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## GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY DEFINED

*"Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Thine; Thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and Thou art exalted as Head above all" (1 Chron. 29:11).*

**T**HE Sovereignty of God is an expression that once was generally understood. It was a phrase commonly used in religious literature. It was a theme frequently expounded in the pulpit. It was a truth which brought comfort to many hearts, and gave virility and stability to Christian character. But, today, to make mention of God's sovereignty is, in many quarters, to speak in an unknown tongue. Were we to announce from the average pulpit that the subject of our discourse would be the sovereignty of God, it would sound very much as though we had borrowed a phrase from one of the dead languages. Alas! that it should be so. Alas! that the doctrine which is the key to history, the interpreter of Providence, the warp and woof of Scripture, and the foundation of Christian theology, should be so sadly neglected and so little understood.

The sovereignty of God. What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the godhood of God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him what doest Thou? (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will (Ps. 115:3). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is "The Governor among the nations" (Ps. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the "Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.

How different is the God of the Bible from the God of

modern Christendom! The conception of Deity which prevails most widely today, even among those who profess to give heed to the Scriptures, is a miserable caricature, a blasphemous travesty of the Truth. The God of the twentieth century is a helpless, effeminate being who commands the respect of no really thoughtful man. The God of the popular mind is the creation of a maudlin sentimentality. The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than of awe-inspiring reverence.\* To say that God the Father has purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died with the express intention of saving the whole human race, and that God the Holy Spirit is now seeking to win the world to Christ; when, as a matter of common observation, it is apparent that the great majority of our fellow-men are dying in sin, and passing into a hopeless eternity: is to say that God the Father is *disappointed*, that God the Son is *dis-satisfied*, and that God the Holy Spirit is *defeated*. We have stated the issue baldly, but there is no escaping the conclusion. To argue that God is "trying His best" to save all mankind, but that the majority of men will not let Him save them, is to insist that the will of the Creator is impotent, and that the will of the creature is omnipotent. To throw the blame, as many do, upon the Devil, does not remove the difficulty, for if Satan is defeating the purpose of God, then, Satan is Almighty and God is no longer the Supreme Being.

To declare that the Creator's original plan has been frustrated by sin, is to *dethrone* God. To suggest that God was taken by surprise in Eden and that He is now attempting to remedy an unforeseen calamity, is to *degrade* the Most High to the level of a finite, erring mortal. To argue that man is a free moral agent and the determiner of his own destiny, and that therefore he has the power to checkmate his Maker, is to *strip* God of the attribute of Omnipotence. To say that the creature has burst the bounds assigned by his Creator, and that God is now practically a helpless Spectator before the sin and suffering entailed by Adam's fall, is to

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\*Some years ago an evangelical (F) preacher of nation-wide reputation visited the town in which we then were, and during the course of his address kept repeating, "Poor God! Poor God!" Surely it is this "preacher" who needs to be pitied.

repudiate the express declaration of Holy Writ, namely, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee: the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain" (Ps. 76:10). In a word, to deny the sovereignty of God is to enter upon a path which, if followed to its logical terminus, is to arrive at blank atheism.

The sovereignty of the God of Scripture is absolute, irresistible, infinite. When we say that God is sovereign we affirm His right to govern the universe, which He has made for His own glory, just as He pleases. We affirm that *His right is the right of the Potter over the clay*, i.e., that He may mould that clay into whatsoever form He chooses, fashioning out of *the same lump one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor*. We affirm that He is under no rule or law outside of His own will and nature, *that God is a law unto Himself*, and that He is under no obligation to give an account of His matters to any.

Sovereignty characterises the whole Being of God. He is sovereign in all His attributes. *He is sovereign in the exercise of His power*. His power is exercised as He wills, *when He wills, where He wills*. This fact is evidenced on every page of Scripture. For a long season that power appears to be dormant, and then it is put forth in irresistible might. Pharaoh dared to hinder Israel from going forth to worship Jehovah in the wilderness—what happened? God exercised His power, His people were delivered and their cruel task-masters slain. But a little later, the Amalekites dared to attack these same Israelites in the wilderness, and what happened? Did God put forth His power on this occasion and display His hand as He did at the Red Sea? Were these enemies of His people promptly overthrown and destroyed? No, on the contrary, the Lord swore that He would "have war with Amalek *from generation to generation*" (Ex. 17:16). Again, when Israel entered the land of Canaan, God's power was signally displayed. The city of Jericho barred their progress—what happened? Israel did not draw a bow nor strike a blow: the Lord stretched forth His hand and the walls fell down flat. But the miracle was never repeated! *No other city fell after this manner*. Every other city had to be captured by the sword!

