

Sovereign God



WHEN THE GROUND FALLS AWAY BENEATH YOU, there isn't time to reach out for God's hand. If you are not already in His grasp when it happens, it will be too late.

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PEOPLE THE WORLD OVER HAVE WEPT over the brutal and senseless loss of life in New York City and Washington, DC.

We have gasped at the images that have illuminated our living rooms with their scenes of unimaginable destruction and bloody carnage. We have searched for answers, for anything that might explain the lunacy that precipitated this horror.

And people all over the United States and around the world have done what they always do when such things occur: they have gathered in churches to pray, and hold each other, and to look longingly to their spiritual leaders to tell them *why*.

Some have drawn strength from a faith that was in place long before the first hijacked airliner veered off-course, aimed like a missile at the first tower of the World Trade Center. But many have, belatedly, searched for a new and unfamiliar faith to console them in their grief. And some spiritual leaders have sought to comfort the mourners by telling them that God's heart was the first to be broken when the planes hit—suggesting in their well-intentioned ignorance that surely a benevolent God could not have personally had a hand in such a terrible event, that He may even have gasped in surprise at the ensuing death and destruction.

But our God is not a spectator. Jehovah God is either Master of everything that is—or He is not. You can't have it both ways. The God who gives life can just as well take it away; the God who heals sickness can also cause it to linger.

The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains,
The world, and those who dwell in it. Psalm 24:1 nasb



FOR MANY PEOPLE, HISTORY BEGINS AND ENDS with their personal experience. If it took place before they were born, then, to them, it never happened; if it didn't transpire within their own sphere, then it is insignificant, and not worthy of their attention. It is not surprising, then, that when tragedy strikes, the human inclination is to imagine that nothing this bad has ever happened before. But from the first blow struck in anger between the first brothers, civilization has witnessed atrocity and horror. And through it all, from beginning to end, God has reigned.

God was on His throne in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar's army destroyed Jerusalem, and the major part of the remaining Israelite community was taken to Babylon. He was still on His throne in AD 60, when Nero was lighting his patio with Christians dipped in tar, or tossing them to the lions. He was still on His throne in 1933, when the Nazis began their systematic persecution of the Jews resulting in, by 1945, over 5 million exterminated. He was there in the 1930s while Joseph Stalin systematically crushed the peasantry of the Soviet Union, sending tens of millions of his own countrymen to their death. And God was still on His throne in 1988, when Saddam Hussein ordered thousands of Kurds to be killed, some by chemical weapons, and hundreds of Kurdish villages destroyed.

Tragedy is not reserved only for those who deserve it. By human standards the ancient Job did not deserve to lose all of his livestock, his servants, every one of his children; he did nothing to deserve the festering boils that covered him from head to toe. Indeed, the story begins with God declaring Job's righteousness.

Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Job 1:8

Yet, for all his innocence, tragedy struck, and while one could debate interminably the semantics of whether God 'permitted' or 'allowed' or 'caused' these events to take place, one thing is clear from the narrative: God was not just a spectator.

When tragedy strikes, our sorrow must be informed by an understanding of God's sovereignty. There is no lasting hope in the *search* for faith; there is only hope in the faith itself—faith in a God who can do as He pleases.

God's sovereignty is the attribute by which He rules His entire creation, and to be sovereign God must be all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely free. Were there even one datum of knowledge, however small, unknown to God, His rule would break down at that point. To be Lord over all creation, He must possess all knowledge. And were God lacking one infinitesimal modicum of power, that lack would end His reign and undo His kingdom; that one stray atom of power would belong to someone else and God would be a limited ruler and hence not sovereign. Furthermore, His sovereignty requires that He be absolutely free, which means simply that He must be free to do whatever He wills to do anywhere at any time to carry out His eternal purpose in every single detail without interference. Were He less than free He must be less than sovereign. A.W. Tozer

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VEN MORE FRIGHTENING THAN THE TRAGEDY ON OUR EAST COAST is the prospect of a future in which God is not sovereign. If we worship a God who is all-knowing, then we worship a God who was not surprised by the events of September 11; if we worship a God who is all-powerful, then we worship a God who could have stopped them if He so desired.

