

The Sovereignty of God

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There are few Biblical subjects more fundamental to a proper understanding of the Bible than the recognition of God's sovereign rule over all. This idea is stated repeatedly in the Bible and underlies almost all of its records, principles and promises for God's people. The Bible is the story or record of what God, the creator of the heavens and earth, has done, is doing and will do in history. This principally involves the bringing to pass of his plan of salvation for mankind - all to his own glory. This plan of salvation is an all-encompassing concept and includes: God's reasons for creation, his dealings with the OT patriarchs, the OT nation of Israel, the life and accomplishments of Jesus Christ, the NT church of the body of Christ and the final out-working of God's purposes brought to pass by the second coming of Christ and the ultimate establishment of his sovereign reign in "a new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness" (II Pet. 3:13).

In all of this it is God himself who is at work to bring to pass his own plan "in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). Perhaps, the central idea that must be grasped in all of this is the understanding of the concept of God's "kingdom" as it is presented in the Bible. The NT scholar G.E. Ladd explains in his book *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Eerdmans) what is meant by this Biblical word "kingdom:"

We must set aside our modern idiom if we are to understand Biblical terminology. The primary meaning of both the Hebrew word *malkuth* [kingdom] in the Old Testament and of the Greek word *basileia* [kingdom] in the New Testament is the rank, authority and sovereignty exercised by a king. A *basileia* may indeed be a realm over which a sovereign exercises his authority; and it may be the people who belong to that realm and over whom authority is exercised; but these are secondary and derived meanings. First of all, a kingdom is the authority to rule, the sovereignty of the king...

When the word refers to God's kingdom, it always refers to His reign, His rule, His sovereignty ... Psalm 103:19, "The Lord has

established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." God's kingdom, His *malkuth*, is His universal rule, His sovereignty over all the earth. Psalm 145:13, "Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endures throughout all generations" ... It is God's *rule* which is everlasting.

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," are we praying for heaven to come to earth? In a sense we are praying for this; but heaven is an object of desire only because the reign of God is to be more perfectly realized than it is now. Therefore, what we pray for is, "Thy kingdom come; *thy will be done* on earth as it is in heaven." This prayer is a petition for God to reign, to manifest His kingly sovereignty and power, to put to flight every enemy of righteousness and of His divine rule, that God alone may be King over all the world.

However, a reign without a realm in which it is exercised is meaningless. Thus we find that the Kingdom of God is also the realm in which God's reign may be experienced. But again the facts are not so simple. Sometimes the Bible speaks of the Kingdom as the realm into which we enter as present, sometimes as though it were future ...

Fundamentally, as we have seen, the Kingdom of God is God's sovereign reign; *but God's reign expresses itself in different stages through redemptive history. Therefore, men may enter into the realm of God's reign in its several stages of manifestation and experience the blessings of His reign in differing degrees.* God's Kingdom is the realm of the Age to Come...; then we shall realize the blessings of His Kingdom (reign) in the perfection of their fullness. But the Kingdom is here now. There is a realm of spiritual blessing into which we may enter today and enjoy in part but in reality the blessings of God's Kingdom (reign).

We pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The confidence that this prayer is to be answered when God brings human history to the divinely ordained consummation enables the Christian to retain his balance and sanity of mind in this mad world in which we live. Our hearts go out to those who have no such hope. Thank God, His Kingdom is coming, and it will fill all the earth [pp. 19-23].

The sovereignty of God is shown throughout the Bible to include God's rule over both his *creation* and over *time* itself. The NIV does a particularly good job of emphasizing God's sovereignty over his creation in the translation of various titles for God. I will let the translators themselves explain in their book *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation* (Zondervan):

Because for most readers today the phrases "the LORD of hosts" and "God of hosts" have little meaning, this version renders them "the LORD Almighty" and "God Almighty." These renderings convey the sense of the Hebrew, namely, "he who is sovereign over all the 'hosts' (powers) in heaven and on earth, especially over the 'hosts' (armies) of Israel." For readers unacquainted with Hebrew this does not make clear the distinction between *Sabaoth* ("hosts" or "Almighty") and *Shaddai* (which can also be translated "Almighty"), but the latter occurs infrequently and is always footnoted ...

... The Hebrew for "hosts" can refer to (1) human armies (Ex. 7:4; Ps. 44:9); (2) the celestial bodies such as the sun, moon and stars (Gen. 2:1; Dt. 4:19; Isa 40:26); or (3) the heavenly creatures such as angels (Jos. 5:14; I Kings 22:19; Ps. 148:2). The title, "the LORD of hosts," is perhaps best understood as a general reference to the sovereignty of God over all powers in the universe (hence the NIV rendering, "the LORD Almighty") ...

[OT scholar] Kiss ... maintains...The primary idea of God in Israel is that God is Lord and King of the whole universe ... according to the Old Testament view, there are different powers in the world - angels, hosts of stars, cosmic and natural powers - which are organized like an army. Above them all reigns the Lord. He is the God of gods.... the "almighty Lord" ... is a 'royal' concept stressing the kingship of Yahweh.

[OT scholar] Hartley concurs with this analysis of the epithet:

... [Yahweh Sabaoth] affirms his universal rulership that encompasses every force or army, heavenly, cosmic and earthly ... Ps. 24:10 clearly

shows that 'Yahweh of hosts' conveys the concept of glorious king. Yahweh is King of the world (cf. Zech. 14:16) and over all the kingdoms of the earth (Isa. 37:16) ... Although the title has military overtones, it points directly to Yahweh's rulership over the entire universe ... [pp. 109-110].

This same understanding of God's absolute sovereignty is carried over into the NT by the use of such titles as "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of Lords" (I Tim. 6:15) and in the use of OT titles such as "Lord Almighty" and "God Almighty" in various places. In the NT, however, a great deal of emphasis is also placed on God's sovereignty over *time*. Much of this takes place in the light of the background of the OT Book of Daniel where God is shown to be sovereign over all earthly kingdoms and will bring about the glorious victory of his own kingdom according to his own timetable. In his book *Christ and Time* (Westminster, pp. 49-50), NT scholar Oscar Cullman pointed out the significance of God's sovereignty over time:

The terminology of the New Testament teaches us that ... time in its unending extension as well as its individual periods and moments is given by God and ruled by him. Therefore *all* his acting is so inevitably bound up with time that time is not felt to be a problem. It is rather the natural presupposition of all that God causes to occur. This explains the fact that in a great majority of cases the terminology of the Primitive Christian writings has a time reference. Each individual item of the redemptive history has its fixed place in time [e.g. Gal.4:4; Mark 1:15; Rom.5:6; 8:18; Acts1:7; 2:23; 3:21;17:26; Eph.1:10; 2 Thess.2:6; I Tim.6:15; etc.]

I will let the Scriptures have the last word:

... It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority

... which God will bring about in his own time - God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen