

# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

## The Sovereignty, Providence, and the Will of God

### Lesson #4

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The sovereignty of God is a very large topic with many implications and sub-topics. Because God is sovereign, His Sovereignty must be perfect and comprehensive. This demands that God has other attributes, like omnipotence, omniscience, justice, etc. Because of all the related factors, it is very difficult to address God's sovereignty by itself. Sovereignty is also better understood if one understands God's sovereignty in relationship to the providence and the will of God. Because of this we will study all three of these essential doctrines at the same time. The sovereignty of God is one of the most practical doctrines in the entire Bible!

#### I. DEFINITION OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

A. Louis Berkhof says,

“God is represented as the creator, and His will as the cause of all things. . . In virtue of His created work heaven and earth and all that they contain belong to Him. He is clothed with absolute authority over the hosts of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. He upholds all things with his almighty power, and determines the ends, which they are destined to serve. He rules as King in the most absolute sense of the word, and all things are dependent on Him and subservient to Him.”<sup>1</sup>

B. A. W. Pink gives us this definition,

“The sovereignty of God may be defined as the exercise of his supremacy. Being infinitely elevated above the highest creature, He is the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth. Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him. . . Divine sovereignty means that God is God in fact, as well as name, that He is on the Throne of the universe, directing all things, working all things "after the counsel of His own will.”<sup>2</sup>

#### II. SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

- A. I Chron. 29:11 – “Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all.”
- B. II Chron. 20:6 – “Power and might are in your hand so that no one can stand against you.”

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 76.

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 32.

- C. Job 23:13 -- “But He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does.”
- D. Job 42:2 -- “I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”
- E. Psa. 103:19 – “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all.”
- F. Psa. 115:3 – “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.”
- G. Prov. 21:1 – “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.”
- H. Isa. 46:9-11 -- “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’; 11 Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.”
- I. Dan. 4:17 (also vss. 25, 32, 35) -- “This sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers And the decision is a command of the holy ones, In order that the living may know That the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, And bestows it on whom He wishes And sets over it the lowliest of men.”
- J. Eph. 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.”

### III. SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Thomas Watson notes, “There is no such thing as blind fate, but there is a providence that guides and governs the world. . . Providence is God’s ordering all issues and events of things, after the counsel of His will, to His own glory.”<sup>3</sup>

- A. Prov. 16:9 – “The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.”
- B. Prov. 16:33 – “The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the Lord.”
- C. Rom. 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.”

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 119.

#### IV. **SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR THE DOCTRINE OF CONCURRENCE**

Concurrence is the biblical doctrine that says God is able to grant to the moral creatures He has created the ability to exercise certain freedoms of the will, even freedoms to oppose His revealed will, but at the same time or concurrently, accomplish His perfect will or decree. What this means is that God will accomplish all His good pleasure even if men, Satan, and demons oppose His revealed will.

##### A. **Joseph's Story in Genesis 37, 39-50**

Joseph was the first-born son of the most loved wife of Jacob. His father loved him more than his other brothers. Joseph was the only son of Jacob to receive a multicolored tunic. Joseph was asked by his father to check up on his brothers who were tending the flocks and Joseph let his father know that his brothers were not caring for the flocks properly. Not only that, but Joseph had two sets of dreams. In the first dream his brothers were bowing down to him and in the second dream his brothers, mother, and father were bowing down to him. All these events made Joseph's brothers hate him.

Joseph was sent a second time to check up on his brothers, He didn't find them where they were supposed to be, but a "man in the field" directed Joseph to where they were. When Joseph arrived they threw him into a pit and later sold him as a slave to some slave traders. Potiphar, who was captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard, purchased Joseph. Joseph rose to power in Potiphar's house, was put in charge of everything, but was unjustly framed for attempted rape by Potiphar's unfaithful wife and ended up in prison.

