear a mad-man preach? And yet in **Mark 1:4-5** we read, *“John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.”*

We can see in these events a foreshadowing of God’s sovereign dealings with sinners throughout the entire Church dispensation in the exercise of His grace. He bestows His favours on whom He pleases, and it is often on the most unlikely and the most unworthy. God has the sovereign right to do with His creatures exactly what He pleases. This is the revelation of scripture and it defies the logic of man. We must constantly guard against resisting that which cannot be measured in the small scale of our limited capacities.

We conclude Lesson five with an interesting declaration from our Lord recorded in **Luke 10:13**: *“Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.”* The question that immediately presents itself after reading this verse is “If the mighty works that were done in these Galilean villages would have caused the citizens of Tyre and Sidon to repent if they had been done there, why were they not done?” Why did our Lord work all these miracles in Galilee and not in Tyre and Sidon? He acknowledged the fact that the miracles did not accomplish the conversion of the Galileans but that they would have guaranteed the conversion of the people of Tyre and Sidon. The answer to this and other similar questions are hidden in the sovereignty of God. *“Oh, how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! For who can know the LORD’s thoughts? Who knows enough to give him advice? And who has given him so much that he needs to pay it back? For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen”* (**Romans 11:33-36**).