

The Sovereignty of God Over All Things

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Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, September 17th 2023

I. Introduction

I think that this section beautifully illustrates both God's total sovereignty over everything while still (amazingly) maintaining men's free agency and their choices as real choices. So the question comes, "How can God control all things, including the choices men, and yet do so in such a way that men really choose and they are truly responsible for their choices?"

For example, God predestines who will be saved and who will be damned, but men truly and freely choose to repent and believe when God's grace is at work in them, and men truly and freely choose to rebel when God's grace is not at work with them. Their destiny is chosen by God, yet men freely choose what God has destined them to choose. We are going to look at how *both* of these things are possible.

And by the way, God predestines much more than just human actions. God's predestination of all things in history is clearly taught all throughout the Bible. There is not a dust molecule or virus that you breathe into your nose that God has not predestined to happen. Not a solar flare or a meteorite can come apart from God's plan. Hebrews 1:3 says that God is constantly upholding all things by the word of His power. He is upholding a virus's integrity. He brings the cancer and He gives the wisdom needed for the doctor to remove that cancer. Isaiah 46:9-10 says, "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'" Nothing can thwart God's plan. Paul told the Athenians that God created man to "inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26, NIV). Proverbs 16:33 says that even when you throw dice, every outcome of that dice that you threw is from the Lord. There is no such thing as chance.

And as I have said, this is a section that beautifully illustrates that balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. And there are other lessons that I will bring up as we go through these five verses. But that's a central one; that's a heavy one; it's a puzzling one. That's why I have chosen to focus on it.

II. The general area conquered (vv. 16-17a)

The first two verses highlight the general area that was conquered by Joshua. It says,

Josh. 11:16 Thus Joshua took all this land: the mountain country, all the South, all the land of Goshen, the lowland, and the Jordan plain—the mountains of Israel and its lowlands, 17 from Mount Halak and the ascent to Seir, even as far as Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon.

If you don't know the geography of Israel, that may be Greek to you, so I've included a map of which areas Joshua conquered and which areas that God left for later generations to conquer. In fact, some areas (like Jerusalem) didn't get conquered for 400 years. A generation before this God told the Israelites that he wouldn't let Joshua conquer the whole land in his generation. That was *never* His plan. Conquering the whole land in one generation would be contrary to His plan. There were various reasons. One of them was given in Exodus 23:29, which says,

I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you.

That's very interesting. His reasons for having Israel take a long time to do the entire conquest included an ecological reason. It wouldn't be good for the land or the beasts or the people. And the reason is that the Israelites would not have the numbers and the time to take dominion of the land and it would go wild. And God says that's not good for the land.

There are many passages like that one that indicate that the Biden administration's effort to pay farmers not to farm their land in hopes of saving the environment is an act of folly. The wilderness act is an act of folly. The whole environmentalist movement is an act of folly. God commanded Adam to *subdue* the earth. It needs to be subdued and turned into a garden. And He also gave the command to take dominion over the earth. And it is a demonic impulse that wants to push us in the opposite direction and turn everything into wilderness reserves. So that's one reason God didn't enable them to kick out all the Canaanites immediately.

Another reason Scripture gives is that the gradual conquest with lots of ups and downs for 400 years (or ten generations - there is symbolism in that too) was a typological picture of the New Covenant conquest of the world with the Gospel, that would also be destined to take many generations with many ups and downs.

But Judges 3:1-4 gives us a third reason why God did not drive out all the Canaanites in one year. It too has some interesting lessons. Let me read that. Judges 3:1-4 says,

Judg. 3:1 Now these are the nations which the LORD left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan 2 (this was only so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it), 3 namely, five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal Hermon to the entrance of Hamath. 4 And they were left, that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.

In other words, its good for every generation to do hard things and to need to depend upon God's grace to do them. I think back when our kids were teenagers, one of them had a t-shirt that said, "Do Hard Things." It matures people. Trees that never experience wind are more easily uprooted. People who have never experienced hardship in the past, are more easily diverted from God's calling when they do begin to experience hardship. So God in His

wisdom made it take a long time to conquer the land that they did conquer, and He left plenty for later generations to deal with.

