

Riverside Reflections – Week 9 – The Sovereignty of God

As we have said again and again, the truths we are studying are not meant to be abstract concepts, they are truths meant to be lived out. We are not to just live out our Christianity in our heads. We could be very knowledgeable and articulate Christians, but our lives will be empty and frustrated if they aren't balanced with living life on some sort of a grounded level. Because we are blinded by sin and not our intellect, we might accept these things in our heads, and deny them in our hearts.

This is one reason why personal commitment and involvement in a local church community is so important. We are meant to have a fully orbed life that worships God by doctrine, devotion, and demonstration. We need all three: propositional truth (doctrine), personal truth (devotion), and public truth (demonstration). In order for our faith to be consistent, the truth that we believe must be something that we that know and grow in, truth that informs and shapes our personal lives, and truth that we live out in the world, otherwise we don't really believe what we say we do.

This final session will deal with a most vital truth, and it is one that may seem to be abstract to you, but when it is truly understood and truthfully applied it will change your life forever. The truth is that doctrine is critical, because everyone lives their theology. Life imitates doctrine, and since you are going to live what you believe, the sounder, clearer, stronger, and more defensible your doctrine is, the more it is going to affect how you live in the right way. There are many passages to consider, and we will not cover them all in this session. It would be wise to review all the verses and negligent to dismiss this truth without considering the biblical evidence.

The term “the sovereignty of God” refers to the fact that all things are under His rule and control. In other words, God has the right to govern all things, and nothing happens without His direction or permission. He works all things, not just some things, after the counsel of His own will (**Ephesians 1:11**). God's purpose is all-inclusive and is never thwarted (**Isaiah 46:8-11**). God has the right to do as He wishes with His creation (Genesis 14:19 / Deuteronomy 10:14 / **1 Chronicles 29:11** / Job 41:11 / Psalm 24:1, 89:11). He is **eternal** (Exodus 3:14 / Job 36:26 / Psalm 45:6, 90:2 / Daniel 7:9 / Revelation 1:8), **self existent** (John 5:26), **self sufficient** (Psalm 50:10-12), **independent and free** (Numbers 23:19 / Isaiah 14:24). There is no external influence He needs or that He must obey (Genesis 22:16, Hebrews 6:13). He has the ability to exercise His right according to His will (Psalm 33:11). God does as He pleases (**Psalm 115:3, 135:6**). He is both the **Creator** (Genesis 1:1-2 / Nehemiah 9:6 / Isaiah 40:28 / Jeremiah 10:12 / John 1:3 / **Colossians 1:16** / Revelation 4:11) and **Sustainer** (Job 12:10, 34:14-15 / Psalm 104:27-30 / Acts 17:24-26 / **Colossians 1:17** / 1 Timothy 6:13-15 / **Hebrews 1:3**) of the universe (Romans 11:33-36). Our proper response to this knowledge is worship (Psalm 148:1-13 / 1 Timothy 1:17).

God is **omnipotent** (2 Chronicles 20:6 / Job 23:13 / Proverbs 21:30 / Jeremiah 32:17 / Luke 1:37) – He has unlimited power, and any power that anyone or anything has is granted by Him, and He has the power to do anything He pleases. God is **omniscient** (1 Kings 8:39 / Job 34:21-23, 37:16 / Psalm 139:1-4 / Jeremiah 17:10 / Matthew 6:8, 10:29-30 / Romans 2:16) – He has unlimited knowledge, past, present, and future, nothing takes Him by surprise, and He knows our hearts and our thoughts before we do. God is **omnipresent** (1 Kings 8:27 / Psalm 139:7-10 / Jeremiah 23:23-24) – He has an unlimited audience; everything is in the presence of God and He

can give you His undivided attention while still giving it to someone and everyone else at the exact same time. Omnipresence does not mean that God is “distributed” throughout the universe, or that everything is God (pantheism), or that God is present in everything (panentheism).

God doesn't just have dominion over everything; He is the only thing that keeps any of it in existence. “Sustainer” doesn't just mean that God could wipe anything and everything out, but that God is the only life support anything has. It isn't that things are created and then they have life by themselves, in an eternal sense, but that God continues to give life to anything and everything. It is not that everything is Him, or that everything has Him in it, but that everything is maintained by Him or it ceases to exist.

