

Essentials of the Faith Lesson 1

The Sovereignty of God: “How Much Control Does God Have?”

I. Introduction

- a. Sovereignty is related to God’s omnipotence (God is all-powerful). Yet it goes farther and answers the question: to what extent does God exercise his infinite power?
- b. Introductory Questions:
 - i. To what extent has God planned human history? And to what extent does he control it? What kind of control does God have? What is the nature of God’s knowledge and the dominion of his control?
 - ii. Are human beings puppets? Do they have free-will to decide and thus God works with them though God does know the future? What is “free-will”?
 - iii. Does he exercise his sovereignty over everything except the human will? If so, does that mean that humans can thwart God’s plan?
 - iv. Does God act according to a plan he has already worked out?
 - v. Does he decide what to do and how to respond as he sees events of the universe unfold?
 - vi. Does God take “risks” with his creation, hoping for a certain outcome? Or, perhaps, letting the outcome work a certain way? Does he wait for us to respond however we will respond?
 - vii. Are we “partners” with God, who team-up with him to unfold history?

II. What Kind of Control Does God Have? Over What is God “Sovereign”?

- a. Over the smallest details:

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Matthew 10:29-31 “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. “But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. “So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.
RC Sproul: “There are no maverick molecules in the universe.”

Chance is a godless and non-existent concept.

- b. Weather & geological events:

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Job 37:4-5 “After it, a voice roars; He thunders with His majestic voice, And He does not restrain the lightnings when His voice is heard. “God thunders with His voice wondrously, Doing great things which we cannot comprehend.

Psalm 29:7-8 The voice of the Lord hews out flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; The Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

Mark 4:37, 39-41 And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up..And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Hush, be still.” And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And He said to them, “Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?” They became very much afraid and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?”

c. The animal world:

Psalm 29:9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer to calve

Matthew 10:29 Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And [yet] not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

d. Overall good; good things that happen to everyone:

Matthew 5:44-45 “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous.

James 1:17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

e. Events of nations

Psalm 22:28 For the kingdom is the LORD’S and He rules over the nations.

Psalm 33:10-11 The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.

f. War and the Outcomes

Proverbs 21:31 The horse is prepared for the day of battle, But victory belongs to the LORD.

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g. Governments

Proverbs 21:1 The king’s heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.

Romans 13:1-2 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Ezra 1:1-3 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying:² “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.’³ ‘Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Cyrus-king of Persia, decreed rebuilding of the temple in 538BC-set apart in God’s sovereignty, for divine purposes though not even a believer

h. Business success

Psalms 127:1-2 Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman keeps awake in vain.² It is vain for you to rise up early, To retire late, To eat the bread of painful labors; For He gives to His beloved *even in his* sleep.

i. Our financial situation

Proverbs 22:2 The rich and the poor have a common bond, The LORD is the maker of them all.

j. Individual human decisions, including both sinful and righteous actions:

1 Kings 12:12-15 Then Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day as the king had directed, saying, “Return to me on the third day.”¹³ The king answered the people harshly, for he forsook the advice of the elders which they had given him,¹⁴ and he spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.”¹⁵ So the king did not listen to the people; for it was a turn of events from the LORD, that He might establish His word, which the LORD spoke through Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

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Proverbs 16:1 The plans of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Proverbs 16:9 The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.

Proverbs 19:21 Many plans are in a man’s heart, But the counsel of the LORD will stand.

Proverbs 21:1 The king’s heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.

Matthew 26:24-25 “The Son of Man *is to* go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.”²⁵ And Judas, who was betraying Him, said, “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” Jesus said to him, “You have said *it* yourself.

Matthew 26:34 Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this *very* night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.”

k. Birth and death

Genesis 21:1-2 Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised.² So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him.

Luke 1:13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.

Luke 1:31 “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

Jeremiah 28:15-17 Then Jeremiah the prophet said to Hananiah the prophet, “Listen now, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. “Therefore thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This year you are going to die, because you have counseled rebellion against the LORD.’ ” So Hananiah the prophet died in the same year in the seventh month.

l. False signs, dreams, visions, and prophecies

Deuteronomy 13:1-3 “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder,² and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of

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dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

1 Kings 22:19-23 Micaiah said, “Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. “The LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said this while another said that. “Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ “The LORD said to him, ‘How?’ And he said, ‘I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then He said, ‘You are to entice *him* and also prevail. Go and do so.’ “Now therefore, behold, the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and the LORD has proclaimed disaster against you.”

