

our beliefs

'God is sovereign in creation, revelation, redemption and final judgment.'

Giles Cattermole considers God's sovereignty



In the first article in this series we saw that God is love, perfectly and eternally in the trinity. In this article we will see that God is powerfully sovereign. If God were loving but powerless, we'd have no assurance he could help us or save us. There'd be little point in worshipping him. If he were powerful but loveless, he'd be a tyrant. We wouldn't want to worship him. The good news is that God is both loving and powerful, a God of mercy and majesty, saving and sovereign.

God's sovereignty means that he is dependent on nothing outside himself. Petty pagan gods were defined by their relationship with creation (a god of the sea, a god of war); they were dependent on something outside themselves. A solitary god who does not enjoy an eternal loving relationship as the trinity does, but who is nonetheless defined as

merciful, is therefore dependent on created beings in order to show mercy, in order to be who he's said to be. But the true and triune God does not depend on his creation in order to love or to be true, good or beautiful. These things are part of his eternal nature. He is utterly sovereign in his nature. And his sovereignty is unique:

'We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one". For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords") yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.' (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)

God's sovereignty is his supremacy over all others. It's not just that he's superior to other



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powers, as though there's a battle of near-equals in which he's got the upper hand. He is the only God; Father, Son and Spirit. And he is utterly in control:

'The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers

or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body,

the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.' (Colossians 1:15-18)

God is supreme over creation. He made it from nothing simply by speaking it into existence (Genesis 1; Hebrews 11:3). Creation continues to be dependent on God, day by day (Hebrews 1:3). And day by day, God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11). Nothing was made apart from God; nothing happens outside his control.

God's purpose is to bring all things together in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). Through his world he has revealed his power and majesty, so we're without excuse for rejecting him (Romans 1:20). And through his Word he has revealed his plan to save us through his Son (Acts 4:12). There is no other way for us to know God, no other way to be saved. God is sovereign in revelation and redemption. And it's all his work, not ours:

'He has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but

because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.' (2 Timothy 1:9-10)

It's God who's chosen us and called us, who's forgiven us and prepares us to be with him for eternity. And it's God who's sovereign in his final judgment. Everyone will stand before him, and no-one will be declared righteous according to their own efforts (Romans 3:19-20). God is the supreme judge; he alone will decide and his judgment is final (Revelation 20:11-15).

But what about free will? If God's will is sovereign, are human decisions meaningless? Far from it. We are very much responsible for the choices we make. From Genesis to Revelation, God calls us to choose to obey him, and holds us accountable for rejecting him. We often struggle to reconcile God's sovereignty and our responsibility, perhaps because we think of them as two parallel truths running alongside each other like railway lines which meet only in eternity. But instead, perhaps it'd better to think of these truths as asymmetrical. God's sovereignty is primary. And our responsibility flows from that. We are responsible because God is sovereign. Our responsibility is to the God who is creator, revealer, redeemer and judge. His Lordship demands my obedience, my repentance, my faith, my hope. His sovereignty creates my responsibility to love and worship him.

Because God is sovereign over creation, we are responsible to him to care for it. The earth is the Lord's, not ours (Psalm 24:1). This makes

the world of difference to our medicine. Studying and using God's world is part of what it means to rule over it (Genesis 1:27-28). Caring for others reflects God's character, and our responsibility is to bear the image of the sovereign God. But our medicine must be practised within God's moral limits, because he is sovereign both in creation and revelation: we rule over creation only as his servants; his Word tells us how we should live. It is God, not us, who decides what is right and wrong. A right understanding of God's sovereignty and our responsibility to him has huge implications for our understanding of areas such as what it means to be human, the value of unborn and vulnerable lives, and the purpose of medicine to demonstrate God's compassion.

'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.' (Romans 8:29-30)

Because God is sovereign, I can rest in him. If my salvation was down to me, I'd have no assurance. But those God has called, he will see through to the end. Their final glory is so certain Paul can describe it as a done deal! The doctrine of God's sovereignty is something to delight in, not to debate. If you're in Christ, rejoice that the loving ruler of the universe is working for your good, to make you like Jesus, to prepare you for heaven. His sovereign purpose and power are unshakeable.

And because it's God's work and not mine, I can also rest in the knowledge that my friends are in his hands too. It's not up to me to

convert them; God works that miracle through his Spirit. Sometimes we have the privilege of being the means by which our friends hear the good news of Jesus, and that's wonderful. But don't fall into the arrogance of thinking it's your own achievement if your friend becomes a Christian. And don't fall into the despair of thinking it's your fault if they don't. God is in control.

So too when you fail exams. When you don't get the FI job you wanted, God is in charge. None of this happened outside his control. God didn't blink. You're not in 'Plan B' struggling to sort out the mess. Instead, remember that God's plan for you is far bigger than exams and jobs. It's to be made like Jesus and to help others become more like him too, as God brings all things together in Christ. How he does that day by day, I'll wait and see – in faith. It might mean a job I didn't expect in a place I'd never heard of. It might even mean leaving medicine. But whatever it means, God is in control.

When your diagnosis and treatment are wrong. When your patient deteriorates despite all your efforts. When death seems to win. And when it's not your patient, but your loved ones. When it's you yourself, suffering or sick. God is in control. He doesn't promise health and wealth in this life; we're called to take up a cross and suffer for the gospel (Mark 8:34; 1 Peter 2:21). But God does promise a future hope without death, mourning or pain (Revelation 21:4). God is sovereign in final judgment, and he will ensure his people will be with him in eternity. Because that's his plan, and he will see his plan through to the end. ■