Let's ask some questions. Can you imagine God asking permission of someone? Can you imagine Him appealing to a higher authority? Can you imagine that there is some force, law, or power outside of God that He must yield to? Can you imagine Him creating and sustaining anything that He doesn't have the ability to fully control?

God is sovereign **over the entire universe** (Psalm 103:19), over **all of nature** (Psalm 105:16, 135:7 / Jeremiah 14:22 / Amos 3:6, 4:7 / Mark 4:39-41), over **angels and demons**, including **Satan** (Psalm 103:20-21, Job 1:12), over **kings** (Genesis 20:1-7 / 1 Kings 12:15 / Ezra 1:1-4 / Proverbs 21:1 / Daniel 4:17), over **nations** (Psalm 47:7-9 / **Daniel 2:20-21, 4:34-35** / Isaiah 40:15), over **human beings** (Exodus 4:11 / 1 Samuel 2:6-7 / Psalm 33:13-15 / Isaiah 45:23 / Acts 17:26 / Galatians 1:15-16 / 2 Timothy 2:25 / James 4:15 / 1 Peter 4:19 / Revelation 17:17), over **animals** (1 Kings 17:4-6 / 2 Kings 17:25 / Psalm 104:21-30 / Daniel 6:22 / Matthew 6:26, 10:29), over **free acts of men** (Exodus 3:21 / Isaiah 10:5-20 / Ezekiel 7:27), over **sinful acts of men and Satan** (Genesis 45:5, 50:20 / 2 Samuel 24:1, 1 Chronicles 21:1 / **Job 2:7, 42:11**).

God from all eternity has ordained whatsoever comes to pass. This does not mean God is the author of sin. Sin is not something that was created. Sin is simply a lack of moral perfection in a fallen creature. God has established a world in which sin will come to pass by His allowance, but not by his “positive agency.” He ordained that evil be in order for good to come of it. Both God's love for righteousness and hatred for evil must be made manifest for the sake of the complete communication of His character, because the happiness of His people and sense of His love is made complete in the fuller knowledge of God.

God's predestination of all things does not destroy the contingency of second causes, or deny or destroy human responsibility. God is the ultimate cause and we or other things are the secondary causes. This means that while He is sovereign we are still responsible. God is sovereign over all human events including man's sin; however, no one is forced to do evil things. In fact, God restrains the vast majority of evil in this world just as He restrained Joseph's brothers who at first wanted to kill him.

We see the compatibility between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man in **Acts 2:23**. In **Acts 4:27-28**, we see that Herod, Pilate, the Jews, the Gentiles (Roman soldiers) were all gathered against Jesus, but for different intentions, and each will be judged on the basis of their intentions, but they all did what God had predestined to occur. In Isaiah 10, God brings the Assyrian army to punish Israel, and then He punishes Assyria for doing it. Assyria thought that

they were doing this in and of themselves (arrogance) – God decrees in eternity, man freely chooses in time – the intention of the heart is the basis on which the judgment is made.

The Bible stresses that salvation is all God’s work (Acts 13:48, 16:14 / Romans 8:28-30 / Ephesians 1:4-5, 11, 2:8 / Philippians 1:29 / 2 Thessalonians 2:13 / 2 Timothy 1:9). Knowing that man is so wicked that none would come apart from grace, God elected some, by His grace alone, without respect to anything in them whether works or will, in eternity past, to be recipients of grace in spite of themselves. These are objects of God’s mercy and grace. Election does not exclude anyone from God’s mercy; it merely ensures that some will be included. All God’s children go to heaven, but not all are God’s children (Galatians 3:26).

Some suggest that election is based on His foreknowledge of certain events. This argument says that God simply looks into the future to see who will believe, and He chooses those whom He sees choosing Him (cf. **1 Peter 1:2**). However, that is not the biblical meaning of “foreknowledge.” God’s foreknowledge refers to His establishment of a love relationship with that person (Hosea 13:4-5 / Amos 3:1-2 / Romans 11:2). **1 Peter 1:20** – this doesn’t mean that the Father looked into the future to behold Christ; it means He had an eternal, loving relationship with Him. God “foreknew” the elect; He loved them, before the foundation of the world.