"See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand." Deuteronomy 32:39

Faith is not simply believing that God is able to heal; real faith is continuing to believe even when He doesn't. Job had more advice than any one man could need. The first—and possibly the worst—of this advice came from his good wife. Her counsel to the grieving Job was

“Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” Job 2:9b

Only the God of the Bible is revealed as a personal Creator who can act independently of the cosmos and its space-time dimensions. The God of the Bible is neither subject to nor contained within the limits of our space and time. He is the one who brought these features of the cosmos into existence. And no other God besides the God of the Christian Bible claims attributes that defy explanation in the context of four dimensions. For example, only the biblical God is simultaneously singular and plural (a tri-unity) and simultaneously accommodates both humanity's freedom of choice and God's sovereign choice (that is, predetermination).
Hugh Ross

Job's response to his mate is something that should be forever stenciled on the backs of our hands, always available as a reminder when we pass through difficult—even tragic—times.

He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” Job 2:10a

It is far too easy to proclaim our faith in a sovereign God when He has just filled our life with pleasant blessings. When the job is going well the praise comes easily; when there's money in the bank our allegiance is never a stretch; when the family is in good health we never question His wisdom.

But let our lives become hard, and it is often far too easy to change our tune. When we've lost that comfortable job we cry out, shaking our fist toward the heavens: “How could He do this?” When bankruptcy looms we declare: “God can't be in this!” And when disease and sickness and death attack the family we question: “How could a loving God stand by and permit this to happen?”

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things. Isaiah 45:7

SOME PEOPLE, IN AN HONEST EFFORT TO KNOW GOD, fall into the trap of trying to define who He is by standards familiar to them. We are encouraged to know God by acknowledging His holy attributes: He is Truth, He is Majesty, Great, Changeless and Eternal. It is a righteous occupation to spend time meditating upon these attributes and using them as the raw material of our worship and praise.

But never should we seek to know Him by the attributes of humanity. We can, at best, use humanity and nature to illustrate for our better understanding; these things were created by Him and, thereby, are related, and are profitable as illustrations when our small minds fail in grasping the scope of His grandeur.



Everything around us, however, is imperfect—including ourselves—when compared to God. We must not try to limit His abilities and rights by the rather limited abilities and rights of His creation.

*I sing the mighty power of God,
That made the mountains rise;
That spread the flowing seas abroad,
And built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained
The sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at His command,
And all the stars obey.*

*I sing the goodness of the Lord,
That filled the earth with food;
He formed the creatures with His word,
And then pronounced them good.
Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed,
Where'er I turn my eye:
If I survey the ground I tread,
Or gaze upon the sky!*

*There's not a plant or flower below,
But makes Thy glories known;
And clouds arise, and tempests blow,
By order from Thy throne;
While all that borrows life from Thee
Is ever in Thy care,
And everywhere that man can be,
Thou, God, art present there. Amen.*

Isaac Watts

G

OD IS WISE NOT ONLY WHEN HE AGREES WITH US. His wisdom need only agree with Himself.

He need not explain Himself to anyone else.

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, aircraft of the Japanese navy attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in an attempt to cripple the United States Pacific Fleet, thereby minimizing the ability of the US to prevent the Imperial navy from taking over most of the Pacific.

The attack was wildly successful. Just before 8:00 am they struck. During the next two hours, the Japanese navy destroyed or heavily damaged 18 ships and 77 aircraft. For the people of a country officially neutral in the expanding world conflict, the most alarming numbers were those itemizing the lives lost.

Over a period lasting just two hours, almost 2,500 innocent people were killed by bombs, bullets and torpedoes rained on them by planes from a country that had not even declared war. In other words, these were not war casualties; these were people who were murdered.

Four years later, the United States, in an effort to draw the world war to an end, dropped the first atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The Supreme Allied Headquarters reported that 129,558 persons were killed, injured, or missing and 176,987 made homeless by the bombing. Worldwide, as a result of World War Two, 55 million people—military and civilian—lost their lives.

And our sovereign God was still on His throne.

Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Lamentations 3:37-38

Why did God 'permit' all those people to die? 55 *million* people. Why?

There is no answer for that, because God does not need to explain Himself to us. Those are the rights of a sovereign; He may do whatever pleases Him, at any time and in any way, and He need not explain His actions to anyone.

A sovereign's logic does not need to agree with the logic of His subjects. We betray the smallness of our faith, and the apparent smallness of our God, when we expect His actions—or inaction—to agree with our reasoning. Could God have prevented World War II? Absolutely. Was He under any obligation to do so? Absolutely not.

ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, ALMOST 7,000 PEOPLE WERE KILLED in less than two hours when four planes were commandeered by zealous madmen and used as guided missiles to wreak destruction in the United States. The first two reached their intended targets of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and the third reached an apparent secondary target of the Pentagon in Washington DC. The fourth plane, almost certainly on its way toward either the White House or Capitol, crashed in Pennsylvania after some of the passengers overpowered the hijackers.

Could God have prevented the deaths? Absolutely. Was He under any obligation to do so? Absolutely not.

When Christian theology declares that God is wise, it means vastly more than it says or can say, for it tries to make a comparatively weak word bear an incomprehensible plenitude of meaning that threatens to tear it apart and crush it under the sheer weight of the idea. 'His understanding is infinite,' says the psalmist. It is nothing less than infinitude that theology is here laboring to express.

There is, indeed a secondary, created wisdom which God has given in measure to His creatures as their highest good may require; but the wisdom of any creature or of all creatures, when set against the boundless wisdom of God, is pathetically small. For this reason the apostle is accurate when he refers to God as 'only wise.' That is, God is wise in Himself, and all the shining wisdom of men or angels is but a reflection of that uncreated effulgence which streams from the throne of the Majesty in the heavens. Tozer

Ancient civilizations worshipped a veritable catalogue of gods—each god responsible for sometimes only one area of the peoples' lives. There were gods for the weather, for the crops, for fertility, for war. The list could be endless. All the gods were specialized and a man would not, for example, pray to the god of war if he wanted his wife to bear a healthy child. That wouldn't do any good; the husband or wife would have to pray to the god of fertility.

But *our* God, the one God, is in charge of everything. He is not sub-divided, neither does He work in concert with any other gods. As sovereign God, He does as He pleases, and only has to agree with Himself.

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious—Thy great name we praise.*

*Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.*

*To all, life Thou givest—to both great and small,
In all life Thou livest—the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish—but naught changeth Thee.*

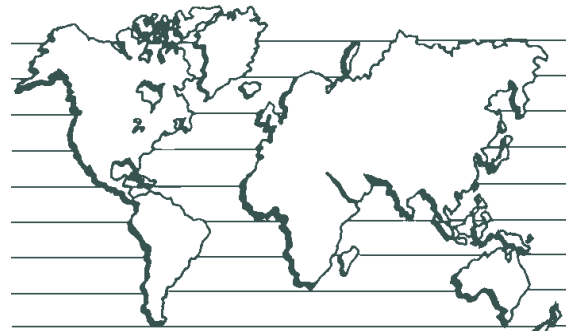
*Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render—O help us to see
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee!*
Walter Chalmers Smith

W

HAT DOES IT MEAN, IN PRACTICAL TERMS, that we belong to a sovereign God who is free to do as He pleases? O, what freedom! What sweet inner peace, knowing that our Lord is a true, unconquerable God—a God who is never surprised by the events of our world.

There are those who question the value of knowing world or national history. Their typical retort is “But what does that have to do with *me*?” Yet a knowledge of history, among other things, can give one a comfortable context within which to place contemporary events. The person with a working knowledge of the ebb and flow of civilization—the rich and varied procession of conflicts and wars, political assignments, societal upheavals and shifts—will rarely panic at the morning's headlines.

Just so with our knowledge of God. There is a reassuring peace to be found in the knowledge that no matter what happens, God is not taken by surprise. God is never alarmed by the morning's headlines, and since He is our Master of our lives, this means that we need never be.



I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:8

Is it possible? Is it *really* possible to have this kind of contented faith? It was for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." Daniel 3:13-18

There may be many Christians like young sailors, who think the shore and the whole land move when their ship sails and actually they themselves are moved. Just so not a few imagine that God moves, and sails, and changes places, because their giddy souls are under sail, and subject to alteration, to ebbing and flowing. But the foundation of the Lord abides sure.
Samuel Rutherford

All around these Jewish men were people only too happy to bow down and worship whatever the king erected to his own honor. But these three would not. They had a quiet, yet firm resolve that their God was quite capable of keeping them safe from whatever torture or death Nebuchadnezzar devised. And—more to the present point—they were content to place themselves in God's hands, even if He chose for their lives to end.

These three men had not read the end of the third chapter of the book of Daniel. They had no foreknowledge of how this drama would be played out. Many Jews had been killed before them, and many would be after. They had no assurance that their names would not be listed as simply three more who had lost their lives at the hands of yet another foreign despot. But even without this knowledge, they placed their faith in their God. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego chose to live for their Lord—even if it meant their death.

