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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

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The knowledge of theology is a matter of the utmost importance for every Christian because our whole attitude to life depends on our doctrine of God. Religion takes its character from its doctrine of God and differences between religions can be traced to variations in the doctrine of God. So the doctrine of God is extraordinarily important. Doctrine is the Latin word for 'teaching' and if the words 'teaching about God' are given their Greek form, we have the word 'theology'. Theology simply means teaching or knowledge about God, of which there can be nothing more important to study or to know. Theology therefore is the most important of all subjects. Now, as in so many other subjects, there are both erroneous ideas and true ideas, so too in the doctrine of God there is a vast number of errors competing with the truth. If we concentrate our study on these errors, theology will be a very dry subject. But true theology, is far from being dry; for it is a most powerful subject, elevating our mind, stirring our conscience and energizing our will.

Theology must confine itself to what the Bible teaches, for no one would know anything about God at all, if He did not reveal Himself to us. From reflecting on the world, we know that God exists; we know something of His power and divinity in the universe; we know something of His moral character in our conscience; but that is as far as the natural world takes us. When theology is confined to our natural resources in thinking about God, all sorts of fantastic ideas of God arise, as is witnessed to by the various religions of the world. True theology, therefore, must concentrate on what God's Word teaches.

In considering God's character and nature and our relationship to Him, there is no more important

a subject than God's sovereignty.

The Lord Jesus Christ taught that God is Lord of Heaven and earth. In Matthew 11:25 He prayed: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth", - we are to think of God, therefore, as Lord of heaven and earth. He is the creator of all and is fully sovereign over and in His creation. There is a phrase that runs through Scripture, first spoken to Abraham and repeated to the Virgin Mary and again endorsed by Jesus, namely, that "there is nothing too hard for the Lord". This truth our faith must assimilate if we are to have a right relationship to God and a right understanding of His revelation - there is nothing too hard for the Lord. Abraham and Sarah faced this with regard to the birth of Isaac. Abraham believed. He counted God able to give him a child, even though his body and his wife's were, as St. Paul put it, dead. So too the Virgin was reminded of this same truth by Gabriel with regard to the birth of our Lord; and when the disciples were despairing of the salvation of the people, asking "Who then can be saved?", Jesus replied "with man it is impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God".

God rules. This is where we must start if we are to understand the truth about ourselves, the world and God. God's rule was the centre of Jesus' teaching. The kingdom of God literally means the rule of God. When the writer of Revelation was given a vision of Heaven (Rev. 4) the first thing he saw was a throne - God's throne. God rules; nothing is outside His control. This is the fundamental fact of reality.

Mankind's failure to believe means that our concept of God is too small. J.B. Phillips tells the story in one of his books how early in the war when radar had just come into the news and was a

completely novel and rather amazing idea, he had asked a group of young people the snap question, "Do you think God knows all about radar?" Half the group said "No". Of course they soon realised the absurdity of their answer but it showed that their concept of God was too small. God's knowledge is complete and absolute. He knows things not by way of observation as we know things, for He knows them because they are first in His mind and then in actuality. It is because He has willed them that they exist. God knows, for example, every movement of every electron in every galaxy throughout the universe, and a great deal more besides, things of which we have no awareness. He knows them because he wills them. Since God is infinite, there is no detail too small, nor anything too immense for Him to hold in His knowledge at the one and the same time. This is quite clearly taught, for example, in Isaiah 41 where God calls upon the idols to declare the future. The fact that they are not able to know the future shows that they are not God. God knows the future because it is in His mind and will before it is in actuality. That is why He can predict it. In I Corinthians 2:16, St. Paul speaks about the immensity of God's knowledge by saying, "Who is able to teach God anything". God knows all. So the first step is for us to re-adjust our thinking along this line. For example, Amos 9:7 speaks about the movement of the Syrian tribes and the Ethiopians and the Philistines. He said God was the one who not only brought the children of Israel up out of Egypt (we are all willing to acknowledge this) but who led the Syrians from Kir and the Philistines from Caphtor.

Do you think of the wanderings of the aboriginals of Arnhem land as under God's control and superintendence?-because that is what Amos is saying with regard to the neighbouring tribes about Israel.