Many other instances might be adduced illustrating the

sovereign exercise of God's power. Take one other example. God put forth His power and David was delivered from Goliath, the giant; the mouths of the lions were closed and Daniel escaped unhurt; the three Hebrew children were cast into the burning fiery furnace and came forth unharmed and unscorched. *But God's power did not always interpose for the deliverance of His people, for we read: "And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented" (Heb. 11:36, 37).* But why? Why were not these men of faith delivered like the others? Or, why were not the others suffered to be killed like these? Why should God's power interpose and rescue some and not the others? Why allow Stephen to be stoned to death, and then deliver Peter from prison?

God is sovereign in the *delegation of His power to others.* Why did God endow Methuselah with a vitality which enabled him to outlive all his contemporaries? Why did God impart to Samson a physical strength which no other human has ever possessed? Again; it is written, "But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is He that *giveth thee power to get wealth*" (Deut. 8:18), but God does not bestow this power on all alike. Why not? Why has He given such power to men like Morgan, Carnegie, Rockefeller? The answer to all of these questions, is, Because God is Sovereign, and being Sovereign He does as He pleases.

*God is sovereign in the exercise of His mercy.* Necessarily so, for mercy is directed by the will of Him that showeth mercy. Mercy is not a right to which man is entitled. Mercy is that adorable attribute of God by which He pities and relieves the wretched. But under the righteous government of God no one is wretched who does not *deserve* to be so. The objects of mercy, then, are those who are miserable, and all misery is the result of *sin*, hence the miserable are deserving of punishment not mercy. To speak of *deserving* mercy is a contradiction of terms.

God bestows His mercies on whom He pleases and withholds them as seemeth good unto Himself. A remarkable illustration of this fact is seen in the manner that God re-

sponded to the prayers of two men offered under very similar circumstances. Sentence of death was passed upon Moses for one act of disobedience, and he besought the Lord for a reprieve. But was his desire gratified? No; he told Israel, "The Lord is wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me: and the Lord said unto me, Let it suffice thee" (Deut. 3:26). Now mark the second case:—"In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live. Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying, I beseech Thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before Thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in Thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore. And it came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying, Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of my people, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, *I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord. And I will add unto thy days fifteen years*" (2 Kings 20:1-6). Both of these men had the sentence of death in themselves, and both prayed earnestly unto the Lord for a reprieve: the one wrote: "The Lord would not hear me," and died; but to the other it was said, "I have heard thy prayer", and his life was spared. What an illustration and exemplification of the truth expressed in Rom. 9:15!—"For He saith to Moses, *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*"

The sovereign exercise of God's mercy—pity shown to the wretched—was displayed when Jehovah became flesh and tabernacled among men. Take one illustration. During one of the Feasts of the Jews, the Lord Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He came to the Pool of Bethesda, where lay "a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water." Among this "great multitude" there was "a certain man which had an infirmity thirty and eight years." What happened? "When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made

whole? The impotent man answered Him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked" (John 5:3-9). Why was this one man singled out from all the others? We are not told that he cried "Lord, have mercy on me." There is not a word in the narrative which intimates that this man possessed any qualifications which entitled him to receive special favor. Here then was a case of the sovereign exercise of Divine mercy, for it was just as easy for Christ to heal the whole of that "great multitude" as this one "certain man." But He did not. He put forth His power and relieved the wretchedness of this one particular sufferer, and for some reason known only to Himself, He declined to do the same for the others. Again, we say, what an illustration and exemplification of Rom. 9:15!—"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

*God is sovereign in the exercise of His love.* Ah! that is a hard saying, who then can receive it? It is written, "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven" (John 3:27). When we say that God is sovereign in the exercise of His love, we mean that He loves whom He chooses. God does not love everybody\*; if He did, He would love the Devil. Why does not God love the Devil? Because there is nothing in him *to love*; because there is nothing in him *to attract* the heart of God. Nor is there anything to attract God's love in any of the fallen sons of Adam, for *all* of them are, by nature, "children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). If then there is nothing in any member of the human race to attract God's love, and if, notwithstanding, He *does* love *some*, then it necessarily follows that the *cause* of His love must be found in Himself, which is only another way of saying that the exercise of God's love to-

\*John 3:16 will be examined on pages 262-265 and App. III, pages 253-255.

wards the fallen sons of men is according to His own good pleasure.†

In the final analysis, the exercise of God's love must be traced back to His sovereignty, or, otherwise, He would *love by rule*; and if He loved by rule, then is He under a *law of love*, and if He is under a *law of love* then is He not supreme, but is Himself *ruled by law*. "But," it may be asked, "Surely you do not *deny* that God loves the entire human family?" We reply, it is written, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13). If then God loved Jacob and hated Esau, and that before they were born or had done either good or evil, then the *reason* for His love was not in them, but in Himself.