WHAT MANY PEOPLE HAVE TODAY is a relationship with God that bestows on Him 'conditional' Lordship—lordship with a small 'l'.

Many people are quite content to call Him Lord—so long as there is no discomfort or disappointment involved. They are happy to obey Him—so long as He doesn't ask anything of them too inconvenient or unpleasant in return.

It is a very thin relationship that is based on those terms. Lordship (with a capital 'L') means that we obey and honor God even when He does something we don't understand—or even like. He does not ask that we agree with every decision He makes. He doesn't wait upon our approval. If He did, He wouldn't be God, but rather a partner, an equal.

We are not God's equal. There is freedom, strength, and sublime peace in acknowledging that our Lord is a God who behaves according to His *own* rules—even when more than 6,000 innocent people have lost their lives.

A PSALM OF DAVID.

**ASCRIBE TO THE LORD, O MIGHTY ONES,
ASCRIBE TO THE LORD GLORY AND STRENGTH.
ASCRIBE TO THE LORD THE GLORY DUE HIS NAME;
WORSHIP THE LORD IN THE SPLENDOR OF HIS HOLINESS.
THE VOICE OF THE LORD IS OVER THE WATERS;
THE GOD OF GLORY THUNDERS,
THE LORD THUNDERS OVER THE MIGHTY WATERS.
THE VOICE OF THE LORD IS POWERFUL;
THE VOICE OF THE LORD IS MAJESTIC.
THE VOICE OF THE LORD BREAKS THE CEDARS;
THE LORD BREAKS IN PIECES THE CEDARS OF LEBANON.
HE MAKES LEBANON SKIP LIKE A CALF,
SIRION LIKE A YOUNG WILD OX.
THE VOICE OF THE LORD STRIKES
WITH FLASHES OF LIGHTNING.
THE VOICE OF THE LORD SHAKES THE DESERT;
THE LORD SHAKES THE DESERT OF KADESH.
THE VOICE OF THE LORD TWISTS THE OAKS
AND STRIPS THE FORESTS BARE.
AND IN HIS TEMPLE ALL CRY, "GLORY!"
THE LORD SITS ENTHRONED OVER THE FLOOD;
THE LORD IS ENTHRONED AS KING FOREVER.
THE LORD GIVES STRENGTH TO HIS PEOPLE;
THE LORD BLESSES HIS PEOPLE WITH PEACE.**
PSALM 29:1-11

S

HOW ARE WE THEN TO LIVE? So many in God's family are 'Sunday morning' Christians—checking in periodically with the infrastructure of their religion to be conducted through the familiar liturgy, making contact with familiar faces, everyone decked out in their Sunday finery. They go through the paces secure in their comfortable relationship with a quiet, undemanding God of sweetness and light. Then something thoroughly inconvenient, even tragic hits, and their comfortable, fragile faith is tested in the extreme. "How could my sweet, loving God *do* this?" They wail.

In this instance, everyone is behaving in character. The world is filled with evil—and God is still on His throne. The weak component is the believer with the nominal faith, ignorant of the true depths to which evil can sink, and ignorant of the true height of God's sovereignty. Left stumbling about somewhere in the middle, somewhere in a pabulum world in which nothing bad ever happens to good people, the believer struggles to remain true to a God who is, essentially, a stranger.

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.
Ephesians 1:17-19a

By the indwelling Spirit and by the Word we can know God. We can know His personality, His habits, His methods. We can, as much as any earth-bound creature, come to understand His motives and ways. God has given us every means by which we can have a true, dependable faith so substantial that when tragedy strikes, we need never say "Why?"—only "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

An old writer said that Faith and Reason may be compared to two travelers. Faith is like a man in full health, who can walk his twenty or thirty miles at a time without suffering. Reason is like a little child, who can only, with difficulty, accomplish three or four miles. "Well," says the old writer, "on a given day Reason says to Faith, 'O good Faith, let me walk with you.' Faith replies, 'O Reason, you could never walk with me!' However, to try their paces, they set out together. When they come to a deep river, Reason says, 'I can never ford this,' but Faith wades through it singing. When they reach a lofty mountain, there is the same exclamation of despair; and in such cases, Faith, in order not to leave Reason behind, is obliged to carry him on his back. Oh, what luggage is Reason to Faith!"
Charles Haddon Spurgeon

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.*

*And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God that willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim—
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers—
No thanks to them—abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His Kingdom is forever. Amen.*

Martin Luther

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