

The Sovereignty Of God

Introduction

We have examined the sovereignty of God in salvation in the section on the Biblical Gospel; but here we need to evaluate the matter of God's sovereignty in all areas of life and government, in areas which affect both the life of the believer and the secular world. Getting this right is fundamental to living a godly Christian life.

While it may be unfair to lump all the various forms of Charismatic churches together, nevertheless there is a general tendency in the Charismatic Movement [CM] to seriously denigrate (or at least neglect) this vital doctrine. While some give lip service to the sovereignty of God theologically (such as NFI), in practice they deny it; some groups strongly deny it in their formal teaching as well. In fact for Word Faith theology it is a foundational doctrine that God is not sovereign at all, but requires man's help in order to function in the earth - faith is a natural force and the positive confession of the believer allows God to act!!!

You will note that in the Charismatic background section we mentioned Gnosticism and there is a considerable flavour of Gnostic dualism in the CM. What this means is that God is not God, but is involved in a battle with the devil on Earth. Christians are the key battleground of this spiritual warfare. The outcome of each battle is uncertain, and in some groups (such as Word Faith & Latter Rain influenced churches) it is believers who play the key role by exercising faith. God can only move in power on Earth when Christians act in faith. Other groups emphasise the need for spiritual warfare by confronting demons. Again God is powerless in this and must wait for believers to defeat demonic strongholds in order for blessing and evangelistic success to proceed. This is typical of the Apostolic & Prophetic Mvt., March For Jesus and the Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare methods of C Peter Wagner.

There is a tendency to focus on man and over-emphasise God's transcendence – that he is far above this world and has left the earth in the ruling hands of Satan who captured it through misleading Adam. God is not in control of the earth, Satan is. All of this is much like the basic ideas of Gnosticism dualism – that God is fighting Satan and the outcome is uncertain. [In contradiction, Charismatic worship emphasises God's immanence, or closeness.]

Many Charismatics have this dualistic attitude in their daily lives. When things go well they praise God; when things go badly they blame the devil; there is no concept of God's sovereignty. When they are sick it is the devil's fault. When they get well it is God's blessing. When they are poor or in trouble, they blame their lack of faith. When there is a natural disaster it is caused by Satan. When the sun shines on their outdoor conference it is God's providence. All the sickness, evil, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, famines, cyclones and volcanoes are caused by the devil. God has no real control in their universe.

All this is confused and contradictory nonsense and has nothing in common with Biblical teaching about God's attributes. Indeed, it is close to Deism where God winds the world up at creation like a clock and then leaves it to unwind under other forces. For this reason, and because it is so foundational, it is important for us to evaluate the Biblical doctrine of God's complete and total sovereignty over all things. There is nothing more encouraging or comforting that to know that our times are in his hands; the progress of time is HIS-tory.

Since the arguments are simple but the evidence usually lacking in this debate, this paper will have more scriptural quotes than usual. The point is to show what the Bible really teaches about God's sovereignty.

God is sovereign over all the Earth

Clearly God created the earth, but there is dispute about what happened after Adam fell.

Satan is not in control of the earth

Of first importance is the need to demonstrate that God is still sovereign over the earth. Many Christians do not believe this but affirm that the devil has usurped this role by controlling Adam, and is thus called the 'god of this world/age' (2 Cor 4:4) or the 'prince/ruler of this world (Jn 12:31).

The devil is the ruler of this world of sin. He controls sinful men as the author and tempter of sin. His kingdom is the world of darkness that is full of wicked people, so that he rules men through sin, lawlessness and iniquity. He has no rights over the earth and is not the ruler of this planet – either by right or usurpation. Satan is not in control, nor is he the ruler of planet Earth, but controls the world of wicked people through sin. When Adam fell he lost control of his life to sin through Satan, but there was no exchange of rights to the earth. Adam lost his delegated right to authority and this passed to the promised Messiah (Gen 3:15; Isa 53:12; Heb 2:14-15; 1 Jn 3:8 etc; trace the Messianic hope through scripture).

God owns the earth and all that is on it

Heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, *also* the earth with all that *is* in it. (Deut 10:14)

The earth *is* the LORD's. (Exod 9:29). All the earth *is* mine. (Exod 19:5)

Thus says the LORD: 'Heaven *is* my throne, and earth *is* my footstool'. (Isa 66:1)

The earth *is* the LORD's, and all its fullness. (1 Cor 10:26, 28 & Ps 24:1)

For every beast of the forest *is* mine, *and* the cattle on a thousand hills. (Ps 50:10)

God *is* the King of all the earth. (Ps 47:7) The earth is full of your possessions. (Ps 104:24)

The point is made clearly here and in many other passages. The suggestion that the devil owns the earth, made by many Charismatics, is gross heresy.