There is the well-known verse from our Lord's teaching about the flight of the sparrow (Matt. 10: 29). We may have got used to the idea of sparrows as under God's control, but if a sparrow is under God's control, so is an ant, so is a spider and not only the ones we see but also the ones, for example, in the jungles of the Amazon. Everything is within His knowledge and control according to the teaching of the Bible. And you may think that this is an exaggeration; because we are inclined to think that God, like us, knows these things only in round numbers. We tend to think of Jesus' statement "The hairs of your head are all numbered" as a generalization not to be taken literally. But the Bible's teaching is clear. Our God is a great God. Jesus instanced the hairs of our head, not because it is the most important but because it is the least important object of God's knowledge. Since He knows this, He knows everything. His knowledge is infinite. Not only is His knowledge infinite, including for example, the movement and position of every electron every instant of time, but also His power is infinite. If He knows all about these things and holds them in existence by His knowledge of them, He can obviously control them, as it were by the movement of His mind. Certainly the Bible testifies to that effect. Psalm 104 proclaims God's complete control over His creation. The psalm begins with adoration of God's greatness, and goes on to speak of the weather as under God's control. It is God who causes the rivers and the springs to flow. "He watereth the mountains from his chambers. He causes the grass to grow for the cattle and herb for the service of man." This is the way the Bible expects us to think about God. This is the way God expects us to think about the world, because it is the true way. It is the correct way. It is certainly not the way in which we normally would think, because human society in which we live is God-forgetting.

But that is not the true attitude. The psalmist depicts every event of man and beast and the natural world as directly operated as it were by God. This, of course, must be so, for God's interest in His creation did not cease with creation and His purposes for creation did not cease with having made the world. Having made the world He is also interested in the world and cares for the world as we see in Psalm 104. He cares for the animate and the inanimate creation as well as for man. And God is not limited. Because He cares for and knows all about one aspect of His creation, it does not mean that He has not got time for something else. That is the way we think about it, but, of course, we must not limit God by the limits of our power of imagination. Our imagination is based on our ways of doing things and to limit our concept of God to this is hopelessly inadequate. By definition God vastly transcends humanity and its ways. He knows all about our lives and gives us His full love and care, without diminishing this from anyone else, or from anything else, however minute a creature it might be in our estimate.

God's exercise of sovereignty and control of the world is absolutely complete - nothing takes place apart from His knowledge and apart from Him. For it is obvious that if any event is to be under Him, every event must be, because all events interact on one another. The world is not divisible; every event is related. Even the falling of a leaf is related to some other event, and so on.

Any event can be used as an illustration to pinpoint this truth. Thus, according to Proverbs 16:33, God disposes and controls the drawing of the marbles from the barrel in the lottery. If people realised this they might not be so anxious to invest as they say, in the lottery. Certainly,

this verse in Proverbs 16:33 reminds us that even such a fortuitous event, as we conceive it, as the casting of a dice, or the drawing of a marble from a barrel, the pulling of a handle of a poker machine (and I am given to understand that this is not as fortuitous as it may seem!) or, for that matter, any other event is under God's control. Thus the idea of luck as an independent thing vanishes. Luck is only fortuitous from our point of view because we do not know the causes, if any. But so called luck is under God's complete control, according to the teaching of the Bible.

Take a further example from the more difficult concept of the imperious will of an Eastern despot. The fall of the dice is uncontrollable, by men, but from the point of view of human life, what is more uncontrollable than the despotic will of an Eastern tyrant - whom he will he keeps alive and whom he will he slays - as Nebuchadnezzar put it (and he proved his point more than once!) But in Proverbs 21:1 we are told that "the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord, and He turns it as a water course", turns it this way or that way just as the winter streams rushing down the valley swollen by a cloudburst sometimes make a channel this way, sometimes make a channel that way. If God so controls the imperious will of the king, if "the hearts of kings are in God's rule and governance", what is there else left outside of His control? The same sentiment is expressed in Psalm 76:10 where we read that the wrath of man is under God's control. Only so much of the wrath of man as is to His glory is permitted. The rest He restrains.

A very good illustration of this latter point is the story of Job where the wrath of man reaches so far but no further, because it is limited by the will and decree of God. The story of Job is clear testimony that God controls and limits Satan,

The Sabbeans and the Chaldeans, those nomadic bands that attacked Job's property, though stirred up by Satan, were acting within the permission and within the limits that God had given.

There are many other illustrations of this truth in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 10:5, 12, 15, the Assyrians are said to be the rod of God's anger. They are His axe. Now the Assyrians were quite unaware of that. Isaiah 10 makes that clear. The militaristic Assyrians thought they were doing what they were doing under their own steam (10:13). They said "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent". From this self-description it is plain that the Assyrians had the latest technique for waging total war. They were prudent, they were wise, they were strong. They were also cruel, blood-thirsty and avaricious. These were the reasons why they were victorious. But behind it all was God's purposes. They were the axe, and the axe was boasting itself against Him that hewed therewith. From verse 12 we learn that the Assyrian is performing God's whole work upon Mount Zion. The Assyrian's wicked will was serving God's justice by inflicting judgment on those who deserve judgment. In the case of Job and the Sabbeans, God's purpose was not for judgment but for testing (as Abraham was tested) in order that God might be glorified and Job might learn more about God and so enter into inestimable blessing; for as our knowledge of God increases so our blessing in life increases. None of these robber bands had any intention of doing God's will, nor I may say, had Satan (who was behind them stirring up these instruments of his). All were simply originating their sin themselves within their own wills. They knew what they were doing was wrong but in their wrong-doing, in their rebellion against God, they could not remove themselves from the control of God nor frustrate the purposes of God -



in Job's case, purposes of blessing, in the case of the Assyrians and Israel, purposes of judgment, and also of blessing, in due course, of the remnant.

The basic doctrine of the Christian religion may be said to be that God is the creator of heaven and earth and everything that is in them. And as their creator He is their sovereign controller. When we align our thoughts to this truth, our actions and attitudes will more easily be directed aright. Let me illustrate this from the story of Joseph, who was sold as a slave by his brothers but who after years of slavery and unjust imprisonment was chosen to be governor of the greatest country in the world. In Genesis chapter 45 we read how Joseph, now a prince, made himself known to his brothers who had sold him as a slave. Naturally the brothers were a bit uncertain as to their reception. They thought Joseph would do what they themselves would have done in those circumstances, and so they were frightened. "They are troubled at his presence"(verse 3). But in verse 5 Joseph reassured them that he had no vengeance in his heart. He said "God sent me here to preserve life ....It was not you who sent me here but God"(vv 5,8). We may ask: "How was he able to rise above the natural feelings of vengeance and the desire to get his own back?" It was because during the whole of this time he was suffering in such an unjust way he knew that his sufferings were not outside the purposes of God, for God was in control of His world and so he was able to commit his cause to God, who, in due course, vindicated him. We will also be vindicated, in due course. Sometimes we will be vindicated at the Second Coming, sometimes within this life as well. Joseph committed his cause to God. He was not aware when he would be vindicated. It was sufficient to know that God was in control of all this sin of others under which he was suffering - the sin of his brothers; the sin of

Potiphar's wife; the sin of the forgetfulness of the chief butler; so he could reassure his brothers that "God sent me before you to preserve life", (Gen. 45.50). He saw the hand of God in it all. So too if we are conscious of the sovereignty of God in our life, we will be able to rise above the desire to vindicate ourselves. More than once Scripture tells us "Avenge not yourselves", because God is looking after the matter.

We are limited in our understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves at any time. Consequently, our natural reactions may very well be wrong. We are not to judge but to commit our cause to God who judges rightly - to a righteous and just Creator. That is obviously what Joseph had done and that is what preserved the equanimity of his heart and enabled him to forgive. Now those of you who know your Greek classics will remember the story of Odysseus and Telemachus on Odysseus' return home. What a different story that was with regard to vengeance! The Greek child would be brought up on the story of Odysseus' bloody and complete vengeance on the suitors of his wife. Those who are brought up on the Scriptures are brought up on this story of Joseph, brought up on the story of a full and ready forgiveness of very real wrongs.

