

The Character of God  
Part 4 - His Sovereignty  
"Who's in charge?"  
October 10, 1999  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Over the past several weeks I have been speaking of the attributes of God. What is God like?

We casually, but correctly, say we come into this room on Sundays to worship God.

Who is the God we worship?

What is He like?

What about him makes us desire to worship him?

If I said we would meet next week to worship Billy Graham or Mother Theresa you rightly think such a suggestion was blasphemous.

You would think of those people as worthy of commendation but "worship" - no. Why?

Because worship speaks of something higher, more exalted, purer.

We may well be enamored of people of the caliber of Billy Graham and Mother Theresa but we recognize they are still LIKE us in more ways than they are different.

In our thinking, "worship" is reserved for someone who is not just better than we are but infinitely better, even perfect.

Worship is reserved for...well, God!

Two weeks ago we thought about God's faithfulness – and we worship him that he is faithful – never failing to do what he has promised.

Three weeks ago we thought about God's power – and we worship him that he is all-powerful.

Four weeks ago we thought about the majesty of God – his uniqueness, how unlike us he is, his transcendence – that about God that makes him so different, so above us, so awesome – and worthy of being worshipped.

Today I want us to think about God's sovereignty.

Sovereignty speaks of his control of everything, of everyone and of all history.

The word "sovereign" means the chief, the highest, the supreme one.

It has to do with being the highest authority.

And it has to do with being in complete control.

It means to be unlimited by anything or anyone else.

We speak of "free will" as if it was something common.

**We think of ourselves** as having the ability to make choices freely – as if our choices were determined solely by us.

But we all know that our choices are very conditioned.

All our choices are profoundly influenced and conditioned by people and circumstances totally out of our control.

We are not sovereign. Our choices are very limited.

**We speak of kings** as sovereign – but we only mean that they have more authority and power to make choices than others in the country.

We know they aren't completely sovereign because they are subject to many of the same conditions we are: life, health, weather, natural disasters, and so on.

Their sovereignty may be great compared to ours but it is limited and conditional.

**But when we speak of God's sovereignty**, we speak of a Being who is completely free – nothing else conditions or controls his actions - no force, no other person, no other conditions, no principles outside of himself, influence or in any way condition his choices and actions.

He is in complete control – nothing outside of himself determines his actions.

Not only does this mean that his actions are uncaused by anything outside of himself – but that all other actions by anyone or anything else are ultimately controlled by him.

For if there **was** anything outside of his control then he would be limited and even conditioned by that something else.

He is the only uncaused cause.

He is the only unmoved mover.

He is the only totally free being in existence.

He thus has the ability to control and does actually control everything that happens.

Now since he is sovereign God, then he is worthy of worship.

But if he is controlled by something, if something else ultimately determines God's actions, then that something else deserves to be worshipped more than God.

If something else is ultimately in control, is exercising the ultimate influence, is the cause of all other causes – then that something else is sovereign – not God.

What controls life? Who or what ultimately makes the difference in what happens?

Maybe nothing.

Maybe just blind luck determines everything.

The current issue of TIME magazine (Oct 11, 1999) carries an article by Robert Hughes, TIME's art critic, who last May had a serious automobile accident in Australia.

He writes, "At one point I saw Death. He made no gesture, but he opened his mouth and I looked right down his throat, which distended to become a tunnel. He expected me to yield, to go in. This filled me with abhorrence, a hatred of nonbeing. In that moment I realized that there is nothing, nothing whatsoever, outside of the life we have; that the "meaning of life" is nothing other than life itself, obstinately asserting itself against emptiness."

As bizarre as it all was, "it all seems a long way off from the nice, uplifting sort of near-death experience that religious writers like to effuse about... I am a skeptic to whom the idea that a benign God created us and watches over us is somewhere between a fairy story and a poor joke... People of a religious bent are apt...to see... a tunnel of white light with Jesus beckoning at the end as featured in the memoirs of a score of American K Mart mystics. Jesus must

have been busy when my turn came: he didn't show. There was, as far as I could tell, absolutely nothing divine on the other side."

Robert Hughes is recovering from his accident and he said, "**Blind luck has dealt me a whole new hand**".

Is that what is in charge? "Blind Luck"?

Is "luck" sovereign? Is "luck" the uncaused cause, the principle behind every action and condition of life?

Even Christians struggle with answering the question – "Who is in charge?"

Gerald Sittser in his book entitled A Grace Disguised, tells of a fateful night in the fall of 1991.

