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God Is Sovereign

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Ian McLaren proposed, "The greatest reinforcement religion could have in our time would be a return to the ancient belief in the sovereignty of God." One must first react, whose doctrine of sovereignty? Or what ancient belief? Most summaries of doctrine contain no section on the sovereignty of God.

To start with the Bible, no verse includes the word sovereign or sovereignty. The ancient belief cannot be ascertained by starting with obvious verse references.

One might next turn to a dictionary definition. Derived from the Latin *super* ("above"), the primary meaning is chief or highest; supreme. It is used of those supreme in power or position, especially of a ruler. The word also came to include the idea of independency, as of a sovereign state.

It is in this last sense that we can speak of the sovereignty of man. Each man is regarded by God as independent and individually responsible. Only in a limited sense is any man ever chief or highest. Man has a limited sphere of influence and control: God is over all.

Scripture presents God as eternal, supreme over all creation, that is, greater than all that exists other than Himself. He not only has supreme position, He maintains supreme rule. He is Lord and King over all. He is the most high, "that liveth forever, 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?" (Dan 4:34-35).

Over the World

God is far superior to all His creation: He is the God who "created the heaven and the earth" (Gen 1:1). Hebrews 1:1-3 declares that God by His Son not only "made the worlds," but that He also continues to uphold "all things by the Word of His power." "David blessed the Lord before all the congregation: and David said, Blessed by Thou, Lord God of Israel our Father, for ever and ever. 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 over all" (I Chr 29:10-11).

David again proclaimed, "The Lord hath prepared His throne in the heavens; and His kingdom ruleth over all" (Ps 103:19). Another Psalm declares, "For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did He" (Ps 135:5-6).

He whom we worship is "the blessed and only potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (I Tim 6:15). He is now supreme and will ever be the One whom all creation honors. Before the eternal throne, the greatest hymn of all ages will proclaim, "Thou are 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).

Concerning the fulfillment of God's purpose in His creation, the Scriptures declare that God had a complete and perfect plan. As supreme, eternal potentate, He has been subject to none else and has been influenced by none else. His eternal, all-wise plan has never been changed. "The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever" (Ps 33:11). "Our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased" (Ps 115:3). "Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did He in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places" (Ps 135:6).

"I know, that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before Him" (Eccl 3:14). God strongly declares, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure" (Isa 46:10). All things are "according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Eph 1:11).

Over all Men

God maintains His supremacy over mankind. He is God. He is the only creator. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor

principalities, nor powers . . . nor any other creature" (Rom 9:38-39) can even approach the power of God. Men are but as clay in the potter's hand (Jer 18:6; Isa 45:9; Rom 9:21); their power is as naught compared to the might of the Almighty.

God is supreme sovereign; none exists that can thwart His purposes. "For the Lord of Hosts has purposed, and who shall disannul it? and His hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isa 14:27).

God has a plan and works that plan. Since God is in complete control, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:28). Even the ungodly fulfill His purpose (Acts 4:26-28). "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee" (Ps 76:10). "The Lord hath made all things for Himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil" (Prov 21:1).

Even the wicked fulfill God's eternal purposes, though they are entirely ignorant that God so controls all things. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will" (Prov 21:1). As an example, King Nebuchadnezzar was as proud and independent as a man can be (Dan 4:30). For seven years he lived as an animal, insane. Then when his sanity was restored, he acknowledged the King of heaven and his own stubborn pride (Dan 4:34-37).

A beautiful illustration of God using the wrath of man to accomplish His purpose appears in the first book of the Bible. Finally revealing himself, Joseph said, "I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt; now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Gen 45:4, 5). "So it was not you that sent me hither, but God" (Gen 45:8). Later Joseph again could clearly say, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day" (Gen 50:20). Rather than hindering God, the independent acts of men are used by God to accomplish His greater purpose.

Responsibility

When God permits wickedness, He is in no way responsible for it. "Far be it from God, that He should do wickedness: and from the Almighty, that He should commit iniquity" (Job 34:10). "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man" (Jas 1:13).

"Every one shall die for his own iniquity" (Jer 31:30). Satan will be punished for his evil acts and attitudes. Each unsaved sinner will be judged according to his works. God will never suffer punishment for any evil act of angels or men. Man may be influenced by the world, the flesh, and the devil; but he is fully responsible for his own acts.

In spite of themselves the free acts of men fulfill the eternal purpose of God. For instance, in Acts 2:23, Peter can charge concerning the death of Christ, "Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." Men are yet held responsible for what they have done.

Although God knows of man's sin and permits man to persist in his way, God ever pleads with men to seek forgiveness and cleansing. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa 1:18).

Many passages stress man's responsibility to repent and turn unto the Lord, "Say unto them, As I live, said the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek 33:11). "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:8-9).

God very clearly declares that He "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim 2:4). Unsaved men are enemies of God (Rom 5:10), but the sovereign God stands with outstretched arms to await sovereign, sinful man, saying, "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).