Christ is Lord of the earth

God gave the earth to his Son. Christ has always been Lord of the earth from the beginning, but as the Messiah, the God-Man, he is doubly worthy of rule since he is not only the Second person of the Trinity who created the earth, but is God's appointed ruler as prophet, priest and king of the earth through his work as Redeemer.

As the eternal Son, the world was made by God through Christ and by Christ:

The world was made through Him (Jn 1:10)

God who created all things through Jesus Christ. (Eph 3:9)

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. (Col 1:16)

He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom. (Jer 10:12)

In these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds. (Heb 1:2)

The world was made for him:

All things were created through Him and for Him. (Col 1:16)

In the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth -- in Him. (Eph 1:10)

For of Him and through Him and to Him *are* all things. (Rm 11:36)

For whom *are* all things and by whom *are* all things. (Heb 2:10)

The Word is clear. God is sovereign over all the earth, and everything in it, through Christ.

God is sovereign over all spiritual beings

It is common amongst Charismatics to over-emphasise the position and authority of Satan. This is a great mistake. What this does is to enable men to place a greater authority in themselves as champions fighting Satan to bring in blessing. Leaders claim to fight and defeat Satan in various scenarios (spiritual warfare, healing, deliverance etc.) and so gullible people look to them for help instead of God. People flock to healing meetings and throw all their hard-earned money to some flamboyant speaker in order to heal a sick child because there is the supposition that he has power over the enemy. This mentality is unbiblical, foolish and always leads to great heartache and depression in the end.

We look to God for our help not men; he will give us aid in his will.

- Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:16)
- Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I *am* God, and *there is no other*. (Isa 45:22)
- So we may boldly say: 'The LORD *is* my helper; I will not fear....' (Heb 13:6)
- If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! (Matt 7:11)
- Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. (Phil 4:6)

However, here we must examine who really has authority over Satan and why he is allowed to function as he does. The issue at stake is the glory of God.

God is sovereign over Satan

Satan is a created being and has always been under God's full control. As an angel he was merely God's messenger and servant; as an un-elect fallen angel (demon) he is a created being under condemnation. He has no power over God, no ability to thwart God's purposes, and no ability to even hinder God's work. Fallen angels under Satan's control (possibly one third of the heavenly host - Rev 12:4) have even less authority (being subject to Satan).

Whenever there is a setback to God's work caused by enemy action, or suffering endured by the Lord's faithful people, this has been permitted by God for a further and more mysterious end. Only in the glory will we see the importance of this and understand why these hardships were allowed. Make no mistake; the devil can only do what God permits (Job 1:12, 2:6; Lk 8:32, 22:31; 1 Cor 10:13). If this were not true, then God would have no control at all.

All actions performed by the devil and his demons are under God's direct command and control, and to his own glory – even false prophecy (1 Kg 22:21-23) and demonic counsel (Jud 9:23; Rev 17:17). This means that all events are not only controlled by God but must be accepted by us as from God's hand with thanksgiving; even things that appear to be evil or difficult.

- In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess 5:18)
- ... giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:20)
- I will bless the LORD at all times. (Ps 34:1)

Christ has defeated Satan and triumphed over him already, not in the future

After the cross, God the Father made Christ the ruler of all things (Jn 3:35), placing him at his right-hand as a man in the glory. Jesus Christ is,

at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. (Eph 1:20-21)

Before the incarnation Christ was at God's right-hand as the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity; now he is at God's right hand of all authority as the beloved Son, the God-Man, the Messiah, the King of the universe.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth'. (Matt 28:18)

This verse is clear. Christ has authority over all things, including spiritual beings. The word 'authority' here really means 'power to rule'; the Lord not only has formal authority but the power to

back it up. He is 'Lord of all' (Acts 10:36). Everything is under his feet (1 Cor 15:27; Heb 2:8). There is no name above that of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:9-11). He is 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (Rev 19:16).

To make matters more specific, at the cross, Jesus triumphed over Satan and his hordes as the obedient Messiah, servant of the Most High God. As a man Jesus defeated Satan even at the level of human temptation (Matt 4; Lk 4) but upon his resurrection, Jesus was made the Saviour of men and Lord over all demons.

Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him. (1 Pt 3:22)

The cross disarmed Satan and his demons, humiliated them and triumphed over them completely, Having disarmed principalities and powers, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. (Col 2:15)

Modern Charismatic heresies – stem from denying God's sovereignty

If any preacher suggests that Jesus is not Lord of Satan, or that Christ does not own the earth and all that is in it, this is a lie. To add that God needs our help in order to defeat Satan practically on the earth now is utter heresy and will incur God's wrath. It is blasphemy.

The impression given by many Charismatic leaders that God needs us to do all sorts of things in order to succeed and defeat Satan is utter garbage. They pretend that Satan is not under God's control and that we must use this or that technique, method or strategy to overcome him; things like: apostolic and prophetic direction, inner healing, exorcism, faith exercised as a force, strategic level spiritual warfare techniques, praise marches, prayer walking, spiritual mapping and so on.