What about “free will”? The opposite of free will isn’t no will, it is a bound will, and no one comes to God naturally (**Romans 3:10-18**). Men are free moral agents but the will of man is bound. In other words, people are free to act in accordance to the dictates of their conscience and desires and circumstances. We are free to do what we want, but we are also bound to do what we want. We are free, but we are in bondage to our morally depraved nature so that we cannot act in any way to save or help save ourselves. Every aspect of man is tainted by sin. No one is as evil as they can be, but evil affects every part of our being – mind, will, heart, etc. We do not seek after God, and need God to mercifully reach down and intervene (Titus 3:5).

Romans 9:6-28 – If God’s choice of the elect is unconditional, does this rule out human responsibility? Paul asks and answers that very question. He says God’s choice of the elect is an act of mercy. Left to themselves, even the elect would persist in sin and be lost, because they are taken from the same fallen lump of clay as the rest of humanity. God alone is responsible for their salvation, but that does not eradicate the responsibility of those who persist in sin and are lost, because they do it willfully, and not under compulsion. They are responsible for their sin, not God. The offer of mercy in the gospel is extended to all alike.

Those whom God has chosen will be brought to life by the Holy Spirit; this is called being born again. Those who are born again will freely choose Christ. They will be resurrected to life with Christ and will freely repent and believe and become partakers of Christ’s righteousness. The means God usually uses to bring this miracle about is the preached gospel (**Romans 10:13-17 / James 1:18 / 1 Peter 1:23-25**). **John 3:8** – the word used for wind and the word used for Spirit is the same in this verse. Truly, the Spirit blows where He wants to; He is sovereign over who is born again. Remember this fact: the Spirit blows where He will, not where we will.

Regeneration (being born again) precedes faith. Faith flows from a heart that has been regenerated. A dead heart can’t believe. Faith is the sign of what happened behind the scenes in

the internal workings of the heart. So while it may look like faith causes the new birth from our perspective, it actually is the new birth which evidences itself in faith. **1 John 5:1** – believing is the consequence not the cause for being born again.

Regarding justification (being declared righteous), it is mediated through the means of faith (**Ephesians 2:8-9**), and God did not believe the Gospel for us. We had a role to play. God quickened our dead heart and opened our eyes in the miracle of the new birth and then, with our eyes open to behold the glory of Christ as it is and the awfulness of our sin as it is, we preferred Christ and believed in Him with all our hearts.

Christ's work of redemption on the Cross saved all those who God chose to be recipients of His grace. Jesus didn't just make salvation possible; He actually redeemed and saved a people through His death. These are the sheep for whom He died and the church whom He purchased with His blood and the bride whom He died for. He actually bore their real punishment and substituted on their behalf in a real way (2 Corinthians 5:21 / **1 John 4:9-11**). This may seem unfair, but we dare not ask for a "fair" God since fairness and justness would require us to suffer for our own sins in eternal perdition. We do not want a fair God; rather our hope is in a merciful God whose willing Son absorbed the wrath on the cross as our glorious substitute. Yet, if universal atonement were true, then God could hardly punish people for eternity when Christ had already suffered the punishment. There is no double jeopardy.

All the elect find their salvation fully guaranteed by that act of Christ. Having purchased them with His blood, Jesus now intercedes on their behalf to ensure they are brought, first to repentance and a saving knowledge of Christ, and then finally to full son-ship, completely restored, glorified, before the Father in heaven.

God's grace toward His elect will always *ultimately* triumph over their resistance. In other words, the common term "irresistible grace" does not mean God's grace is never resisted, because many of us resisted it at first, but it ultimately proves irresistible.

The grace of God within those whom God has brought to life through His great redemptive purpose is an enduring grace which will not leave them helpless but will remain with them through life, death, and eternity, ensuring their full and final salvation. They begin in faith. They end in faith. Their faith endures (**1 Peter 1:5-9**).

So is this "once saved, always saved?" Let's define our terms first. If you mean "once saved, always saved" in the sense that all a person has to do is make a one-time profession of "faith" and they are thus "saved," regardless of whether they never continue in faith or commit outright apostasy, then no, we do not believe in that. However, if you mean that once the Spirit raises a person from spiritual death to spiritual life and gives that person faith and repentance, then yes, we do believe that. Such an act of the Spirit does not give the believer license to sin but necessarily results in a changed life (**Ephesians 2:10**).