III. The kings conquered (vv. 17b)

Back to Joshua 11:17, the last sentence says, “He captured all their kings, and struck them down and killed them.” Were humans involved? Absolutely. Yet Deuteronomy 7:24 prophesied of this killing of kings as being the work of God. It says, “And He will deliver their kings...” Did He use them? Yes. It says, “And He will deliver their kings into your hand, and you will destroy their name from under heaven; no one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them.”

God delivers their kings, but He does it into Israelite hands. God is sovereign, but He expects humans to be responsible. He alone can enable this warfare to succeed, but He does so in a way that makes men’s actions or lack of actions definitely impact the outcome.

And you will notice another interesting thing about this verse that you see throughout this book. Most frequently it credits the battles and victories to *Joshua*. It doesn’t ignore the Israelites who fought. Verse 19 mentions that “*they* took them in battle.” But frequently this book will focus on these being *Joshua’s* battles and *Joshua’s* victories. This is because Joshua stands as a type of Jesus. Hebrews 4 especially focuses on Jesus leading His people into the new conquest of the world, this time with the Gospel (what it designates as the sword of the word). It anticipates a time when we will eventually rest from Gospel warfare and there will be a long time of peace, righteousness, prosperity, and kingdom glory. In fact, Jeremiah 31:34 says that they will eventually no longer need to do evangelism since they will all know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest of them. But the books of Joshua and Judges typify that there will be a lot of ups and downs and gradual progress before that happens. And we need to depend upon Jesus and His grace in order to achieve this supernatural world conquest of the Gospel.

IV. The time it took (v. 18)

The length of time it took to even take as much as they did take is hinted at in verse 18. It says, “Joshua made war a long time with all those kings.” How long? Most commentators say that it took seven years. The way they arrive at that figure is simple logic and mathematics. Deuteronomy 2:14 speaks of 38 years of wandering after the spies went into Canaan and brought back a bad report. Joshua 14:7 says that Caleb was forty years old at that point in Ken’s Barnea. In chapter 14:10 (three verses later) Caleb is said to be 85 years old. So you add 38 + 40 subtracted from 85 amounts to seven years of conquest under Joshua. That is long time. But it would take even longer to gain control of all the land God had given - some of which was still under Philistine control in the time of David.

V. God's sovereign election illustrated (vv. 19-20)

But we move now to God's sovereign election illustrated in these nations.

A. The vessels of mercy and the vessels of wrath (v. 19)

Verse 19 introduces the vessels of mercy and the vessels of wrath. It says,

There was not a city that made peace with the children of Israel, except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon. All the others they took in battle.

We will be seeing in a moment that it was God's will that the inhabitants of Gibeon made peace with God. They were the vessels of mercy.

1. God's mercy spurned by most cities (vv. 19a-b,20c)

But that verse we just read says that God's mercy was spurned by most of the cities. None of them made peace, implying that they *should* have. If they had sought mercy, God would have given it to them. So they have no excuse when they failed to ask for mercy. Indeed, they attacked Gibeon in chapter 10 precisely because *it* had made peace, and in verse 20 God reminds us that they attacked *Israel* in battle. Rather than repenting and seeking God's mercy, they hardened themselves against God and against God's people. Verse 20 will explain *why* that happened. It was God's sovereign will for that to happen. But here he points out that it was their fault. They did not seek for mercy, but instead opposed Israel. They have no one but themselves to blame.

2. God's mercy given to Gibeon (v. 19b)

But I want to reiterate what I have said in previous sermons - that God intended for mercy to be given to Gibeon. That was not a fluke accident. God was not taken by surprise. He didn't think, "Oh rats! The Israelites ruined my plans, so now I have to give them mercy." Here it doesn't mention their deception because it is highlighting the fact that they received mercy and none of the others did. But we've seen in the past that there were *other individual* Gentiles who had become believers and stayed Gentiles. They were called strangers in Israel's midst. And they were saved. God made a covenant with them in chapter 8 and He continues to bless and protect them in chapter 20. They were vessels of mercy. There were others who had gone all the way and had become Jews - they had gotten circumcised. Caleb was one of those Canaanites (a Kennezeit according to Numbers 32:12) who had become a Jew - and a hero among the Jews. He was adopted into the tribe of Judah. But either way, it was faith in God that saved them, not how good they were. None of those strangers from the covenants were good. They were all deserving of judgment just like Gibeon was. But Gibeon alone was chosen to be a nation that was a vessel of mercy.