Life is not an uphill climb requiring all sorts of new methods in order to have success over Satan; he is already defeated and our job is to stand on that victory.

Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore. (Eph 6:13-14)

Setbacks, problems, trials, difficulties, persecution, afflictions, hardships and all sufferings are not evidence of Satanic superiority that must be overcome in this way and that. Neither are they part of an uncertain battle between God and the devil. Our perspective must be Biblical. Trials are under the direct sovereign purpose of God for our benefit. Even the most difficult satanically inspired nastiness is ordained for our good by God; Job illustrates this well.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *his* purpose. For whom he foreknew, he also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of his Son. (Rm 8:28-29)

All things work for our good because God predestined them specifically for the testing and training of our character – to make us more like Christ. They are not haphazard; they are not accidents; they are not arbitrary; they are not under Satan's purpose – but they are chosen specifically by God for our good, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. To become conformed to Christ's image we must go through many trials - We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Problems are an evidence of God working in us, not the evidence of Satan controlling us. There is something wrong with supposed Christians who never have any problems but are always victorious. There is no example of such a person in the Bible. Problems and suffering are not evidence of Satan's control, but of God's care.

God is sovereign over all human affairs

God is sovereign over all people

I have made the earth, the man and the beast that *are* on the ground, by my great power and by my outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to me. (Jer 27:5)

You, O king [Nebuchadnezzar], *are* a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory. (Dan 2:37)

God predestines the lot of every man, not just the elect, and gives him a purpose within his plan for human history. If this was not so, then God could not control the destiny of the world. Sometimes one unlikely man can change a nation or create an empire (e.g. Genghis Khan, Shaka Zulu, Alexander the Great). Control of the earth and history requires predestination of all things and all people. This is not an unusual or hard doctrine, it is a necessary part of God being God and was a fundamental issue for OT prophets:

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, *and* skilfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when *as yet there were* none of them. (Ps 139:15-16)

The word 'fashioned' here *means*: formed, predetermined, predestined or preordained. It clearly teaches that our days were predestined and formed by God to fit into his plan before we were born. God does not just control all people, but predestines them to do his will.

God's sovereign control over people is evidenced in many places in the Bible. For example:

- God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to precipitate the Exodus (Exod 9:12, 10:1, 20).
- God made the Egyptians follow the Israelites in order to make an example of them in destruction (Exod 14:4, 17; Rm 9:17). Notice the effect on other nations (Jos 2:10-11).

God is sovereign over rulers

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of his heart to all generations. Ps 33:10-11

Yours, O LORD, *is* the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all *that is* in heaven and in earth *is yours*; yours *is* the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honour *come* from you, and you reign over all. In your hand *is* power and might; in your hand *it is* to make great and to give strength to all. 1 Chron 29:11-12

God's sovereignty involves the rulers of nations being predestined and controlled by God to further his plans for world history. Rulers are not led by Satan, except as complies with God's purpose. Divine sovereignty can often be noticed in history where a nation turned on a sixpence through unexpected actions by a leader. For instance, note the incomprehensible failure of Hannibal to march on Rome in his initial campaign, when he would have certainly defeated it. The Mediterranean would then have been Carthaginian not Roman, and would have led to a very different world history.

Other examples:

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| Pontius Pilate - | Jesus answered, 'You could have no power at all against me unless it had been given you from above.' (Jn 19:11) |
| Herod - | For truly against your holy Servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined before to be done. (Acts 4:27-28) |
| Daniel's prophecy - | Both these kings' hearts <i>shall be</i> bent on evil, and they shall speak lies at the same table; but it shall not prosper, for the end <i>will still be</i> at the appointed time. (Dan 11:27) |
| Sihon- | But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass through, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into your hand. (Deut 2:30) |

God is sovereign over empires, nations, tribes and peoples

For the kingdom *is* the LORD's, and he rules over the nations. (Ps 22:28)

For God *is* the King of all the earth ... God reigns over the nations. (Ps 47:7-8)

God controls nations and all human history. He establishes empires and puts them down in his purpose (Job 12:23). Their boundaries are conformed to God's will (Acts 17:26). Their leaders are

raised up by God to suit his purposes (Exod 9:16); sometimes God even named future leaders decades before they were born (e.g. Cyrus, Isa 44:28-45:1). For good reason God is called the 'King of the nations', (Jer 10:7).

We can observe that the history of nations and empires was prepared over centuries for a specific purpose by God. The most obvious being the Greek and Roman Empires. The former established a common language throughout the Mediterranean and brought in a common cultural experience. The latter, building on the former, was enabled to control the Mediterranean, and bring relative peace, freedom from pirates on the sea and the establishment of good road communications – all in order to aid the spread of the Gospel. There are many other cases, such as bringing in the Medo-Persian Empire in order to free the Israelites from the Babylonian captivity at exactly the time prophesied.