Jerry, his wife Lynda, their four children and Jerry's mother piled into the Sittser's mini-van and left Spokane, Washington to visit a Native American reservation just across the state line in Idaho.

They had a great evening participating in an authentic pow-wow.

About 8:15 that night, when the children were making it plain they were done - The Sittsers climbed back into the van to make their way home.

Ten minutes into the trip home Jerry noticed a car approaching them.

It was coming very fast and on a curve in the road as they met, that other car driven by a drunk driver, swerved into their lane and hit them head on.

Jerry writes that in the first moments after the accident it was as if everything was in slow motion.

With three of his four children, some of them seriously injured, Jerry looked at the carnage before them - the unconscious and broken bodies of the fourth child (four year old Diana Jane), his wife Lynda, and his mother Grace.

In spite of every effort, he watched those three members of his family die.

He writes, "I (later) felt wild with fear and agitation...I could not stop crying. I could not silence the deafening noise of crunching metal, screaming sirens and wailing children. I could not rid my eyes of the vision of violence, of shattering glass and shattered bodies. All I wanted was to be dead.

"Over the next months I thought I was going to lose my mind...the foundation of my life was close to caving in.

"I wondered whether I could survive another day, whether I wanted to survive another day." (Sittser 16-19)

Have you ever questioned the sanity of life?

Maybe for you it wasn't sudden, maybe for you it was the steady deterioration of your resources until you didn't know if you could go on.

Gerald Sittser said he had always believed in the sovereignty of God - that God is in absolute control of everything that happens.

God's sovereignty follows logically from who he is - he is God.

But Sittser writes, "This positive inclination toward God's sovereignty may come to a sudden stop in the face of severe loss."

Do you believe in the sovereignty of God?

Do you believe that he is truly in control of all history, including your history, your life – even down to the smallest detail?

If everything in your life is manageable right now – then the question of God's sovereignty and its answer probably don't feel very important this morning.

But if you have experienced life seemingly out of control or if you have the good sense to realize you aren't in control right now and that there will come times, even at death itself, when you will know you aren't in control – then this question and its answer about the sovereignty of God are very important.

Gerald Sittser wrote, "the issue of God's sovereignty was no longer a mere abstraction..." (p138)

With that introduction I want to look at what God says about himself.

Listen to God's own claim through Isaiah the prophet:

Isaiah 46:9-10 "Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say my purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please."

Listen to God's claim through David:

I Chronicles 29:11-13

"Yours O Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name."

Psalm 135:6 "Whatever the Lord pleased, that he did in heaven and in earth, in the seas and all the deep places.

Listen to Job:

Job 42:2 "I know that you can do all things; **no** plan of yours can be thwarted."

Hear Daniel:

Daniel 2:2 "And he changes the times and the seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings."

Hear even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 4:35 "He does according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him 'What have you done'".

Through Isaiah we learn that God's sovereignty extends even to the calamities of life – God openly admits to causing adversity and disaster –

Isaiah 45:7 “The one forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these things.”

The Apostle Paul said:

Ephesians 1:11 God works all things after the counsel of his will.

In both Isaiah's day and the apostle Paul's day, as today, there were those who wanted to argue that God wasn't fair if he acted differently toward some people than toward others.

And in all of Scripture one answer to such criticism is:

Isaiah 45:9 “Woe to the one who quarrels with his maker”

Romans 9:18-21 “Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?”

Don't you understand? God is sovereign, he doesn't have to answer to us or to anyone – his decisions are not controlled by anything outside of himself.

In fact, both Isaiah and Paul argue, if it wasn't for the sovereignty of God, none of us would be saved – if God didn't overrule our hearts none of us would ever turn to Jesus for forgiveness and life.

We could cite so many more verses from Scripture – in fact all of Scripture affirms this basic, fundamental concept – God is sovereign – all that happens in life and eternity, is controlled by God.

Now I know this raises some questions about God that we struggle with.

Questions about the role of prayer, the necessity of evangelism, God's relationship to tragedy and suffering in our world and other questions.

Those questions can be answered, but I don't want you to miss the point: We dare not say we believe the Bible if we begin to limit the sovereignty of God in any way.

When you read the verses, we have already look at, and scores of others like them, you cannot say God is sovereign except in certain situations.

No, God says he is absolutely sovereign – in all ways, in all things.

Not only does Scripture explicitly state that God is sovereign – not a little sovereign, not even a lot sovereign, but absolutely sovereign.