God preserves all the elect so that not one of them is finally lost, but He also so works in them that they persevere in their faith. When they fall, they aren't utterly destroyed, they get back up. They bear fruit and have good works which testify to the genuineness of their professed faith.

For those who fail to persevere, we are not the ultimate judge God is. But we should exhort one another daily to “fight the good fight of faith”. When understood properly, this point allows believers to take seriously the many warning passages and “if” statements in Scripture. It also gives us confidence and trust (**John 10:28** / Philippians 1:6). God’s warnings are often the means He uses to secure our perseverance. The warning itself is a manifestation of grace.

Time for some more questions. Is it God’s choice or man’s choice of who is going to be saved? If Jesus died for all the sins of all the people ever, doesn’t this include unbelief? Why, then, aren’t all people going to heaven? Is it God who ensures or man who secures? Is it more loving for God to let everyone of fallen man try and secure his own salvation making it dependent on his own choice, or is it more loving that God ensures that some will be saved, making sure they make the choice? Did God send His Son to die, so that He could be loved, or did God send His Son to die because He loved? Does God rescue people that do not love Him, or does He wait till they love Him to rescue them? Is it “I’m so glad I chose you”, or “I’m so humbled you chose me?” Was it something in me that caused Him to choose me, no, or something in me that caused me to choose Him, no...does it ultimately have to do with us, or was it God’s plan all along? Are we born again because we believed, or did we believe because we were born again?

Although the sovereignty of God is absolute, it is not blind power; it is coupled with infinite wisdom, holiness and love. This doctrine, when properly understood, is comforting and reassuring. If we cannot trace His hand we can still trust His heart. Would you prefer to be in the hands of a God of infinite power, wisdom, holiness and love, or be left to fate, chance, some irrevocable natural law, or to your short-sighted self? Those who reject God’s sovereignty should consider what alternatives they have left.

Why do we evangelize if we believe in predestination? Because we believe God ordains the end, but that He also ordains the means to that end, which is through evangelization. This doctrine, when not truthfully understood, can lead to all sorts of abuses. As we have and will discuss, this is not fatalism, and indifference is not the right result. We still must witness, live a holy life, preach, and give a universal call, knowing that God is working behind the scenes, but not knowing who God’s elect are. God does the electing, but we are called to do some nominating also. We ought to be praying for God to save people, and go out and witness like He is going to answer our prayers.

Why pray if the outcome has already been determined? Again, it is because we believe that God has ordained means in His eternal decree to accomplish His predetermined plan. One of those means is prayer. Think of how the Bible instructs us about prayer and pleading with God, like Abraham considering Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18). Think of Daniel finding the scroll of Jeremiah, and seeing that God had ordained 70 years of captivity. He knew the time was nearly up, yet he prayed with fervor, he didn’t let this make him apathetic (Daniel 9:2-19).

Just because God is sovereign doesn’t mean we are static, we don’t have a fatalistic religion. Actors practice a fatalistic enterprise; they know their character, lines, and rehearse the script. They know what is coming next but have to pretend as if they don’t. This can help you with your mindset about the difference between fatalism and predestination. We know we will spend eternity with God, yet we still have roles to play. We know there is a script, and we know some

of the outcome, but unlike actors, *we* only learn the plot by living. Understanding God's sovereignty is cause for action, not apathy.

Paul taught God's sovereignty but also taught about pleading prayer. In Ephesians 1:1-14 Paul tells us all about how God is in complete control, and then the next thing he does is pray. This is the indicative / imperative construct we discussed in session 4, and his prayer is centered on providence, yet he prays. As well, prayer is about much more than petition (see our sermons "*This is How to Pray*" and "*Passion for Prayer*"). God uses us as part of the drama. Paul knew God was in control, but he also knew that he was responsible (Philippians 2:12-13).

God has already determined the final score of the game but that doesn't mean we don't have to go out on the field. He gives us the playbook. If we join His team, trust Him and are obedient, we are sent into the game and run His plays. As we execute, the play may unfold a thousand different ways and we must improvise and make decisions on how to proceed. God has coached us up on the skills and knowledge to make the play work. At the same time God can decide to make the ball bounce however He wants, cause the field conditions to change, change the players on the field, allow injury, etc. God ordains ordinary means for us to run His plays. If He chooses, He can even cause the miraculous to occur through us or around us at His will. God is sovereign, yet we are responsible.