If God doesn't control nations, then he can't control history at all, and can't bring in the end, let alone protect his people. However, the Bible makes it clear that all nations, great and small, are in God's hand and do his bidding. The world is not out of control, it is under the governance of God who is allowing mankind to ruin the world and demonstrate the fulness of his wickedness. This will be curtailed at the return of the Lord.

- For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they shall serve him.' (Jer 28:14)
- Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Surely I will give the land of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; he shall take away her wealth, carry off her spoil, and remove her pillage; and that will be the wages for his army. I have given him the land of Egypt *for* his labour, because they worked for me,' says the Lord GOD. (Ezek 29:19-20)
- The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever he will, and sets over it the lowest of men. (Dan 4:17)

God is sovereign over wicked plans and evil people

We can rest assured in the hands of our sovereign God - nothing evil can overtake us that is not part of his will. The martyrdoms in church history were not failures; neither were they accidents out of control; they were deliberately planned and decreed testimonies to God's glory evidenced in the faithfulness of saints. Jesus is the prime faithful witness (Rev 1:5) but when saints die for their faith, they join the Lord in their own faithful witness unto death. Indeed, not only does the death of saints glorify God in it's witness to truth, but many people were converted through watching the peaceful and patient way saints died in flames, water and other ways. Many men, women and children died singing or praying for their onlookers and tormentors, while some preached the Gospel from the flames.

However, many times the Lord also provides escape from persecution according to his will (e.g. Paul in a basket over the wall or Peter led out of prison by an angel). Our confidence is that we rest in the hands of the one who is in control. We never suffer according to the wicked plans of evil men, only according to God's decree.

- He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot carry out their plans. (Job 5:12)
- There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the LORD's counsel - that will stand. (Prov 19:21)
- The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *like* the rivers of water; he turns it wherever he wishes. ... *There is* no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the LORD. ... deliverance *is* of the LORD. (Prov 21:1, 30, 31)
- The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. (Ps 33:10-11)

God is sovereign over all natural affairs

God preserves the world by his providence

The world would not survive were it not for God's direct and continuous involvement. This ranges from restraining sin and preventing human annihilation, to holding molecules together and keeping the sun active. The theology of the Deists, claiming that God wound up the world like a clock at creation and then left it to wind down, is completely wrong. No one is controlling the universe except God through Christ. Natural laws do not keep the cosmos going, they are just attempts of scientists to explain the subsidiary laws God chooses to use.

Unlike man, creation obeys the laws God set for it. Trees absorb carbon dioxide and excrete oxygen, despite man's industrial interference to damage this process. The sun gives us heat, light and determines the weather. The moon gives light at night, determines the tides and has much influence on the animal world, particularly insects. We could go on.

There will come a time when God will wind this world up, destroy it with fire and establish his kingdom on a new purified but recognisable earth (2 Pt 3:10-13); but until that time when Christ returns in glory, the world will continue according to God's plan.

- [Christ is] upholding all things by the word of His power. (Heb 1:3)
- And He is before all things, and in him all things consist [placed together, cohere] (Col 1:17)
- He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth ... The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their food from God ... These all wait for you, that you may give *them* their food in due season. *What* you give them they gather in; you open your hand, they are filled with good. (Ps 104:14-15, 21, 27-28)
- For He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust ... Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matt 5:44-45; 6:26)

God controls animal life

God not only controls all the processes that are active in the earth, but also governs all sentient life on it. He provides food, shelter, community and prosperity for animals (Matt 6:26), but in his plan he also brings ruin when required (Matt 10:29).

Sometimes the action of wild beasts is used by God as a judgment for sin:

Then, if you walk contrary to me, and are not willing to obey me, I will bring on you seven times more plagues, according to your sins. I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, destroy your livestock, and make you few in number; and your highways shall be desolate. Lev 26:21-22

At other times the seeming certainty of death by animals is prevented by God when he chooses (Dan 6:22).

Animals do not go into extinction or suffering unless it is ordained by the Lord for a good reason; even if the immediate cause is human.

All natural processes and all forms of life are under God's complete control. He governs them all according to his eternal plan.

God is sovereign over evil things

This is a matter that so few people get right, and yet to understand this is one of the greatest blessings a believer can have, leading to absolute assurance. It is essential that we are totally Biblical in this; all teachers that deny this elementary doctrine should be avoided.

God controls all things according to his purpose

God is not just in control of good things while the devil controls the bad things; such a view is not only nonsensical, but entirely unscriptural. How could God control history if he cannot control the bad things according to his purpose? God's word affirms that the Lord God controls all things according to his purpose:

- Then Job answered the LORD and said: 'I know that you can do everything, and that no purpose *of yours* can be withheld from you.' (Job 42:1-2)
- Is anything too hard for the LORD? (Gen 18:14)
- Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for you. (Jer 32:17)
- He does according to his will in the army of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to him, 'What have you done?' (Dan 4:35)
- The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart to all generations. (Ps 35:11)
- The LORD's counsel -- that will stand. (Prov 19:21)
- For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul *it*? His hand *is* stretched out, and who will turn it back? (Isa 14:27)

God's control includes what are called 'evil' things.