B. God determines the vessels of wrath (v. 20)

And verse 20 indicates that it was God Himself who determined that to be. It says,

For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that He might utterly destroy them, and that they might receive no mercy, but that He might destroy them, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

It was God who predestined these people to not make peace so that He would not give them mercy, so that He could utterly destroy them. We call this the doctrine of reprobation. Let's break the verse down.

1. God hardens their hearts (v. 20a)

First of all, it is crystal clear that God hardened their hearts. Did they harden their own hearts? Certainly, but it was because "it was of the LORD to harden their hearts" that they hardened their own hearts. And this is a head-scratcher for some people, so I want to park on this for a while. How can God be sovereign and yet still hold people responsible?

Let me use this pen as an example. And I got this illustration idea from A. W. Pink, whose fabulous book is in your outline. I highly recommend His book, *The Sovereignty of God*. Actually, he used a book instead of a pen for his illustration.

The thing that is keeping this pen from falling to the floor is the restraining energy in my hand. If I let go of the pen it will fall to the ground of its own accord. That's just the nature of how gravity works on a pen. I don't have to actively throw it down to the ground for it to go to the ground. By letting the pen go, I have determined that it will fall, but it falls of its own accord. Makes sense, right?

In the same way, God's restraining grace holds sinners up and keeps them from sinning any worse than they are presently sinning. And some people object to my using the idea of common grace since grace is only to the elect. I agree. But God gives common grace for the sake of the elect. He had the pagans dig wells so that the Israelites could inherit them, and to plant gardens, build cities, develop water systems, and other technology for the sake of the elect. All grace is for the sake of the elect, but it works in restraining the sinful impulses of pagans from becoming worse than they already are and messing things up for the elect.

So, back to this illustration - just as the inherent nature of gravity pulls a pen to the ground, the inherent nature of human sinfulness pulls them down into deeper and deeper and worse and worse sins. But God's common grace (working on behalf of the elect) restrains the non-elect from that downward pull, and keeps them from becoming worse sinners that would make life around us intolerable. That's an incredible mercy. There are all kinds of sins that he is keeping them from committing, which, if they had committed them, would bring them greater judgment. They don't deserve God's restraining grace. Some sinners are downright nice people. But if God were to withdraw His restraining grace from *any* sinner whatsoever, that person would immediately plummet into worse and worse sins simply because of the pull of his fallen nature.

Who is to blame for the sinner's sins? It's the sinner. The sinner *wants* to do the sin. God is not forcing him. I don't have to throw the pen down to determine that the pen will go down. All I have to do is withdraw my restraining hand. And God doesn't have to throw sinners down into sin in order to determine that they will sin. Did you know God decrees even the

sins of sinners in some way? Yes, He does. Did you know that there were upwards of one hundred sins associated with the crucifixion of Jesus, all of which were determined before the foundation of the world? I mean, the crucifixion was the worst sin ever, yet it was predetermined. But God did not do the sin; the sinners did. James says that God is not the author of sin. All He does is to withdraw His restraining grace; a grace which they don't deserve anyway; a grace which they despise and resist; a grace God can very justly withdraw.

And is this not exactly what Romans 1 and 2 say that God does to sinners who persist in their sins? It says that He gives them up to a depraved mind. And what happens when a pen is given up to its own nature? It falls to the ground. What happens when a sinner is given up to his own nature? He falls into sin. So Romans 1 lists a long catalogue of sins that people automatically enter into when they are given over or given up to a depraved mind, homosexuality being one of the sure signs of being given up. When you see a society highly honoring homosexuality and treating gender fluidity as a good thing and treating our insistence on the Bible's binary position of male and female as being a horrible thing (and sometimes even an illegal thing), you know that the entire society has been given up to a depraved mind. It is falling; falling very fast. This is why it is so critical that the church repent and once again be salt and light in society in the hopes that God will grant it repentance - like He did Nineveh.