That Joseph was able to forgive because he knew that God's sovereign hand controlled the events of his life is confirmed by Genesis 50:20. Here the brothers a second time approach Joseph. For after the death of their father Jacob, their fears returned. Presumably, they thought that Joseph had merely been behaving himself in front of his father, Jacob. They had not attributed to him the right motives nor credited him with being a generous and forgiving person. Joseph once more had to reassure them. He did not hesitate to recognise that their intentions were sinful; "You meant

evil against me". But he recognised that God was in the event: "God meant it for good". As the psalmist said "the wrath of man shall praise God and the residue thereof He will restrain". (Ps. 76:10).

But perhaps the clearest illustration of God's control of the evil will of men is the story of the crucifixion. In Acts 2:23 Peter in his sermon does not hesitate to accuse the sinners of their sin. "You by the hands of lawless men crucified and slew Jesus". The crucifixion was the result of sin, - the sin of Judas, the sin of Pilate, the sin of the chief priest, the sin of the crowd, and so on. Every event which led to the crucifixion was wrong and sinful and the culprits were sinning against their consciences. God's Holy Spirit, we may say, was pricking their consciences; there would be no doubt about that. Even a Gentile like Pilate recognised that what he was doing was not right, and he washed his hands as though that was the way of getting rid of his guilt. God writes His law on peoples' hearts. They do not, of course, take notice of that, and they are therefore without excuse. The crucifixion took place as the result of sinful wills. But, nevertheless, what took place took place according to God's purposes. As Peter put it: "he being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God". In this verse we see the double-sided character of the event of Jesus' crucifixion: an event where men's sin is quite obviously at work and yet an event which is completely under God's control and out of which has flowed immense benefits and blessing. Turn over to Acts 4:27, 28 (for this, like the Joseph story, is not an isolated verse - it is repeated in order that we might have no doubt as to what to think about the matter). This second verse is from the prayer of the early church, which, quoting Psalm 2 saw that the psalm is fulfilled in Christ - "to do whatsoever they hand and thy counsel foreordained to come, to pass" (verse 28).

The early Christians here affirm that God's sovereignty is complete. At the completion of His prayer in Gethsemane Jesus saw His crucifixion as the cup which His father had given Him (John 18:11). Consequently, He was able to commit His cause "to Him who judges righteously" as St. Peter put it (I Pet. 2:23). St. Peter goes on to exhort those who suffer according to the Will of God, to commit their lives to God, their faithful Creator (I Peter 4:19).

From the point of view of history the crucifixion of Christ was only just one event out of innumerable similar events. It was indistinguishable from all the other events before it and after it; it was an event of history. But with regard to ~~this~~ event we have had, as it were, the curtain drawn aside and we have the Word of God affirming that this event was under God's control, teaching us that every event is to be thought of in the same way. God does not control one event only, but all events. Every event in your life is under God's control, according to the teaching of the Scripture. That does not in any way make for determinism or diminish the reality of our responsibility. If this causes a problem it is because our way of thinking about God is wrong. "You shall be as God" - that was the bait by which Satan tempted man, and ever since the fall we deal with God as someone over against us, someone more or less on an equality with us, as though we were gods ourselves. But scripture teaches that our relation to God is quite different really. He is the one "in whom we live and move and have our being". He is sustaining us every moment, even when we are rebellious against him. He sustains our being; and He sustains the beings of all His creation. And, therefore, His control of our life and of the events around us is complete; but this does not in any way weaken the reality of the natures He has created. That ought to be obvious if you reflect that God knew from the beginning His intentions.

Events do not take Him by surprise. He does not have to improvise, or reflect on what He should do next. In creating us with a certain nature He works through the nature He created, and therefore, from our point of view, everything will seem to be natural. It was extraordinarily natural that those Sabbeans and Chaldeans should want to enrich themselves at Job's expense when they got the chance. Their responsibility was real, for they knew what they were doing was wrong and they will be judged for it. So too the Assyrians were responsible for their actions. They were conscious that the actions were their own, and yet they were doing God's work and, as Habakkuk saw, the cruelties of the Chaldeans was working God's purposes of judgment. God, therefore, works through our nature; through the natures He has made. Therefore, He will work physical things through physical natures and moral things through moral natures. In His blessing of us He will work through our wills, through our minds, through our emotions, through our responses, and in doing so the reality of our own action is not weakened. We are conscious that we are responsible and we know that what we will, we will with our own will. As St. Paul put it, we are therefore obliged to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us both to will and to do (Philippians 2:13). "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling". This sentence underlines our responsibility and if we neglect to do the things that we ought to do we will be held responsible and will have no one but ourselves to blame. For we know in ourselves that we are responsible for doing what is right. And yet at the same time we are not to regard ourselves as independent, as though the good we do were from ourselves, because the Scripture makes clear that all the good that is in us is God's gift to us, because it is God who wills within us to will and do of His good pleasure. Moreover, as sinners we are incapable of doing good apart from God's gift.