- That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that *there is* none besides me. I *am* the LORD, and *there is* no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity (Heb = 'evil'); I, the LORD, do all these *things*. (Isa 45:6-7)
- Who has commanded and it came to pass, unless the Lord has ordained it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come? (Lam 3:37-38)
- Does evil befall a city unless the Lord has done it? (Amos 3:6)
- And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do his people. (Ex 32:14)
- Thus says the Lord, Behold I am shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. (Jer 18:11b)

Does 'evil' really mean 'evil'?

'Evil' = *Rah* (Strong's number 7451) meaning: adversity, affliction, bad, calamity, evil, harm, displeasure, trouble etc. It is from the root word *Ra'a'* (7489) meaning: to spoil by breaking to pieces, to make something evil, shatter, destroy. The severity of the word cannot be watered down.

When a person is sick, the illness is brought by the Lord (Exod 4:11; Deut 28:61) and may be for many reasons, not just sin or chastisement. When a false prophet speaks evil things to deceive people, the Lord brought it about for a good reason (Ezek 14:9). Misfortune is under God's control (Ruth 1:13, 20). Evil brought about directly by Satan is so much under God's hand that it is said to be brought by God (Job 42:11). When people curse us or hate us it is allowed by God (2 Sam 16:10; Ps 105:25). When people fall into great delusion through ignoring God, that deep deception comes from the Lord (2 Thess 2:11).

God's purpose in evil things

The suffering of God's people is always controlled by God for good reason; some examples include: Jesus' death, Acts 4:27-28; the suffering of Joseph, Gen 50:19-20 and the suffering of Israel, Ps 105:25.

It is absolutely crucial to understand that God controls evil things and allows them to affect his people for good reasons. Problems and suffering are not a sign of God's displeasure unless there is reason for chastisement. If we have sinned, we will reap what we have sown (Gal 6:7-9) and God will discipline us as wayward children. He still loves us, but allows the rod of circumstance to

train us to be more obedient and wise (Heb 12:5ff). However, many times great afflictions come upon God's people when there has been no sin, and this comes for various reasons, sometimes never fully understood in this life. These reasons include:

1. Training in godliness (2 Pt 1:6 – godliness follows self-control and perseverance under suffering).
2. Establishing a testimony on Earth (Rev 6:9; Heb 11:39; 2 Cor 4:7-11).
3. Preparing for a testimony in heaven (Eph 3:10; 2 Cor 4:17-18).
4. Setting an example to others (1 Cor 4:9-17).
5. Enabling a person to better minister to needy people (2 Cor 1:4).

There are many more. Most important is the development of character for a heavenly position that will glorify God in a specific way. God's purposes in us are primarily for the glory, not the earth – he is making us more like Christ to have a heavenly purpose.

God is sovereign over traumatic political events

Nothing that happens on Earth is outside of God's complete control; even what men say is predestined (Lam 3:37). Every disaster is not only authorised by God, but has a specific decreed purpose on the earth. Frequently, national disaster is an evidence of God's judgment on nations that have rebelled against him or legislated unrighteous laws. Though men are placed in authority by God, they are obligated to obey God and enforce laws righteously (Ps 2:10-11, 9:17-20, 107:39-40; Prov 16:10, 12-13, 28:16, 29:2; Isa 10:1-2).

There will be judgment, now and at the final day, for those that failed. This is particularly true for those who afflicted the poor (Exod 22:22-24; 2 Chron 28:19; Isa 10:1-4, 60:12; Amos 6:1-8; Zeph 3:6-8).

Religious people and religious leaders of God's people can also be severely judged for disobedience in the public forum (1 Sam 2:25; Ps 106:40-42).

Examples of judgment on nations

'Son of man, when a land sins against me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out my hand against it.'
(Ezek 14:13)

'Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have persisted in unfaithfulness,' says the Lord GOD. (Ezek 15:8)

- Handing over to an oppressive nation (Ezek 21:31).
- Handing over to disease (Ezek 14:19; Jer 21:5-6).
- Declaration of war (Ezek 14:17).
- Wild beasts (Ezek 14:15).
- Famine (Ezek 14:13).
- Earthquakes (Ezek 38:19).
- Storms (Ezek 13:13).