The occurrence of a dream, sign, or vision that comes true is in no way affirmation that God works in such ways. They are not to be trusted in, relied upon, or taken to account.

- m. The creation of the universe and everything it contains:

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

This is one of the most profound statements of God’s sovereignty.

- n. Satan and demons

Job 1:12, 2:6 ¹² Then the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him.” So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD. ⁶ So the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.”

Mark 5:6-7 Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; and shouting with a loud voice, he said, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!”

Some charismatic theology teaches the sovereignty of Satan. Perhaps in part, this explains the need to name it claim it faith, miracles, and do battle against Satan.

- o. Punishment of unbelievers

Psalms 11:6 Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup.

Revelation 20:11-15 Then I saw a great white throne and Him [Jesus] who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life; and the dead were

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judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

- p. Evil (evil/sinful actions committed by people) and disaster.

Exod 9:12, 10:20, 27, 11:10, 14:8 “And the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart,” and he did not listen to them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider— God has made the one as well as the other so that man will not discover anything *that will be* after him.

- q. Answer to prayer

Isaiah 37:15, 20-21, 34-36

¹⁵ Hezekiah prayed to the LORD saying...²⁰ “Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God.” ²¹ Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent *word* to Hezekiah, saying, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria...’³⁴ ‘By the way that he came, by the same he will return, and he will not come to this city,’ declares the LORD. ³⁵ ‘For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.’ ” ³⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead.

Matthew 6:32 “For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask.

- r. The good of believers even in trials

Genesis 50:20 “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result; to preserve many people alive.”

Romans 8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

- s. The spiritual giftedness of believers

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1 Corinthians 12:7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

- t. Divine illumination (ability of believers to savingly ascertain truth from Scripture)

Psalm 119:18 Open my eyes, that I may behold Wonderful things from Your law.

1 Corinthians 2:10 For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

- u. The progressive sanctification and eternal security of believers (more on this in lesson 8)

John 15:5 “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Philippians 1:6 *For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

- v. Great good and compassion on people

Psalm 136:23-25 Who remembered us in our low estate, For His lovingkindness is everlasting, ²⁴ And has rescued us from our adversaries, For His lovingkindness is everlasting; ²⁵ Who gives food to all flesh, For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

- w. Salvation of individuals (more on this in lesson 3)

John 6:65 And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.”

Ephesians 1:4-5 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will

- x. The daily operation of all things in the universe.

Hebrews 1:3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.

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God is not like a divine watch-maker who winds up the world and lets it unfold.

y. All future events

*All fulfilled prophecies in Scripture (the Messiah, destruction of various cities, etc.)

- i. Jeremiah 25:11-12 (29:10) ‘This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ‘Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,’ declares the LORD, ‘for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.

(Jeremiah spoke this prophecy in 626 B.C. Jewish captivity lasted from 605 B.C., Jerusalem’s first capture by Babylonian invasion, to 535 B.C., Cyrus’ decree to release the Jews).

- ii. Isaiah 44:28-45:1 “*It is I* who says of Cyrus, ‘*He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.*’ And he declares of Jerusalem, ‘*She will be built,*’ And of the temple, ‘*Your foundation will be laid.*’ ” ¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, Whom I have taken by the right hand, To subdue nations before him and to loose the loins of kings; To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut

(Isaiah written ca. 700 B.C. and Cyrus decreed the Jews’ release in 538 B.C.)

- iii. Isaiah 53:5-6 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.

(Written ca. 700 years before the death of Christ on the cross)

- iv. Daniel 9:25 “So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress.

(444-445 B.C. was the year that the Persian king, Artaxerxes decreed Nehemiah (a Jew in Artaxerxes’ court) to return and rebuild Jerusalem. 69 “weeks” (periods of 7 years) = 69x7 = 483 years of the Jewish 360-day calendar. Take that added to the exact day in 445 B.C. when Artaxerxes issued the decree and you get the exact day that Christ entered into Jerusalem (the triumphal entry, Matt 21:4-11).)

