

The Sovereignty of God

Sermon preached on Sunday 7th February 2010 at BHAC, North Turramurra.

The American pastor and author A.W. Tozer (who died in 1963) wrote a little essay at the end of one of his books called “The Open Secret”. In that essay he declared that the most pressing need of the day for the worldwide church was that it needed to be brought back from what he described as “her long Babylonian captivity.”

What he was meant by that very biblical metaphor was that the church had for too long been held to ransom by increasingly liberal theology that undermined its witness and work in the world. In short, he said that:

“the name of God [needs to] be glorified in [the church] again as of old.”

He asks: “What can we plain Christians do to bring back the departed glory? Is there some *secret* we can learn?” He answers: Yes, there is...but you might be disappointed! Because the secret isn’t profound, and it isn’t some esoteric, mystical code. The secret is a message to every Christian, namely:

“Acquaint thyself with God.”

To regain her lost power the church must see heaven opened and have a transforming *vision* of God. And the God that the church needs to regain a clear vision about, says Tozer, is the true and living God...not the god of our own imagining. It’s God the **Father Almighty**, the **Maker of heaven and earth**, the only **wise God our saviour**. In short, the **God of the Bible**.

Now, considering that Tozer said these things in the 1950s when churches were actually experiencing a post-war upswing, and the effects of pluralism and postmodernism hadn’t yet begun to be felt, how much more is the need today for the church to heed Tozer’s advice?

And so as we commence this new year at BHAC, we are wanting to do just that. Our sermon series for this first term is designed, therefore, to help us **focus on God** and to get to grips with his character... **to acquaint ourselves with him...** so that our lives will be transformed, our church will be transformed, and our community will be transformed.

That’s the vision: to go deeper *in* and *with* God, for our joy, for the building of his kingdom and for the glory of his name.

And this morning, we begin our sermon series by meditating on the Sovereignty of God.

But just before we start to think about God’s sovereignty, let me just say a word about the basis upon which I’m going to make assertions about God in this series: namely, **the truth and reliability of the Bible**. At every turn in this series, I’m going to be making statements about the character of God which spring from the Bible, the presumption being that the Bible is **true and trustworthy** and **authoritative**, and that the God it describes is indeed the true and living God.

Now, I realise that *that* is a big presumption. And there *are* those who say (for a variety of reasons): “I simply don’t believe that the Bible is authoritative or true or trustworthy, so whatever you say from this point is conjecture, but nothing more.” I understand that.

Nonetheless, for reasons that I'm not going to delve into today, I am totally convinced that the internal and external evidence *within* and *about* the Bible *does* make it trustworthy and true. And I suspect that (as I look around the church this morning) if you're here you are at least open to the fact that the Bible really *does* describe reality...and answers the big questions...not least about God.

So, that being the case, let's consider what the Bible says about the sovereignty of God. Well, let me say it: the Bible says that **God is sovereign!** But what do we think when we hear the word "sovereign". It's a word that (at heart) implies "ruler", don't you think? In the Book of Common Prayer, the Queen is called "Our *Sovereign* Lady, Queen Elizabeth."

But there are also (tied up in the word "sovereign") notions of **majesty**, and **authority**, and **power**, and **might**, and **dominion**. And those words do aptly describe God; that is, they are used of God in various ways in the Bible to describe his *sovereignty*.

Let me give you a few quick examples of how the Bible describes God's sovereignty in those terms. Firstly, in terms of his dominion from eternity past.

It's hard for us to imagine a time when the universe and even time itself did not exist. But the Bible affirms that God has existed from eternity, and that in the perfection and unity of the godhead, there was no rival to his authority and power. Of course, the only context in which we can really grasp that aspect of God's sovereignty is in the context of the creation of our world.

So you get passages like Psalm 90:2 where these two themes are intertwined. Moses wrote:

Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

And in Psalm 93 verses 1 to 2, it's even more explicit:

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty:
The LORD is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.

So, God reigned before the creation of world. And the existence of the universe is a testimony in some sense to that reign. And then, there are passages in the Bible that remind us that God's rule over the world he created is a *current* rule **over all people**. So for example, Isaiah 40:21 says:

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

In the New Testament, this theme of the ruling power of God over humanity is taken a step further in passages, say, like Acts 17, in which God's sovereignty is described in terms of him giving all people life and even determining where they are born. So we read:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth... And [...] he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

Only a *sovereign* God, who is indeed the Lord of heaven and earth, could do that. And can I just say: if God is sovereign in these ways... if we are like grasshoppers before him, then surely we can start to see what the implications are. We should tremble before him.