Some examples of God's control over national traumas:

- War (Isa 10:5, 11:20; 2 Kg 15:37)
- Destruction (Jer 13:12-14)
- Drought (Hag 1:11)
- Plague (Ex 32:34-35; Ps 105:31, 34)
- Famine (Ps 105:16)
- Crop failure (Ps 105:33)
- General evil (Jer 18:11)

The evils that befall a country are under the full control of the Lord God and fall within his purpose for the earth. There is nothing outside his control. For this reason, we should be very aware of what is transpiring in our nation and pray with wisdom accordingly. We should also be very careful about how we vote (if we vote) and our political allegiances. Needless to say, there is no place for specific political action, protesting, civil disobedience, marching etc. We are not of this world and our job is to pray, preach the Gospel and do good to all, not to seek to change a fallen world heading for destruction. Such political actions are a waste of time and misplaced faith; they can

also put one at odds with God if he is judging a nation.

God is sovereign over natural disasters

We have already noted God's control over natural disturbances in connection with his judgment on nations. Sometimes natural disasters are inter-continental, affecting several countries, or are even global. God is still in full control of this. Again there may be an element of judgment involved, though the innocent are caught up in it. Christians and churches are frequently caught up in tragic events. This is still all under God's control and will. Sometimes repeated events occur in a nation given over to occult religion; but supposedly 'Christian' nations are also afflicted. We cannot search this out but must trust in the God who rules all things according to his purpose. Our place is to submit and believe, not question and rebel.

We must remember that all men are under God's judgment for their sins and any breath they have is only theirs by the patience of God. If the Lord chooses to bring judgment to some earlier than others, there is no lack of justice in this; rather, it is evidence of God's long-suffering that he lets some people live as rebels to an old age.

While disasters affect all sorts of people, including believers, there is not necessarily any judgment upon individuals in this; that is, the blame for the tragedy may not be theirs but the reason may lie elsewhere in God's plan:

Those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all *other* men who dwelt in Jerusalem? (Lk 13:4)

When the New York Twin Towers were obliterated, this did not imply that the 3,000 lives that were lost were guilty and were the reason for the event. The tragedy was allowed by God to teach the USA a lesson of national judgment, and also to issue in a new era in his end-time plan. The reaction of believers should be awe and trust in God their Father.

When a tornado hit a town in the Midwest US it killed many, including some Christians. In church the next day a godly Reformed pastor prayed and thanked God for his terrible providence, re-affirming their trust in him and praying for the comfort of the bereaved, some of whom were in the congregation. This is an example of the right attitude. Our natural sorrow for the victims of tragedy must never diminish our trust in God's sovereignty.

Some examples of God's control over natural disasters:

Earthquakes – Isa 29:6; Ezek 38:19

Storms – Ps 135:6-7; Amos 4:13

Famine - Ps 105:16; 2 Kgs 8:1

Climate change - Ps 105:32

Tsunamis – Ps 135:6; Amos 9:6

Crop failure - Ps 105:33

Plague - Ex 32:34-35; Ps 105:31, 34

Lightning – 2 Sam 22:15; Job 37:3; Ps 135:7;

Jer 10:13

Hail - Ps 76:48

Volcanoes - Ps 144:5

These are predestined according to God's plan Isa 14:24; Job 28:25-27; Jer 31:35-36.

God is sovereign over all Things for the church

Throughout history God's prime purpose has been to safeguard the elect and bring them into salvation. The church is, therefore, preserved throughout history by God's sovereign intervention; indeed, all history is merely the backdrop to the releasing of the elect.

God only loves his Son; he is the apple of God's eye. There is nothing in this world that God loves that is outside his Son, for the world is full of sin. It is a grave mistake to think that God loves everything and everyone when sin is a stench in his nostrils. A righteous God cannot love that which he hates. The church is beloved since it is in Christ. All believers are placed in Christ and united with God by the Holy Spirit, forming the household, or family, of God. Therefore, all God's attention in this world is focused on the church as the body of Christ. All things are governed by God's sovereignty for the church, his own family. This fact alone should cause great rejoicing and worship amongst God's people.

Christ is Head over all things for the church

And he put all *things* under his feet, and gave him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:22-23)

There is nothing which is outside of Christ's Lordship; everything is under his feet. Yet the amazing fact is that he is head over all things to, or for, the church. Firstly this means that Christ is sovereign over all things to ensure the safety of the elect until they are converted. Not one chosen person will be lost or left behind. Secondly, it means that Christ controls all things to bring the church to maturity. Persecution, afflictions, trials and tribulations are all governed by Christ to serve the good of the church and believers. Nothing is outside his control. What a great comfort this is for beleaguered saints.

As any sensible man will look after his body to prolong life and health, so Christ cares for the church. Unlike a man, Christ is Lord of all things and can determine that anything which affects his body will work for its good. Thus even persecution and hardship serves the church rather than destroying it. The church could only be damaged if Christ was removed from power – and this thought is ridiculous.