But also impressive to us doubters is that history demonstrates his sovereignty.

Over and over again in history we see God demonstrating his sovereignty over nature.

We rightly stand in awe of hurricanes, tornadoes, and erupting volcanoes.

But God is sovereign over them all - He created the world, he parted the sea, he stopped the sun, he calmed the storm, he stopped fire from burning, and turned water into wine.

He stopped the mouths of lions, he made ravens carry food for Elijah, and he caused a donkey to speak.

In history, God has demonstrated his sovereignty over the angelic and demonic world.

He banished the evil angels from heaven, time after time he defeated the forces of evil such as through Elijah on Mt Carmel.

He exercised his sovereignty over people, even the mightiest of men on the earth, when he defeated the kings of Assyria without a sword being lifted, when He lifted David up and took Saul down, when He wiped out the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah while saving Lot and his daughters.

Not a ruler has ever lived or ruled, including today, without the sovereign superintendence of God.

He has demonstrated his sovereignty even over life and death.

He gave a child to the ninety-year-old barren woman named Sarah.



Time and again in the Old Testament we have accounts of God giving or taking life, according to his perfect plan.

He caused a virgin to conceive.

He took the lives of Annanias and Saphira while he gave life back to the widow's son and to Lazarus.

And supremely he raised to life, his own Son Jesus – who unlike Lazarus, would never again experience death.

And so, over and over again, so we can't miss it, we see in history how God manages all the events of history to accomplish his purposes.

He used the evil of Joseph's brothers' to protect Jacob's family through which the Messiah would come.

The kings of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, over a 1000 years of history, were used by God to position his people exactly where he planned.

One of the most amazing aspects of the Bible is to watch events unfold and realize the hand of God controlling, managing, working every detail, even hundreds or thousands of years earlier, to accomplish his perfect plan.

He used the murderous designs of the religious leaders of Jesus' day to accomplish his purpose of atoning for the sins of his people.

The religious leaders thought they were putting to death a trouble maker but they were simply accomplishing God's greater goal of the sacrifice of his own son.

Opponents of the gospel in the time of the apostles, thought they were crushing Christianity by persecuting it fiercely.

But in God's sovereign plan and control all they managed to do was spread it even more widely.

Romans 8:28 speaks to the sovereign control of God in every detail of life.

“And we know that in **all** things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Is God sovereign only in some things?

No! "In ALL things" God works for the good of his own people.

The Scripture asserts that there is not a detail of life too small or irrelevant that it is outside of God's notice or outside of God's control.

And God takes all the events of life, every last one of them, and weaves them to accomplish his purposes.

I know it is a well-known story, but because it culminates in the lifetime of many of us and covers over 50 years – it well illustrates how that sovereign control of God is operating yet today.

And remember that as surely as God was controlling the history of Israel he is controlling history today – even our histories.

I first read the story in one of Charles Colson's books.

Boris Kornfeld was born to Jewish parents who were so influenced by Communist theory that they had abandoned any hope of a Messiah and fixed their hope instead on the Revolution.

Kornfeld followed his parent's beliefs but in spite of the fact that he was a doctor, he ended up on a prison camp of the Soviet Union.

As the inhumanity of prison life went on day after day, even prisoners who formerly believed in the Soviet philosophy lost their faith in Communism.

It was then that Kornfeld came in contact with a Christian, another prisoner, who spoke of real hope even in that place.

A great struggle ensued in Kornfeld's mind but he was overwhelmed by God's love demonstrated in the life of the Christian prisoner and Boris Kornfeld became a Christian.

It changed his life.

His hatred began to give way to love.

In his role as a doctor, he became unwilling to sign the medical releases confirming that prisoners were strong enough to withstand solitary confinement knowing that the intention of the officials was to kill those prisoners.

Not only did he refuse to any longer cooperate with the murderous intentions of the officials but he also did the unimaginable.

He caught an orderly taking food from a hospital patient dying of malnutrition.

And in spite of the fact that orderlies were a protected class of prisoners who were stooges of the officials, Kornfeld turned the orderly in.

With that Kornfeld knew he was signing his own death certificate, because the orderlies would retaliate – as they had done to others several times in recent months.

Knowing he could no longer stay in his barracks, he stayed in the hospital, taking quick naps all the time looking out for an attempt on his life.

But along with his carefulness came a new freedom.

He began to say and do what was right.

He no longer feared what men could do to him.