One of the problems in our understanding of this truth is that there is no parallel in our experience to the relationship of a real though secondary will to a sovereign will; we can experience it but we cannot parallel it by observing similar examples outside of ourselves, and that presents us with a difficulty in understanding it. But, nevertheless, these two things are very clearly taught in the Scripture and true in experience that we are responsible for our actions and that God is sovereign in them. Everything will be natural because God will be working through nature. For example, in blessing the world He makes the sun to rise. That is the way Jesus put it, but we are more accustomed to say that the sun rises. But the truth is that it is God who makes the sun to rise; He makes the sun to rise every day, every day, every day. Why the regularity? Because there is no reason why He should change. We say that it is natural for the sun to rise, and this is true. But we should see beyond 'nature' to the hand of God. So, too, He works through our moral natures, and from one point of view, everything will seem to be natural. But we make a great mistake if we think that 'nature' is the final explanation. The eye of faith is able to see God's hand and that is why we can pray to Him and commit our cause to Him. For He is our sovereign, righteous and faithful creator.

At this point a question may be asked about the apparent clash within the will of God. For example, in the event of the crucifixion, it was the Holy Spirit who warned the culprits not to go on in their sins; they knew that what they were doing was wrong. God did not want them to do it, and yet the event was His will, so that there seems to be a conflict within the will of God.

The best way to resolve the paradox is to use two different terms because there are two different

things for which we use the same word 'will'. And so, we may speak about God's 'decretive' will by which God decrees whatever comes to pass (Eph.1), and God 'preceptive' will by which He wills His creation to conform to His character expressed in His precepts. Now the preceptive will of God does not include sin. The decretive will of God takes sin into account. The preceptive will is the will which expresses itself in God's precepts, the things which we ought to do, like the ten commandments. God wants us to be like Himself and so the preceptive will of God corresponds to His character of goodness and His will for us is laid down by precept. His will for Pilate was laid down by precept. Pilate knew what his duty was, God had written His will in his heart. Pilate did not follow this preceptive will of God. He sinned against what he knew to be right. Yet his action was not outside God's control. God's decretive will included it in the plan he willed for the salvation of sinners so that what Pilate did was according to the determinate foreknowledge and counsel of God. Within the world there is sin, but this is not outside God's control; but included in His working out His purposes after the counsel of His own will. Now sin does not originate with God. Sin originates in a rebellious will. Sin never has the approval of God. There is always His warning against it and His judgment of it. Nevertheless, even the existence of sin does not diminish the sovereignty of God. God is not less sovereign because of the presence of sin in His creation as though by sinning man had got the upper hand of God. We may have an intellectual problem at this point, the problem of the origin of sin - why did God allow it? We cannot answer, all we know is that sin is there. It is important to recognise that God does not will it in the sense that it does not correspond to His character: on the other hand, He does not give it a mere bare permission, as though

saying, "there is an area of activity where people may act as they like in". That is not the Biblical view; it is an active permission; for although sin originates in rebellious wills and within creation, it does not diminish the sovereignty of God one iota.

In quoting such verses as "God is not willing that any should perish but all should be saved" care must be taken in exegeting the word "will" as to whether it reflects the character or the purpose of God. We know the character of God; He does not wish any to be lost. "God is not willing that any should perish". That is the negative way of putting the matter. Put positively, we may say that it is His will that all should be saved. For this corresponds to His character and would have corresponded with His purposes had not sin intervened; that is, His preceptive will would have been fulfilled in His decretive will. But because of sin, this no longer follows. His preceptive will remains plain and unaltered; His decretive will is secret to us apart from what He has revealed (e.g., "to sum up all things in Christ"). It has not been given to us to know why God has permitted sin in His world, but we do know that it is not outside His control and that in the end it will redound to His glory and through it He will bring blessing to those who trust Him, to us whom He has chosen to receive His mercy (Rom. 9:23).