The 19th century poet Algernon Swinburne wrote: "Glory to man in the highest! For man is the master of things." But it's just not true. Grasshoppers aren't masters of the field when there's a crop dusting plane flying overhead! We should tremble before the God who "is enthroned above us". That's at least initially how we should respond to the sovereignty of God.

But there **is** an even *greater* way in which the Bible describes the sovereignty of God (and it's harder to pin this down to one or two verses). I'm talking about the way in which God is described as slowly but surely prosecuting a **great master plan** to gather to himself a people who will glorify him for ever.

Just under two years ago we did a sermon series on the whole Bible called "The Big Plan". What I said in that sermon series was that when you stand back from the Bible, you can see quite clearly that there is a theme that is developed from beginning to end. I summarised that theme as being God's plan to bring *his* people into *his* place, living under *his* rule, enjoying *his* blessing.

And so beginning way back in Genesis chapter 3, when Adam and Eve disobey God in the Garden of Eden, and they are ejected from God's presence and *they* and *the world* are cursed, there begins to unfold a plan in which God acts to graciously forgive and regather a people for himself who will live with him in a New Eden, and enjoy his blessing forever.

Now, I realise it might not look like it at first glance, but the passage that we heard read this morning from 2 Samuel 7 is a key passage both in terms of the outworking of that plan, **and** in terms of the sovereignty of God. By the time we get to 2 Samuel 7, God's plan to redeem the world has resulted in the establishment of the nation of Israel under king David. After innumerable twists and turns and potential roadblocks, God's people (Israel) are in God's place (the Promised Land) under God's rule and enjoying his blessing. God has given him "rest".

And King David thinks: "I will seal this deal by building God a temple. It will mark the culmination and fulfilment of the plan that God began back in Genesis." But you see, God has more to do in the unfolding of his plan. This is only a stepping stone on the way to the plan's fulfilment. David wants to build a house for God. But God says: "No, I'm going to build a 'house' for you... a 'dynasty' through you... and from that dynasty will come one who will build my house and rule as king, and then you will *really* be at rest."

Now in the first place, *that* king was David's son, King Solomon. He built the first temple in Jerusalem. But even *he* wasn't the fulfilment of the plan. We know, of course, that the ultimate fulfilment of that promise and plan would come through *Jesus of Nazareth*...through his **life** and **death** and **resurrection** and his **ascension** to the right hand of God, and through his establishment of the *spiritual* temple of God...the church.

He is the one who will **reign eternally** over the universe, and who is even now his gathering worshipping forgiven people around his throne.

Do you see, then, how this passage is a fantastic illustration or example of God's sovereignty? God is sovereign over *history*. God's plan to rescue sinners unfolded over thousand years. Generations of sinners and saints with their little plans come and go. But God sits above it all. He sees the future in a way that David (and we!) do not.

(And let me say, as an aside, that there are implications in the fact that God knows the future and we don't. It supposed to be that way. Trusting in God's sovereignty for what lies ahead should help us avoid talking about "chance" or "fate" (as if they drive history), and we should steer well clear of horoscopes.)

God, then, has a plan that human desires, and human plans, and human *sin* cannot thwart.

God's sovereignty is a bit like a massive ocean liner travelling across the Pacific Ocean. On board are people ...each with their plans and goals and desires and freedoms to move about the ship. But the ship is heading for a destination. Its destination is set. God sets the course. And God keeps the ship on course over the sea of history. God is sovereign!

And King David recognised this! We didn't read it this morning, but this is how David responds when God tells him about his great plan. He prays (2 Sam 7:18):

"Who am I, O **Sovereign** Lord [...] that you have brought me this far?"

Now, you're not King David, and neither am I. But *surely* every single one of us who has experienced God's blessings through Jesus can also echo these words! The **forgiveness of our sins**...the **indwelling of the Holy Spirit**...the **sure promise of heaven**... these are ours (who have put our faith in Jesus)...though we have done **absolutely nothing to deserve them**.

So let us rejoice in God's sovereignty! Let us rejoice that he has been gracious to us and applied his kingly power for our eternal good.

Having said that, however, it would be remiss of me to fail to raise (before I finish) two issues that relate to the sovereignty of God, and which many have found to be *challenges* to it.

The first is the interplay between human free will and the sovereignty of God, especially as it relates to God's work of salvation. In the 17th century, after the theological upheaval initiated by Martin Luther and other early reformers, the French theologian Jean Calvin forcefully restated the view (which Augustine has espoused in the 5th century) that despite the fact that humans are described in the Bible as having free will, it is not an *absolute* free will. It is a will that is in bondage to sin and death and the inability to respond to God.