The anger he felt for his captors and those who wished to kill him turned to love.

So overwhelmed by this love welling up within him, he had to tell someone.

He found a patient – a man with colon cancer.

He talked all afternoon and into the night with this patient – telling him about his conversion and his new freedom in Christ.

Sick as the patient was, he was awed by the testimony.

That patient was awakened the next morning by a great commotion only to discover that Dr. Kornfeld had been murdered during the night.

That patient pondered the Doctor's testimony and over many days finally became a Christian as a result.

He survived the Soviet concentration camp and went on to tell the world what he had learned there.

That patient was Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Solzhenitsyn was used by God to influence people all over the world and his voice and writings were instrumental in the final dismantling of the “iron curtain” in 1989.

His testimony has influenced thousands including Charles Colson.

A prison camp, an unknown Christian who shared the good news of Jesus with a communist doctor, a man with colon cancer who one night hears the testimony of the doctor’s conversion, a murder, a book – The Gulag Archipelago, the fall of the “iron curtain”, Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Russians, Kyrgyzese, and millions of others now hearing the gospel who formerly were inaccessible.

The sovereign hand of God in the smallest details of life, working his world-changing purposes.

The Scripture declares God’s sovereignty,  
History demonstrates his sovereignty,  
And **logic** demands it.

Many years ago A. W. Pink wrote:

“Men imagine that the Most High is moved by sentiment, rather than actuated by principle. They suppose that his (sovereignty) is such an idle fiction that Satan is thwarting his designs on every side. They think that if he has formed any plan or purpose at all, then it must be like theirs, constantly subject to change. They openly declare that whatever power he possesses must be restricted, lest he invade the citadel of man’ free will and reduce him to a machine. They lower the all-efficacious atonement, which has actually redeemed everyone for whom it was made, to a mere remedy which sin-sick souls may use if they feel disposed to; and they (reduce) the invincible work of the Holy Spirit to an offer of the gospel which sinners may accept or reject as they please.” “The God of this twentieth century no more resembles the supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun.” “A God whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits naught but contempt.” Pink 28,29

Folks, it is still true, “Either he is Lord of all or he is not Lord at all.”

It is not possible to be somewhat sovereign.

**Lastly this morning** I want you to realize how encouraging is this truth about God's sovereignty.

We have hope because God is sovereign.

When I pray according to God's will, I can know it will happen.

When I ask God to forgive me, I can know he will.

When I encounter difficulty in life, I can know that it is under his control and good will come out of it.

When I reach the end of life, I know there is a future for me that is secure because it is secured by a sovereign God.

Planning and work, goals and effort, even pain and difficulty have value in a world overseen by a sovereign God.

My choices and my actions matter because God, not fate, is in control!

Charles Spurgeon wrote so well, "There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that Sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules (those afflictions), and that Sovereignty will (use those afflictions for good). There is nothing for which the children (of God) ought more earnestly to contend than the doctrine of their Master over all creation – the Kingship of God over all the works of his own hands – the Throne of God and his right to sit upon that throne." (from Spurgeon sermon on Matthew 20:15 also found in Pink 32)

The Scripture declares it, history demonstrates it, logic demands it, and our lives and future depend on it – God is sovereign.

Gerald Sittser, whose family was killed in that automobile accident wrote toward the end of his book:

"...over time I realized that the trajectory of my grief had set me on a collision course with God and that eventually I would have to wrestle with this most complex of issues. I knew I had to make peace with God's sovereignty OR I had to reject God altogether, OR I had to

settle for a lesser God who lacked the power or the desire to prevent the accident.” (Sittser 135)

He had to know, is God sovereign or isn't he!

Sittser concluded:

“Loss may call the existence (and sovereignty) of God into question... In our pain we are tempted to reject God, yet for some reason we hesitate to take that course of action. So we move toward God, then away from him. We wrestle in our souls to believe. Finally we choose God... We decide to be in a relationship with God. And then we discover that God, in his sovereignty, has already decided to be in a relationship with us.”

God is sovereign even in our struggles with unbelief.

He is Lord!

The implications of this are huge.

First of all, he deserves our worship – what a God! – Sovereign.

Secondly, he deserves our allegiance – how foolish to do anything other than to cooperate with his purposes.

He will accomplish his desires – and he will accomplish them through us – either through our rebellion or through our obedience.

God will not be thwarted – He is Lord!

We love him for it and we yield our lives to him.

I Chronicles 29:11-13

“Yours O Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.”