

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 5: THE COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Lesson 17

The Omnipotence and Sovereignty of God

The God Who Can Do All Things and Rules Over All Things

Key Texts: Ephesians 1:11; Psalm 115:3; Daniel 4:34–35; Isaiah 46:9–11; Job 42:2

Our God Is in the Heavens — He Does Whatever He Pleases

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Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

In Lessons 14 through 16, we have traveled through the moral heart of the communicable attributes: holiness as the crown and qualifier of all others; righteousness and justice as the moral foundation of God's governance; and goodness, love, and grace as the overflow of His inexhaustible generosity toward undeserving creatures. We have found in each of these attributes not isolated theological topics but facets of a single, coherent, magnificent divine character, a character that is simultaneously morally serious and lavishly generous, infinitely demanding and infinitely giving, perfectly just and perfectly merciful.

Now, in Lesson 17, we take up two attributes that might seem to belong more naturally to the incommunicable category, omnipotence and sovereignty, but that are placed in Unit 5 on the communicable attributes because they express dimensions of divine character that have genuine, if derivative, analogues in creaturely existence. Human beings have power, however finite and fragile; human beings exercise governance, however limited and imperfect. What God possesses in these dimensions He possesses absolutely, infinitely, and without the limitations that creaturely power and governance inevitably carry. But the categories themselves, power and rule, are categories that bridge the Creator-creature relationship, making these attributes both genuinely incommunicable in their divine fullness and genuinely communicable in their creaturely reflection.

Omnipotence and sovereignty are, in many respects, the attributes that most directly address the pastoral questions that suffering and chaos generate in the life of faith. When the world seems out of control, when evil seems to triumph, when the purposes of God seem thwarted by the wickedness of human beings, when the prayer that was answered yesterday seems to go unanswered today, the omnipotence and sovereignty of God are the theological anchors that prevent the drifting of faith into despair. "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3, NASB 1995). Those eight words are among the most stabilizing in the whole of Scripture, and in this lesson, we will work to understand them in the depth and precision that a doctrine this important and this pastorally significant deserves.

I. Defining Omnipotence: All Power, Perfectly Applied

Divine omnipotence is the attribute affirming that God possesses all power and is able to do all that is consistent with His nature and will. The definition has two components that must be held together: the positive affirmation ("God possesses all power") and the qualifying clause ("consistent with His nature and will"). The positive affirmation establishes the unlimited scope of divine power; the qualifying clause protects against misunderstandings that would actually diminish rather than honor the attribute.

The positive affirmation is expressed throughout Scripture with comprehensive and emphatic language. "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You" (Jeremiah 32:17, NASB 1995). "I am God Almighty" (El Shaddai; Genesis 17:1). "His

dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. 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?’” (Daniel 4:34–35, NASB 1995). The power of God is not the power of the strongest being in a category of powerful beings; it is the unique, absolute, underived power of the One who is the source of all power that exists in the universe.

But what does the qualifying clause mean: “all that is consistent with His nature and will”? This is one of the most important theological specifications in the doctrine of omnipotence, and it is one that is regularly mishandled in both popular and academic discussions.

A. What Omnipotence Does Not Mean

Omnipotence does not mean that God can do literally anything that can be stated in grammatically well-formed sentences. The classic philosophical puzzle, “Can God make a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it?” or “Can God make a square circle?”, presents apparently grammatical questions about apparent divine actions, but in each case the question describes not a possible action but a logical contradiction. A square circle is not a very unusual circle; it is a thing that cannot exist because its definition is self-contradictory. To ask whether God can make one is not to ask whether He is powerful enough for a difficult task; it is to ask whether He can make something that is definitionally impossible, which is not a limitation on power but a misunderstanding of what power means.

More theologically significant are the specific things that Scripture declares God cannot do, and in each case, the inability is not a limitation imposed from outside but an expression of His own perfect character. God cannot lie: “In hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago” (Titus 1:2, NASB 1995). God cannot deny Himself: “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:13, NASB 1995). God cannot sin: “He who does not know sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). God cannot be tempted by evil: “God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13, NASB 1995).