While in prison Joseph found favor in the site of the prison warden and was put in charge of caring for all the prisoners. Eventually he interpreted the dream of Pharaoh's cupbearer who had been thrown in prison for a time. Joseph said the cupbearer would be released and he asked the cupbearer to remember him before Pharaoh. The cupbearer forgot about Joseph until the Pharaoh himself had a dream that no one could interpret. This jogged the cupbearer's memory, who told Pharaoh about Joseph. Joseph was released from prison and interpreted the Pharaoh's dream. There would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Joseph laid out a plan for how the famine was to be survived. Pharaoh was impressed and made Joseph ruler of all Egypt. As ruler of all Egypt, Joseph was able to care for his family, bring them to Egypt, so they could multiply abundantly, and eventually become the nation of Israel.

- B. Gen. 45:5-9 -- "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. 7 "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. 8 "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 "Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, "God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay."

- C. Gen. 50:19-20 – “But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? 20 “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”
- D. Thomas Watson notes, “The same action, as it comes from God's providence, may be good, and as it comes from men may be evil. For instance, Joseph being sold into Egypt by his brethren was evil, very wicked, for it was the fruit of their envy; but as it was an act of God's providence it was good; for by this means Jacob and all his family were preserved alive in Egypt.”<sup>4</sup>
- E. **Crucifixion of Jesus Christ**

When studying the crucifixion it is clear that multiple parties were responsible for the death of Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus and the Jewish leaders paid him to do so. The Jewish leaders arrested Jesus. The Jewish leaders unlawfully tried Jesus then took Jesus to Pilate. Pilate should have let Jesus go, but didn't. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod and Herod should have let Jesus go, but didn't. Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, but listened to the crowds. The crowds, riled up by the Jewish leaders, asked for a notorious criminal to be set free and Jesus to be crucified. The Romans actually tortured and crucified Jesus. Working in all the unbelievers was the archenemy of God—Satan. All of these parties were responsible for the death of Christ. But there is one more party that is responsible for the death of Christ—God Himself! God decreed that Jesus Christ would be born and die for the sins of the world and God brought it about by sovereign providence and concurrence.

- 1. Isa. 53:10 – “But the Lord was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, . . .”
- 2. Jn. 10:17-18 -- “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. 18 “No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.”
- 3. Acts 2:22-23 -- “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— 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.”
- 4. 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.”

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 124.

5. Thomas Watson notes,

“The providences of God are sometimes dark, and our eyes dim, and we can hardly tell what to make of them; but when we cannot unriddle providence, let us believe that it will work together for the good of the elect. Rom. 8:28 says, 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.” The wheels in a clock seem to move contrary one to another, but they help forward the motion of the clock, and make the chimes ring: so the providence of God seem to be cross wheels; but for all that, they shall carry on the good of the elect.”<sup>5</sup>

V. **THE TWO DIFFERENT WILLS OF GOD**

God's will is not His sovereignty or His providence but His perfect plan for everything that He has created. God's will guides and directs all of His providential workings in order to achieve His perfect decree. The will of God is a vast subject and there are many facets to it, which might be discussed. One of the most often overlooked aspects of the will of God is that people fail to realize that there are two general categories of God's will and secondly fail to consider what kind of God's will is being discussed in a given text of Scripture. This has led to much confusion. The two different kinds of God's will are as follows:

- A. *His decree or absolute will or secret will or declarative will* is the will of God that always comes to pass, encompasses all that exists. It is often called His “secretive will” because God doesn't reveal His decree to man except in rare instances in the prophecies of the Bible. Prophecy is God giving us a glimpse of a very small part of his secret will.
- B. *His perceptive will or prescriptive will or desirous will or revealed will* is the will of God revealed in the pages of Scripture for mankind. We have the ability to thwart and disobey God's prescriptive will.<sup>6</sup>

VI. **SCRIPTURES SHOWING GOD'S ABSOLUTE, DECLARATIVE, OR SECRET WILL**

A. Jonathan Edwards reasoned,

“Whether God has decreed all things that ever come to pass or not, all that own the being of a God, own that He knows all things beforehand. Now, it is self-evident that if He knows all things beforehand, He either does approve of them or does not approve of them; that is, He either is willing they should be, or He is not willing that they should be. But to will that they should be is to decree them.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 125.

<sup>6</sup> This section was adapted from Louis Berkoff's, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards as quoted by A. W. Pink in his work, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 16.