God preserved the church in the Old Testament, just as much as the New, even when under foreign rule:

But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease till a report could go to Darius. Then a written answer was returned concerning this *matter*. (Ezra 5:5)

The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them. (Ps 34:7)

Sometimes God uses supernatural means to preserve his saints immediately (Acts 5:18-19) and sometimes he lets them go through great tribulation for long periods (2 Cor 11:23ff). Some leaders are cut short in the beginning of their ministry (James, Stephen) while others grow to an old age (John). In all these things, Christ is Lord, appointing men according to his will for the benefit of the church. Sometimes one sermon by a man who dies young can do more for the church than a host of men who work for decades (Stephen's sermon in Acts is one of the longest and most perceptive in the Bible).

The purpose is that the church, the body of Christ, is safeguarded, matured and brought to glory so that Christ is glorified in her.

Questions & Quotes

Does not this sovereignty make God the author of sin?

Since God is perfect, righteous and holy he could never be the author of sin, nor could he lead people into sin, **God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he Himself tempt anyone** (Jm 1:13). Regarding men, they are already depraved as a result of being born in Adam. Being given freedom to choose, they will always choose sinful pursuits; that is man's nature, he likes sin. Regarding Satan and his demons, they were not elect like the angels that serve God (1 Tim 5:21), and thus chose to rebel and become unclean. Satan passed on this rebellious attitude to man through Adam, primarily through tempting him to independent action – trying to be God.

In history God directs men according to his purpose but does not need to lead them into sin, they choose to do this themselves. God arranges the providences surrounding a man so that he rises to power and leads a nation. However, the atrocities this man subsequently commits are not caused by God. God is the primary cause, pre-determining what will be, but man is the secondary cause who commits the actual sin of his own volition.

I find it hard to believe that God directs everything in my life according to a predetermined plan. Is there NT teaching to confirm this?

Yes there is:

- Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. (Matt 10:30)
- Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Lk 12:6-7)
- Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you. (Acts 27:34)
- In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. (Eph 1:11)
- Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour? (Rm 9:21)
- Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. (Rm 13:1)
- No one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. (1 Thess 3:3)
- They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. (1 Pt 2:8)

There are many more examples. If God has appointed even the number of hairs on our head, or determines the time that a sparrow dies, then all the greater events in life are also predetermined to comply with God's plan.

What about evil diseases?

God controls all things according to his will; this includes disease. It is no surprise that as the world grows in its final rebellion, a host of incurable diseases are now hitting men, at the same time as there is resurgence of old, once thought eliminated, diseases.

- Behold, the hand of the LORD will be on your cattle in the field, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels, on the oxen, and on the sheep -- a very severe pestilence. (Exod 9:3)
- I will strike them with the pestilence. (Num 14:12)
- When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people. (2 Chron 7:13)
- When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people. (Jer 21:6)
- Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvellous: seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them the wrath of God is complete. (Rev 15:1)

Sometimes disease comes as a result of sin and foolish choices, such as liver damage caused by heavy consumption of alcohol, AIDS or STDs. Sometimes innocent people are infected by the actions of parents, medical practitioners or employers – this is also sin. Such examples are diseases or afflictions arising from human causes through disobeying God's word. Sometimes the cause of a widespread pandemic is the unexpected result of human failure or greed, but on other occasions the direct cause is unknown. God does not cause the evil consequences, but does supervise it according to his purpose. However, there are also times when the direct cause is God's judgment for sin, either on individuals or nations.

Examples of denials of God's sovereignty and his word by Charismatic leaders

It is no more the primary purpose of the church to teach the scriptures than it is for British Rail to promote timetables. Gerald Coates [*Contending Earnestly For the Faith*, 4.2, p8.]

The word will do you no good. Paul Cain [Speaking at the *School of Prophecy*, Anaheim, Nov 1989 session 7.]

Man was created on terms of equality with God. Kenneth Hagin [*Berean Call*, June 1993.]

Faith is a force just like electricity or gravity ... we are a class of gods. Kenneth Copeland [Spoken on TBN TV programme with Paul Crouch. *Berean Call*, June 1993.]

You don't have a god in you. You are one. You are all little gods. Kenneth Copeland [*The Force of Love*, tape BCC-56, Fort Worth, Texas.]

Satan conquered Jesus on the cross. Kenneth Copeland [*Christianity in Crisis*, Hank Hanegraaff, Harvest House Pub. (1993), p11.]

The biggest failure in the whole Bible is God. Kenneth Copeland [*Praise-a-thon* programme on TBN April 1988, quoted in *Christianity in Crisis*, p125.]

As a believer, you have the right to make commands. Each time you stand on the word you are commanding God. Kenneth Copeland [Quoted in *Alpha – the unofficial guide*, p67.]

Never go to the Lord and say, 'If it be thy will ...' Don't allow such words to be spoken from your mouth. Benny Hinn [*Berean Call*, June 1993.]

You're not looking at Morris Cerullo – you're looking at God. You're looking at Jesus. Morris Cerullo [*Christianity in Crisis*, Hank Hanegraaff, Harvest House Pub. (1993), p11.]