In every case, the inability is not a deficiency but a perfection. God cannot lie not because deception is beyond His capability but because lying is constitutionally incompatible with His nature as the God of truth (John 14:6). God cannot deny Himself not because self-consistency is a constraint imposed upon Him but because His nature is the most consistent reality in the universe, and any deviation from it would be a contradiction of what He essentially is. These are not the limitations of omnipotence; they are the expressions of holiness, faithfulness, and moral perfection. A God who could lie, sin, or contradict Himself would not be more powerful than the God of Scripture; He would be a lesser God, a God whose character was unstable, whose promises were unreliable, and whose governance was not grounded in the absolute, self-consistent perfection of His own being.

II. Defining Sovereignty: God Governs All Things According to His Own Will

The sovereignty of God is omnipotence applied to governance, the attribute affirming that God not only possesses all power but exercises that power in the comprehensive, effective governance of all things according to the counsel of His own will. If omnipotence is the capacity for absolute power, sovereignty is its exercise in the administration of creation, providence, and redemption.

Ephesians 1:11 provides the most theologically comprehensive New Testament declaration of divine sovereignty:

“also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”, Ephesians 1:11, NASB 1995

The phrase “works all things after the counsel of His will” (Greek: *energountos ta panta kata tēn boulēn tou thelēmatos autou*) is the most comprehensive possible statement of divine sovereignty. “All things”, not most things, not the large things and the significant things, not the things that directly involve the salvation of the elect, all things, without exception, are worked by God according to the counsel of His will. The Greek word *boulē* (counsel, purpose, deliberate intention) indicates that the divine governance is not reactive or improvisational; it is the deliberate, wise, purposive administration of all things according to a plan that was settled in the divine counsel before the foundation of the world.

The scope of divine sovereignty, as the Scripture presents it, is genuinely comprehensive. It encompasses the movements of nations and the decisions of kings: “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Proverbs 21:1, NASB 1995). It encompasses the apparently chance occurrences of daily life: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33, NASB 1995). It encompasses the natural world: He gives rain and drought, cold and heat, fruitful seasons and famine (Deuteronomy 11:14–17; Amos 4:6–10). It encompasses the lifespan and circumstances of every individual human being: “Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Psalm 139:16, NASB 1995).

Daniel 4:34–35, the declaration of Nebuchadnezzar after his seven-year humiliation, spoken as the most comprehensive personal confession of divine sovereignty in the Old Testament, provides the most complete single-passage declaration of sovereign omnipotence in the canon:

“But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. 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?’”, Daniel 4:34–35, NASB 1995

Nebuchadnezzar has just spent seven years eating grass like an ox, the most powerful man in the ancient world reduced to the condition of a beast, precisely to teach him the lesson that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He will (Daniel 4:17). The theological content of his confession is comprehensive and precise: God's dominion is everlasting; His kingdom endures through all generations; He does according to His will in both the heavenly realm and the earthly realm; no one can ward off His hand; no one can call Him to account for His actions. This is not a limited, qualified, or partial sovereignty; it is the absolute, comprehensive, irresistible sovereignty of the One who rules over all.

III. Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Concurrence Without Coercion

The most persistent and most theologically demanding question raised by the doctrine of divine sovereignty is its relationship to genuine human freedom and responsibility. If God works all things after the counsel of His will, and if no one can ward off His hand, what becomes of human moral agency? Are human beings merely puppets in a divine drama, their apparently free choices merely the outworking of a sovereignty that has determined everything in advance? And if so, how can they be held genuinely responsible for what they do?

This question is not primarily a philosophical puzzle to be solved by sophisticated argument; it is a biblical tension to be navigated by careful exegesis. And the Scripture navigates it with a confidence and a consistency that neither dissolves the tension nor despairs of it. On the one hand, the Scripture affirms comprehensive divine sovereignty without qualification (Ephesians 1:11; Proverbs 21:1; Daniel 4:34–35). On the other hand, the Scripture affirms genuine human responsibility without qualification: human beings make real choices, and they are genuinely accountable for those choices before God (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Ecclesiastes 12:14).

The theological tradition has addressed this tension through the doctrine of concurrence: the affirmation that God's sovereign governance and the creature's genuine action operate simultaneously and at different levels of causation, without either eliminating the other. God's sovereign purpose is the ultimate (or primary) cause of every event; the creature's genuine choice is the proximate (or secondary) cause of the same event. Both are real; neither eliminates the other. The creature acts freely, in the sense that the action flows from the creature's own desires, values, and character without external compulsion, and yet the sovereign God governs that free action according to His eternal purpose.