So for Calvin, the way a person becomes a Christian is not (at heart) by choosing by the exercise of their will to do so, but by God *sovereignly* inclining the person's heart to have the desire to do so.

Other theologians (notably a fellow called Jacobus Arminius, who was born just before Calvin died) vehemently disagreed, saying that within the human heart was not only the **will** to choose to become a Christian, but the *desire* and *ability* to do it. Arminius recoiled at (what he thought was) the **illogicality** of the thought that God would call people to do what they were *unable* to do.

Now, I don't have time to go into the details of the ins and outs of the arguments about this. But I want to say that, as evangelical Anglicans (whether you know it or not!), we stand in the reformed, Calvinist *tradition*.

That is, we hold *together* the innumerable verses in the Bible that say that God's **sovereignty** *does indeed* extend to include the power to **harden** the hearts of those whom he chooses, and to **soften** the hearts of those he chooses (because without it they could not become Christians)...we hold those *together* with the verses that generally call all who read them to repent and believe.

And we say: there *is* a great mystery there. There are depths there that are difficult to plumb. But we seek to be true to the whole counsel of God, and so we hold them together.

Reformed Christians therefore have a very high view of God's sovereignty. But here's the danger with this view: the danger is if we believe that God is in control of everything and is sovereign even to the extent of choosing who will believe, then we **won't bother to pray**, and we **won't bother to share the gospel**. Now, interestingly, just this month there's an article in Southern Cross magazine by the principal of Moore College who addresses these very issues.

Think about prayer. John Woodhouse's point is that we pray, not out of *duty*, not to tell him things that he doesn't already know, not *despite* the fact that God is sovereign, but *because* he is. We pray because all things depend on God.

And a reason for praying is because God loves to bless his people in answer to their prayers. He doesn't *need* our prayers...his hands aren't tied if we don't...but he loves to fulfil his sovereign will in response to our prayers, for our encouragement.

So: one application of getting to grips with the *sovereignty* of God is to pray. Let me ask you: do you pray because God is sovereign? Do you delight to pray to the sovereign God whose grace has been poured out upon you? Let me urge you to do that.

That's the first issue. Very quickly, the second: the question of the relationship between God's sovereignty and the presence of evil and suffering in the world.

There is a line of reasoning that says that if God truly were sovereign, then logically there ought not to be any suffering or evil in the world. If God is sovereign, then surely he would have prevented their coming into existence.

The logic goes:

- A loving, sovereign God would not allow suffering and evil in the world.
- There is suffering and evil in the world.

- God therefore mustn't be sovereign.

Let me say, there's a certain appeal in that logic. But the logic is actually *totally faulty*. The fact that *we* might not be able to think of, or know of, a good reason why a sovereign God would allow suffering, doesn't mean that there *isn't*.

Let me be clear: there is no simple answer to the question. But in any case, what we're talking about is not theoretical, as if a simple answer would satisfy us anyway. **Pain** and **suffering** and **evil** are real, and they pose a real threat to our trust in God's sovereignty. If you're a Christian and you've experienced trials and tribulations, then somehow you have to believe that God has allowed them to happen. And that's a real and profound challenge. There are things that have happened to people in our church which I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

How do we deal with this tension? Again, all we can do is come back to the Scriptures and build our faith on the evidence there that says that *in his sovereignty*, God *does* allow evil for a time, even using it to achieve his purposes, and that one day it will be gone for ever.

One passage, very briefly, by way of illustration: the passage in Acts 2 in which the apostle Peter describes the betrayal and death of Jesus. Peter says to the crowd:

This man was handed over to you by **God's set purpose and foreknowledge**; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death...God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.

Friends, the cross is the place to look when we wonder whether God is sovereign...and more to the point, when we wonder whether God is good. God even *purposed* that Jesus should thus die. We have such a limited vision when it comes to the circumstances we find ourselves in. We find it impossible to imagine how God could be at work in the dark and bleak events of our lives.

But the Bible says: God is at work for the good of those who love him. God raised Jesus from the dead to save millions. As John Piper says: "God is shifting things around to do us the maximum good in the end." Yes, it's in the painful circumstances, when it seems that God is allowing or even ordaining our suffering, that our trust in his sovereignty is threatened.

But, let us revel in this truth. That God is sovereign. That God knows the numbers of hair on our heads. That not a sparrow falls to the ground that he doesn't know about, and that we are worth more than many sparrows.

Let us prayerfully get to grips with the fact that God is sovereign, and let us to delight to humbly treat him thus in every part of our lives. Amen.