Anyway, when sinners sin, they *want* to sin, yet God determined those sins without being the author of those sins. Both sides of the equation are true: God is sovereign over even sin and men are responsible for their sins. And God can be grieved over those sins. In this chapter the Canaanites harden their own hearts, and this verse explains why - God has hardened their hearts by giving them up.

With this as an explanation, we can make sense of many Scriptures: Beginning in Exodus 8, Scripture says three times that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15,32; 9:34) but even before that passage Exodus (starting in Exodus 4) says 15 times that *God* hardened Pharaoh's heart (cf. 4:21; 7:3,13; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8). Which is correct? Both are. If God hardened his heart by withdrawing His restraining grace, God didn't have to work upon his heart to make it hard. That would make Him the author of sin. God merely withdrew His restraining grace.

The same is true of evil wars. I have a whole bunch of Scriptures in my notes here that indicate that God moved nations to declare war and then condemned them for their wickedness in doing so (cf. eg. Deut. 2:30; Is. 19:14; 26:12; 14:24-27; 44:21-45:23; 46:9-11; Hab. 1:6; 2 Sam. 17:14; Josh. 11:19,20; Judges 14:4; 1 Kings 12:15; Jer. 13:13-14). Wars are not an indication that God is not sovereign and that things are completely out of His control. Proverbs 21:1 affirms, "the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like rivers of water, He turns it wherever He wishes." This is true of President Biden. God turns his heart whichever way God wishes. But this is totally different than forcing kings to sin or tempting the nations to declare war in ungodly ways. The true understanding of God's sovereignty over even sin is that the moment God "gives men up to their carnal desires" they will plummet into sin of their own accord. The mystery is not why men sin. The mystery is why

men are so good. God's common grace to man restrains them from sin. It's an incredible gift.

Now, if instead of viewing the men in these nations as one just pen that falls, you view them as a complex of millions of pens, then you can see how God could restrain some sins and allow others and control every aspect of history without in any way being the author of sin or tempting others to sin.

Now, here is the scary thing: even believers can have God's restraining grace withdrawn from their lives when they are presumptuous and despise that grace. God does it to discipline them. It's a scary thing. I'll just use one illustration. 2 Samuel 24:1 shows that this is exactly what happened when God got angry at David. It says that He moved David to number Israel. But how did He do that? It was by removing His protection from David's life. I believe that's the only way of reconciling that passage with 1 Chronicles 21:1, which tells us that *Satan* was the active agent in moving David to that sin. So 2 Samuel 24 says that *God* moved David's heart to number Israel and 1 Chronicles 21 tells us that *Satan* moved David's heart to number Israel. Which is true? Both are. God moved David by withdrawing His protection: a protection that David was taking for granted. And God knew that Satan would immediately take advantage of that removal of protection by moving David's heart. God guaranteed this sin and subsequent judgment because of David's presumption. Since David was not depending on God, God needed to show David how impossible it is to live without Him. So it resulted in David clinging to God the tighter, as we all must.

What are the practical implications of this doctrine? First, as I just mentioned, it means that we as Christians ought to hold tightly to the LORD. Never grow tired of thanking God for His mercies; never despise His goodness and treat it as a light thing. Never presume upon the Lord's grace by thinking that you can get away with sin. Scripture says that without Him we can do nothing. Do we really believe that?

Second, be quick to repent of sin as David did. One sin leads to another down a slippery slope. But we are not destined to fall if we call out to God. God exalts the humble and abases the proud; He gives grace to the humble, saying, "A broken and a contrite heart — These, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Third, realize that when evil comes against you from others, that it is not a sign that the world is falling apart. God controls absolutely everything that happens. He will not allow anything to happen to you that is not for your good and for the glory of His kingdom. Nothing can mess up His plans. Just make sure that you respond appropriately.