I want to draw your attention to some of the results of this doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Firstly, the sovereignty of God delivers from fear, all fear except the reverential fear and honour of God. If you fear God then there is no need to fear man, for God is sovereign over man. The reverential fear of God is based on the knowledge of His power and character, His love, His goodness, and His promises. It is the same as trusting and honouring



Him. You cannot trust God or honour Him unless you know what His promises are; unless you know, for example, that in Romans 8:28-30 God promises that all things will work together for good to those who love him. He is able to work all things together for good because He is sovereign. He has promised that they will all work together for good and therefore you can trust Him, and honour Him by trusting Him. Your trust is your worship of Him, because worship and honour are only two different words for the same thing. Thus, faith is basic Christian worship.

For those who trust God contentment and enjoyment take the place of anxiety, and thankfulness wells in us as we realize that the sovereign God is the source of our blessing. Prayer is based on the sovereignty of God. There is an idea current in some theological circles that God has limited Himself by giving man a will. That is not an idea found in Scripture, in fact it negates all religion. For example, if I pray to God to deliver me from danger, say, from a bandit, it would not be very much help to get the reply "I am sorry but that man has got free will and he is able to knife you in the the back if he wants to: address your prayer to him as I have limited Myself by giving him a free will".

Prayer is based on the sovereignty of God, but sometimes our intelligence does not accept that doctrine. Yet as we are the more vividly conscious of His sovereignty, so we will pray with greater assurance and also greater vigour, as we know He hears and is able to answer. For example, Psalm 23 which is an affirmation of God's protection, is based on God's sovereignty. "Though I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me". God's presence is sufficient guarantee that evil will not be present.

Psalm 56:11, "In God have I put my trust, I will not be afraid. What can man do unto me?" If, however, you believe in the self-limitation of God, the answer is that man can do anything to you that he chooses because God has self-limited Himself. Thus, any self-limitation or diminution of the complete sovereignty of God is an unbiblical and irreligious concept, which should find no lodgement in our thinking. God has not limited Himself in any way. That is why you can put complete trust in Him.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God frees us from all fear and helps us to trust in His protection. It also inculcates humility. I Peter 5:6 reads, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you in due time". It is the mighty hand of God which has brought about the events in your life which are humbling you - some event or other, whatever it may be, some circumstance, bringing you down in humility. It is the mighty hand of God. That is exactly what Joseph recognised. Then follows the promise that "He will exalt you in due time". Unless we live by the promises of God we do not have the strength to do what we ought to do, namely, to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. He has given us these promises to strengthen us. We must recognize that the "exaltation in due time" may not be in this life. If you are pinning your hopes to this life, then you may be disappointed, but if you believe in God, then you believe in eternity and He has promised to exalt you in due time and you are to fix your hopes on that and so you will be strengthened to humble yourself in the present circumstances. He may, of course, exalt you like Joseph within this life as well, or like Jesus, the crown may be only after death. The doctrine of God's sovereignty teaches us humility, because we recognise that it is God who has allowed these things to happen to us. Not that He desires them

in themselves. He did not desire the brothers to sell Joseph in Egypt, or the Jews to crucify Jesus; but He over-ruled these actions. He does not desire that you become sick, but He over-rules it. If He allows sickness to enter your life it is for the purpose of correcting you, or teaching you, or giving you the opportunity of glorifying Him by learning more of His love and righteousness. All temptation is allowed into our life for the purpose of being overcome. We read quite definitely in I Corinthians 10:13 that God limits temptation: "He will not suffer you to be tried above that you are able". He limited the temptation of Job; He limits our temptations. He does not Himself tempt us, but insofar that He allows temptation, or trial or testing (the words mean the same), to enter our life, it is for the purpose of our overcoming it in order that we might learn more of His character and trustworthiness. And therefore, nothing will be allowed into our life which is not possible for us to cope with. That is to say, God will give us the resources to cope with temptations and tests of life and those resources will be adequate if we use them because He will limit the temptation and testing so that it does not exceed our ability. Satan desires to overwhelm us and would do so apart from God's restraint.