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- v. Daniel 11:2-35 Multiple fulfillments of the Persian kingdom, the Greek reign, and Antiochus Epiphanes. (See MacArthur Study Bible, pp. 1245-1248 for details).

*Therefore, we have absolute confidence that all other foretold events will occur (return of Christ, judgment of all humanity, etc.).

- z. His own exaltation in the universe

Psalm 46:10 “Cease *striving* and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

- aa. Everything

Psalm 103:19 The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all.

Psalm 115:3 But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Isaiah 46:9-10 “Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure’

Daniel 4:35 “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And *among* the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’

Ephesians 1:11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

- bb. The crucifixion of Christ for our sins

Acts 2:23 this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death.

Acts 4:27-28 “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

- cc. Does NOT mean: God personally *does* everything that occurs.

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III. Some Implications

- a. God’s sovereignty defined
 - i. The decree of God is His eternal purpose according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.
 - ii. Sovereignty: absolute rule; one that exercises supreme authority; possessing supreme power.
 - iii. God is sovereign over every second, every event, every person, every molecule, at all times, everywhere in all the universe.
 - iv. “You can never ascribe to God too much sovereignty.” (Jesse Johnson)
- b. Does God act according to a plan he has already worked out?
 - i. God carries out exactly what he has predetermined without deviation.
- c. Does he decide what to do and how to respond as he sees the history of the universe unfold?
 - i. God has ordained all things from eternity past.
- d. Does God take “risks” with his creation, hoping for a certain outcome? Or, perhaps, letting the outcome work a certain way? Does he waits for us to respond however we will respond?
 - i. “Risk” implies uncertainty and lack of control with respect to outcomes. God has full, sovereign control over all things. He not only knows and allows, but decrees.
- e. Are human beings puppets? Do they have free-will to decide and thus God works with them though God does know the future? How do we understand the compatibility of human responsibility and divine sovereignty?
 - i. Scripture never indicates that humans are puppets. In other words, Scripture does not indicate that individuals are moved by an outside force which causes them to act against their will.
 - ii. We are individual creatures who make decisions with real consequences.

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- iii. Do we have a “free will”? Depends what we mean by “free.” There is no verse in the Bible that says we are free and outside of God’s sovereignty (more on this in Lesson 3).
- iv. Is human will free or bound? Both. We never sin under divine compulsion, but freedom of our will is in bondage to our sin (Lessons 2 & 3).
- v. Fienberg: “If the act is according to the agent’s desires, then even though the act is causally determined, it is free and the agent is morally responsible.”
- vi. “The basic difficulty is that of attempting to explain the nature of the relationship between an infinite God and finite creatures. Our temptation is to think of divine causation [God’s sovereignty] in much the same way as human causation, and this produces difficulties as soon as we try to relate divine causation and human freedom. It is beyond our ability to explain how God can cause us to do certain things (or to cause the universe to come into being and to behave as it does” (I Howard Marshall, in *Grace Unlimited*, 132-33, 139, quoted in Grudem, 322).
- vii. We can have peace in God who does whatever he pleases (Ps 115:3) and causes all things to work together for good, for those who love him (Rom 8:28).
- f. How can God be sovereign, good, and evil exist?
 - i. Lesson 6
- g. Every sin, in a sense, is a various assertion of self-sovereignty.
 - i. I am raising up my banner and self-nomination of “Sovereign.”
 - ii. Sovereignty treason.
 - iii. Complaining is contention for sovereignty. Every act of complaining and grumbling is a declaration that God’s sovereign action, both, in that specific realm and in general, is insufficient.
- h. Human beings are not sovereign, nor are they God.

Proverbs 27:1 Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.

James 4:13-16 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” ¹⁴ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead, *you ought* to say, “If the Lord wills,

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we will live and also do this or that.”¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

i. The appropriate response of humanity: trust/faith

Romans 9:19-20 You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it?

Job 42:2, 5-6² “I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted...”⁵ “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You; ⁶Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes.”

j. Though we may not always see it (and maybe will not until heaven), God does work all things for his glory and the ultimate good of those who trust in Christ

Romans 8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

Romans 8:32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Revelation 21:1-7¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea.² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them,⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.”⁶ Then He said to me, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.”⁷ “He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.