Fourth, everyone is fully responsible for their own sins. You can't get off the hook for your sins by blaming God or blaming others. And the reason is that you freely did those sins; you wanted to do them and you aggravated your sin by rejecting God's restraining grace. And that is true of unbelievers too. Unbelievers are fully responsible for their sins. There is no such thing as a victim of Satan. Men who are in bondage have willingly placed themselves in bondage.

Fifth, have confidence that God can help you to overcome any sin; and to get out of any sinful situation. He sovereignly makes a way of escape. Hey - since our God is a God who

can control everything and yet preserve and guarantee freedom, you can be confident in His promise that “If God is for us, who can be against us.”

And if you want to dig deeper into God’s hardening of hearts, read Romans chapter 9 sometime - a chapter in which God teaches the election of Jacob and the reprobation of his twin brother Esau. He said, “Jacob have I loved; Esau have I hated.” It’s a humbling chapter. The unregenerate hate that doctrine. But when you once understand the sovereignty of God as a regenerate believer, it is glorious. It is liberating. It inspires faith, and hope, and confidence. But it is a doctrine that forces us to choose whether we will submit to the true God or not.

Some people think this is not fair, but Paul in Romans 9 says that you don’t want fairness. Fairness would ensure that everyone goes to hell because everybody is a sinner. Since no one deserves mercy, Romans 9:18 says of God, “Therefore He has mercy on whom He wants and whom he wants He hardens.” That’s His prerogative. He is sovereign. No one can honestly question God’s right to give or withhold mercy. Once you come to grips with that doctrine, it will increase your faith in His promises.

2. But does so in such a way that it is still their own reprehensible action (v. 20b)

Anyway, verse 20 goes on to say, “that they should come against Israel in battle...” God hardened their hearts, but they were the ones who engaged in the reprehensible actions of fighting against God. They are to blame.

3. They are thus judged on the basis of their own sins (v. 20c)

Thus, they are judged on the basis of their *own* sins. The next phrase says, “that He might utterly destroy them.” The “that” points back to their own sins. Judgment always comes as a result of sin; it’s not apart from sin. Our God is a just God.

4. But this was deterined so that they receive no mercy and so that they would be reprobated (v. 20d-e)

The next couple phrases say, “and that they might receive no mercy, but that He might destroy them, as the LORD had commanded Moses.” God had it all planned out long before and had even written down exactly what would happen. So each of the steps in this point needed to take place. God had to harden their hearts by withdrawing His restraint, which would immediately result in their sins, which would make them unwilling to receive mercy (because the deeper into sin you get, the less you are attracted to God’s mercy), so that their destruction and reprobation would be sure. And by the way, this is another verse that implies that anyone who had cried out for mercy from God would have received it. But can people cry out for mercy apart from God’s sovereign grace? No. It’s impossible. We will be singing about that after the sermon. We will give you the opportunity to profess your faith in the doctrine of predestination and election.

C. Yet men are still accountable for their stubborn rebellion.

Yet in all of this, men are still accountable for their stubborn rebellion. If you were living back then and could see the perversion, the baby murder, the adultery, blasphemy, and other evils, you would likely agree that they deserved to die. *And* - it's not as if they had not witnessed the Gospel. Early on in chapter 1 Rahab had said that everyone had heard the story of Israel's redemption, who God was, and they knew the Gospel. They knew it and had rejected it. The Canaanites had also known about fellow Canaanites who had embraced the God of Israel over the previous forty years. They had seen redemption and God's grace applied to so many and transforming many, yet they spurned it. As one commentary worded it, "Their day of grace was over." There comes a point of no return.

But even we as believers should make sure that we do not harden our own hearts and ever spurn God's grace. Instead, may our hearts be drawn to love and appreciate the true Sovereign God of the Scriptures, not the fake milquetoast God of the modern church. The true God is able to save to uttermost. And it's *because* He is sovereign that we can have that confidence. Study the sovereignty of God. Cherish it. Love it. Be comforted by it. And may it give you confidence. Amen. Let's pray.