A knowledge of God's sovereignty strengthens us for service by releasing us from the tension which comes from judging things by results. Matthew 11:10-30 is an example. Jesus is reflecting on His failure to communicate the gospel. (I use that modern phrase because we are sometimes bamboozled by the fact that we are failing to communicate the gospel today, in the sense that we are not getting people to respond to its message). Jesus upbraids the cities of Galilee because, although, as we may say, the finest of teachers and the most marvellous of miracle workers has been

ministering to them, they have taken no notice of His message. They have not repented. In modern jargon, He had not communicated His message to them. It is in that context that our Lord reflects on God's sovereignty, "I thank ~~thee~~ Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, Yea, Father, for so it was well pleasing in thy sight". When we fail to communicate the gospel it may be because we have not given enough attention to the way we have presented the message, but it may not only be that. God is sovereign and it may be that His purpose is, as in Isaiah's ministry and in Jeremiah's ministry and in our Lord's ministry, that the gospel should not be communicated in the sense of being accepted; strange though that may seem. But at all events, as our Lord was faced with in this situation, He recognised that God is sovereign. "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from some and revealed them to others, yea Father, for it is well pleasing in thy sight." Jesus then renews the rejected gospel offer: "Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest".

A recollection of the sovereignty of God releases the preacher from the tension of wondering what has gone wrong, and enables him to persist in spite of disappointment in the knowledge that God is sovereign. It is our duty to pray and to study and to learn how to communicate the gospel, but in the end, God is sovereign. We must persist in the gospel even though we see no results. In fact, however, God will give us results because we are ministering the gospel of the new covenant of life, not ministering the old covenant, as Moses and Jeremiah; but nevertheless, our ministry is not judged by its results, because in much of the ministry of the Word of God, the results are not apparent or available for cataloguing. This may be

verified, for example, by asking Christians the history of their spiritual lives. One learns that some faithful minister, man or woman, Sunday School teacher or day school teacher, or teacher of special religious instruction at school, has ministered the Word; it has been accepted and has changed the person's life; but the one ministering it has been quite unaware, and is in no position to find out. Very often the person concerned has himself never known or has forgotten the name of the one who was the means of his conversion. A knowledge that God is at work to bless through the gospel, will strengthen us to persevere without constantly reflecting on what, if any, are the results, the visible results, of our ministry. Once a minister begins to reflect on whether he is getting any results, the only sort of results he is likely to see are buildings or organizations, and they are the least important of all. Or it may be the number of people in the congregation or the number of organizations within the parish. Now these results are irrelevant - not completely irrelevant - but are meaningless in themselves. They are not the key things to be aimed at. A minister must work by faith in the knowledge of God's sovereignty. His labour will not be in vain in the Lord even though he does not see its full results. So long as he keeps his message, his methods and his objectives in conformity with God's mind revealed in Scripture, God will acknowledge his ministry.

God's sovereignty is the ground of prayer. This is well illustrated in St. Paul who prayed three times for the thorn in the flesh to be removed. He was aware that God was able to answer that prayer and therefore he persevered. And we are to glorify God by prayer and by specific petitionary prayer. There is a modern fad which says that petition in prayer is one of the least important parts of prayer. However, the Lord's Prayer,

for example, consists entirely of petition; six petitions. Of course, the petitions are very important ones, and in particular, the first petition is that God's name will be honoured. If you have prayed for that you have prayed for everything. And if that is the first thing that arises in your heart when you address God in prayer, well, you have got your attitude to God rightly adjusted. Nevertheless, 'Hallowed by thy name' is petition. By bringing our petitions to God we acknowledge His sovereignty and His love. In other words, we acknowledge His character. Thus we worship Him. To persevere in prayer is our exercise of faith and an expression of our understanding of the sovereignty of God. We are to live a life of faith in the revealed character of God. Of this revealed character of God the first and basic truth is that He is Lord of heaven and earth.

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