It's not a worthy goal just to be informed by the Bible. John Wimber [John Goodwin, *Testing The Fruit Of The Vineyards*, St Matthew Pub. Ltd. P11, 13.]

Wimber called Jesus, 'a blasphemer', who sometimes had 'little or no faith'. [Goodwin, op. cit. p12, 16.]

Conclusion

Scripture is full of the glory of God, and central to God's glory is his sovereignty. It is blasphemy to diminish the sovereignty of God. His glorious sovereignty is so obvious in the Bible that it amazes me how anyone claiming to be a Christian can for a minute suggest that God is not sovereign in this or that matter. To suggest that God doesn't control man's will, or even know the future, is blasphemy of an extreme order – yet this is the position of many senior Charismatics who support the 'Open Theism' of Canadian professor Clark Pinnock. He has been supported in the UK by Gerald Coates, Sandy Millar, Graham Kendrick, Roger Forster, John Noble and others in that stable.¹ How anyone can trust a god that cannot control mere men or know the future is astonishing. Such a god cannot thwart Satan or do anything. Thankfully the God of the Bible is not such a god, but the Lord of all.

We could give many examples of extended praise to the sovereignty of God in scripture, but just one will suffice, Psalm 29 -

1 A Psalm of David. Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, Give unto the LORD glory and strength.

2 Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

3 The voice of the LORD *is* over the waters; The God of glory thunders; The LORD *is* over many waters.

4 The voice of the LORD *is* powerful; The voice of the LORD *is* full of majesty.

5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars, Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon.

6 He makes them also skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire.

8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; The LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth, And strips the forests bare; And in His temple everyone says, "Glory!"

10 The LORD sat *enthroned* at the Flood, And the LORD sits as King forever.

11 The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace.

In this short psalm we see that angels, demons and men must submit to God and honour him. The church is to worship him. God controls the waters (rivers, floods, rain and sea). God controls nature and the destruction in the natural world. God controls fire (volcanoes, lightning strikes, and forest fires). He controls earthquakes that shake the wilderness. He controls the life and death of animals. He was Lord over the Flood and is enthroned as King forever, who gives power and grace to his people. This simple and short psalm summarises God's sovereign glory. We would do well to emulate the attitude of the psalmist David here and deny the lies of modern leaders.

Further resources

Trusting God, Jerry Bridges, NavPress [An outstanding Biblical and encouraging book on problems.]

The Sovereignty of God, AW Pink, Baker [Note: the Banner of Truth edition is seriously abridged, ruining Pink's presentation.]

Crucial Secular Moments in History and Their Impact on the Bible, Paul Fahy

Various papers on suffering and affliction, Paul Fahy.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version

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¹ Pinnock's, *The Openness of God* was on the recommended advance reading list for the conference *A Theology for Revival* hosted by Coates and others in London in November 1997. Pinnock was called the 'theologian for revival' when he spoke at Coates' Westminster revival meetings supported by the others mentioned.

Appendix One

Current ideas that deny God's sovereignty

Erroneous doctrine	Implication of error	Attribute or decree of God denied
God desires to save all mankind. Christ died for everyone. The Spirit strives to win all men over. Common grace to all.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God is sad, frustrated and defeated. There is no election. Christ's blood is wasted. Grace is given to reprobates. Value of the cross minimised. 	God's omnipotence, purpose and election.
God loves everyone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God has no power to save anyone for certain. God loves non-elect people in sin who have no justification. God's decree to elect is effectively denied. God loves those in hell or stops loving people. God changes (loves then condemns some). God's love is imperfect or alters. 	God's immutability, perfection, power, purpose, justice, wrath & holiness.
Man can choose or reject a universal salvation by free will.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God cannot determine the end from the beginning. Man defeats God. Christ died without purpose or elect in mind. 	God's plan, God's decree, God's power.
God was taken by surprise in Eden and remedies this by the Gospel.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God can make mistakes and is not sovereign over men or demons. The Gospel is an unplanned reaction to evil. 	God's eternal purpose and power.
The devil controls the bad things of life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God is defeated by Satan. God is powerless & saddened by events. The devil runs the earth. 	God's supremacy over all.
God is unable to control world events or prevent natural disasters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God is helpless. Disasters have no purpose. Divine promises to saints have no value. 	God's supremacy over everything; God's predestined plan.

What this essentially means:

The Lie	Impact of the Lie	Biblical Truth
The devil is supreme over bad things and mankind. Man can defeat and frustrate God. The natural world is out of control. Evil can triumph, the end is uncertain. Universalism in the Gospel.	God is not sovereign over anything, not even man or fallen angels. God cannot control the world. God had no plan or purpose. God's eternal decrees removed. God does not control the Gospel	God is sovereign over all things. God controls the world. God has a perfect plan & purpose. God's decrees are eternal. Salvation is under God's control.