God may do as He pleases. He is free to work without, above, and against normal means, at His pleasure. But He is also not a capricious being. He loves those who have hated Him, and we love Him because He first loved us (**1 John 4:19**). This is why it's critical to believe in His sovereignty – not to believe that we are somehow merely pawns, but to understand that by doing what He has prescribed, we demonstrate our love and trust in Him.

Let's discuss a few texts about God's sovereignty in salvation and answer some objections.

Matthew 23:37 – The text doesn't read "how often I would have gathered you" but "your children" which has a much different meaning. "Jerusalem" refers to the Jewish leadership, the scribes and Pharisees, who "would not", who hindered Jesus from bringing the Gospel to the masses (cf. Matthew 23:12-15). "Your children" refers to the Jews suffering underneath them. **Matthew 11:20-27** refutes the idea that Jesus wants to save everybody.

John 6:41-51 – The controversial part is vs.44: some think it means that it means God draws everyone, but only some come. God's drawing only makes the approach possible. We believe it means that no one can come to Jesus without God's drawing, and everyone whom He draws does come. This would mean that the Father only draws some since all don't come, and that the decisive cause of the approach is God, not man. It is not in conflict with our choosing to come because we want to come to Him (John 6:37, 63-65, 10:27, 12:37-40, 18:37).

John 12:32-33 – The "all" in 12:32 refers to all of Christ's sheep, or all of the children of God, rather than all human beings in the world. Compare this with the prophetic words of John 11:50-52 – This is a reference to Gentiles whom God will effectively draw to himself when they hear the gospel. They are called "children of God" because God has chosen them (Ephesians 1:4-5). By the act of the cross, Jesus is able to draw all God's children unto Himself (Revelation 5:9).

Romans 8:28-30 – You cannot cling to “predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son” without also looking at “called”. Are all people called, no, because not all are justified, etc., these are people God predestinates the whole way through, this is the sovereign work of God in salvation with consummation. Foreknown then set apart, called, etc. you cannot break up the chain of events here. This text is obviously speaking of believers, and so how can some say that the call is limited here when they say it is unlimited in their theology? Not everyone is called, because if they are then everyone is also predestined to all the other things as well.

1 Timothy 2:4 – All men is understood by the context, “all types of people are to be prayed for, even kings are to be prayed for, even they are included because some of them will be saved also”. Although God desires the redemption of the entire race, He does not decree universal salvation. Therefore, in respect to the verb want or wish theologians distinguish between God’s desire and God’s decree (cf. Ezekiel 18:23, 32 / recall session #5).

1 Timothy 4:10 – this means that Christ died for everyone in a general sense and for the elect in a specific sense. God’s purpose in the atonement was the saving of the elect, and other benefits such as common grace extend to all as an extension of what Jesus did on the cross.

2 Peter 2:1 – They are talking about the Lord yet they bring in destruction that denies Him. They say one thing but do another, they say they belong to Christ but their actions betray their words. The context shows they were predestined to bring in this destruction because they were predestined to destruction.

2 Peter 3:9 – again, this refers to God’s desired will, not His decreed will (recall session #5). He is a God of mercy, kindness, and patience, but He is also a God of justice and righteousness. His heart is for salvation, but He will bring wrath upon those who will not receive His salvation. Peter clearly states that the false teachers and the scoffers are condemned and face destruction. God grants a period of grace, space to repent, and all those who He has called to salvation will heed the warning and repent. Peter is writing to and about believers.

1 John 2:2 – What about **1 John 5:19**, then? 1 John 2:2 is speaking about the fact that all those who are saved, are saved by Christ, not that the entire world has been saved. 1 John 5:19 tells us what all who are unsaved are under, it is the world system.

Final questions: Do you realize that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart? Do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ? Do you ever suppose that you were at first saved by Christ, but now are required to keep your salvation afterwards by your own works? Is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom? This is all we are really talking about with this doctrine of election and predestination. Thank God that He is sovereign.