That the exercise of God's love is according to His own sovereign pleasure is also clear from the language of Eph. 1:3-5, where we read, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him. *In love having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself according to the good pleasure of His will.*" It was "*in love*" that God the Father predestined His chosen ones unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, "according"—according to what? According to *some excellency* He discovered in them? No. What then? According to what He *foresew* they would become? No; mark carefully the inspired answer—"According to the good pleasure of *His will.*"

*God is sovereign in the exercise of His grace.* This of necessity, for grace is favor shown to the *un-deserving*, yea, to the Hell-deserving. Grace is the antithesis of justice. Justice demands the impartial enforcement of law. Justice requires that each shall receive his legitimate due, neither

†We are not unmindful of the fact that men have invented the distinction between God's love of *complacency* and His love of *compassion*, but this is an invention pure and simple. *Scripture* terms the latter God's "pity" (see Matt. 18:32), and "He is *kind* unto the unthankful and the evil" (Luke 6:26)!



more nor less. Justice bestows no favors and is no respecter of persons. Justice, as such, shows no pity and knows no mercy. But after justice has been fully satisfied, grace flows forth. Divine grace is not exercised at the expense of justice, but "grace reigns through righteousness" (Rom. 5:21), and if grace "reigns", then is grace sovereign.

Grace has been defined as the unmerited favor of God;<sup>4</sup> and if unmerited, then none can claim it as their inalienable right. If grace is unearned and undeserved, then none are entitled to it. If grace is a gift, then none can demand it. Therefore, as salvation is by grace, the free gift of God, then He bestows it on whom He pleases. Because salvation is by grace, the very chief of sinners is not beyond the reach of Divine mercy. Because salvation is by grace, boasting is excluded and God gets all the glory.

The sovereign exercise of grace is illustrated on nearly every page of Scripture. The Gentiles are left to walk in their own ways, while Israel becomes the covenant people of Jehovah. Ishmael the firstborn is cast out comparatively unblest, while Isaac the son of his parents' old age is made the child of promise. Esau the generous-hearted and forgiving-spirited is denied the blessing, though he sought it carefully with tears, while the worm Jacob receives the inheritance and is fashioned into a vessel of honor. So in the New Testament. Divine truth is hidden from the wise and prudent, but is revealed to babes. The Pharisees and Sadducees are left to go their own way, while publicans and harlots are drawn by the cords of love.

In a remarkable manner Divine grace was exercised at the time of the Saviour's birth. The incarnation of God's Son was one of the greatest events in the history of the universe, and yet its actual occurrence was not made known to all mankind; instead, it was specially revealed to the Bethlehem shepherds and wise men of the East. And this was pro-

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<sup>4</sup>An esteemed friend who kindly read through this book in its manuscript form, and to whom we are indebted for a number of excellent suggestions, has pointed out that, grace is something more than "unmerited favor." To feed a tramp who calls on me is "unmerited favor," but it is scarcely grace. But suppose that after robbing me I should feed this starving tramp—that would be "grace." Grace, then, is favor shown where there is positive *de-merit* in the one receiving it.

phetic and indicative of the entire course of this dispensation, for even today Christ is not made known to all. It would have been an easy matter for God to have sent a company of angels to every nation and announced the birth of His Son. But He did not. God could have readily attracted the attention of all mankind to the "star;" but He did not. Why? Because God is sovereign and dispenses His favors as He pleases. Note particularly the two classes to whom the birth of the Saviour was made known, namely, the most unlikely classes—illiterate shepherds and heathen from a far country. No angel stood before the Sanhedrin and announced the advent of Israel's Messiah! No "star" appeared unto the scribes and lawyers as they, in their pride and self-righteousness, searched the Scriptures! They searched diligently to find out where He should be born, and yet it was not made known to them when He was actually come. What a display of Divine sovereignty—the illiterate shepherds singled out for peculiar honor, and the learned and eminent passed by! And why was the birth of the Saviour revealed to these foreigners, and not to those in whose midst He was born? See in this a wonderful foreshadowing of God's dealings with our race throughout the entire Christian dispensation—sovereign in the exercise of His grace, bestowing His favors on whom He pleases, often on the most unlikely and unworthy.\*

\*It has been pointed out to us that God's sovereignty was signally displayed in His choice of the place where His Son was born. Not to Greece or Italy did the Lord of Glory come, but to the insignificant land of Palestine! Not in Jerusalem—the royal city—was Immanuel born, but in Bethlehem, which was "little among the thousands (of towns and villages) in Judah" (Micah 5:2)! And it was in despised Nazareth that He grew up!! Truly, God's ways are not ours.