- B. A. W. Pink says,
- “The decrees of God relate to all future things without exception: whatever is done in time was foreordained before time began. God's purpose was concerned with everything, whether great or small, whether good or evil, although with reference to the latter we must be careful to state that while God is the sovereign over sin, He is *not* the Author of it in the same way that He is the Author of good. Sin could not proceed from a holy God by positive and direct creation, but only by declarative permission and negative action.”<sup>8</sup>
- C. Matt. 11:27 -- “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.”
- D. John 6:37, 39, 44, 65 -- 37 “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. . . 39 “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. . . 44 “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. . . 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.”
- E. Acts 1:7 – “He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority.”
- F. Acts 13:48 – “When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”
- G. Rom. 8:29-30 – “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; 30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”
- H. Phil. 1:29 – “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.”
- I. II Tim. 2:24-26 – “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, 25 with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”
- J. If this was all the Scriptures said we might believe that men were automatons and had no will to exercise, no choice, and were not responsible beings. Yet the

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<sup>8</sup> A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 113-14.

Scriptures teach both the absolute sovereign will of God and also the responsibility of men side by side.

## VII. **SCRIPTURES SHOWING GOD'S PERCEPTIVE, REVEALED, OR DESIROUS WILL**

- A. Deut. 29:29 -- “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”
- B. Matt. 13:11 – “Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.”
- C. Acts 17:30 -- “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent.”
- D. Rom. 16:25-26 – “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.”
- E. I Tim. 2:1-4 – “First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”
- F. A. W. Tozer said,  
  
“Within the broad field of God's sovereign permissive will the deadly conflict of good with evil continues with increasing fury. God will yet have His way in the whirlwind and the storm, but the storm and the whirlwind are here, and as responsible beings we must make our choice in the present moral situation.”<sup>9</sup>

## VIII. **APPLICATION OF GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY**

- A. To live in light of God's sovereignty is to be totally free of anxiety.
- B. When the wicked seem to flourish we do not need to worry for God is in control of them and they cannot thwart His plan.
- C. When God’s providence brings things I into our life that are hard and difficult, we can rejoice knowing that they came from His hand and will be used for the good

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<sup>9</sup> A. W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, pg. 112.

of all those who know Jesus Christ as their Savior (Psa. 33:18-19; 34:7; Rom. 8:28; I Pet. 5:7).

- D. The believer is not to ask, "Why is this happening to me?" when trials come, but they should trust the Lord knowing that their trials are fewer than their sins and that even painful trials are guided by the hand of a loving God.
- E. Our job is to acknowledge that God has an all-encompassing decree, not try to guess what it is and live by it. What we are to live by is God's perceptive, prescriptive, revealed will as recorded in the pages of Scripture.
- F. Thomas Watson notes,

"Perhaps the hearts of the godly were lifted up with riches, or with success; now God comes with a humbling providence to afflict them and fleece them. Better is the loss that makes them humble than the success that makes them proud. . . If the godly were not sometimes afflicted, and suffered an eclipse in their outward comforts, how could their graces be seen, especially their faith and patience? If it were always sunshine we should see no stars; so if we should have always prosperity, it would be hard to see the acting of men's faith. Thus you see God's providences are wise and regular, though to us they seem very strange and crooked."<sup>10</sup>

"God is God; He sees and hears  
All our troubles, all our tears.  
Soul, forget not, 'mid thy pains,  
God o'er all for ever reigns."

"Fear not death, nor Satan's thrusts,  
God defends who in him trusts;  
Soul, remember, in thy pains,  
God o'er all for ever reigns."

"For this life's long night of sadness  
He will give us peace and gladness.  
Soul, remember, in thy pains,  
God o'er all for ever reigns."

C. H. Spurgeon<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 121.

<sup>11</sup> This particular hymn, quoted and often attributed to Spurgeon, is actually a German hymn from *Gott lebet noch, Zihn*. 1682. trans. by Catherine Winkworth, 1855. It can be found at for the second Sunday after Epiphany <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/winkworth/lyra.titlepage.html>. Spurgeon took the stanzas he liked best and smoothed out the English a bit and used them.