The most instructive biblical illustration of concurrence is Joseph's declaration to his brothers in Genesis 50:20: "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" (NASB 1995). The same event, the selling of Joseph into Egypt, was simultaneously a genuinely evil act for which the brothers were genuinely culpable ("you meant evil against me") and a sovereignly purposed act of divine grace ("God meant it for good"). Both are true. Neither eliminates the other. The sovereignty of God does not make the

brothers' sin less sinful; the brothers' sin does not make God's sovereign governance less sovereign.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the supreme illustration of this principle. Acts 2:23 declares: "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" (NASB 1995). The crucifixion was simultaneously the most explicitly sovereign act in the history of redemption ("delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God") and the most heinous criminal act in the history of humanity ("you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men"). God's sovereignty does not diminish the guilt of those who crucified Christ; their guilt does not compromise the sovereignty of God. Concurrence holds both with equal firmness.

The practical implication of concurrence for the life of faith is enormous. It means that I can pursue genuine goals, make genuine choices, and exercise genuine agency, while simultaneously trusting that the sovereign God is at work in and through and behind all of my choices to accomplish His eternal purposes. It means that prayer is genuinely effective, not because prayer changes the divine mind, but because prayer is itself one of the means the sovereign God has ordained for the accomplishment of His sovereign purposes. And it means that I am genuinely responsible for every choice I make, while simultaneously knowing that no choice I make can ultimately frustrate the sovereign purposes of the God who works all things after the counsel of His will.

IV. Sovereignty Over Evil: God Is Never the Author of Sin

The most searching test of the doctrine of divine sovereignty is its relationship to evil. If God works all things after the counsel of His will, what is His relationship to sin, suffering, and the moral evil that pervades human history? Three things must be affirmed simultaneously, and the affirmation of any one of them without the others produces a distorted and ultimately unbiblical account of the divine sovereignty.

First, God is never the author of sin. The Scripture is unambiguous and absolute on this point: "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone" (James 1:13, NASB 1995). "He who does not know sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil" (Habakkuk 1:13). God does not cause sin in the sense of being its efficient moral cause; He does not inspire, encourage, or delight in the sinning of His creatures. The absolute moral purity of the divine character, the holiness we explored in Lesson 14, is the theological guarantor of this affirmation. A God who authored sin would not be the holy God of Scripture; He would be a morally compromised deity, and the moral seriousness of the gospel would collapse.

Second, sin never escapes the sovereign governance of God. No sin, however heinous, however widespread, however apparently triumphant, escapes the governance of the God who works all things after the counsel of His will. Every sinful act is, in the most ultimate sense, permitted and governed by the sovereign God who could prevent it if He chose to, but who has chosen not to prevent it in service of purposes that are wiser and more comprehensive than any creaturely perspective can fully grasp. This does not make God responsible for the sin; the responsibility remains entirely with the sinning

creature. But it does mean that sin is never a surprise to God, never beyond His governance, and never capable of ultimately frustrating His purposes.

Third, God sovereignly governs evil toward ends that are genuinely good. This is the most theologically demanding and most pastorally significant affirmation of the three. Joseph's declaration in Genesis 50:20, "God meant it for good", is not the optimistic rationalization of a man who has made peace with the worst thing that ever happened to him; it is the theological conviction of a man who has seen, in the unfolding of his own life, the sovereign governance of the God who turned the evil intentions of sinful men toward the salvation of many. Romans 8:28 makes the same claim universally: God causes all things, including all the things that are evil, painful, and seemingly contrary to any recognizable good, to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

The supreme expression of all three affirmations together is the cross. God was never the author of the sin of those who crucified His Son; their actions were genuinely evil and they were genuinely culpable. Yet the crucifixion never escaped God's sovereign governance; it was accomplished according to "the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). And God sovereignly governed the most heinous act of human wickedness in history toward the most glorious end in the history of creation: the redemption of sinners and the display of His own glory in grace. The cross is the definitive demonstration that God's sovereign governance of evil does not compromise His holiness, does not eliminate human responsibility, and does not fail to turn even the worst of human wickedness toward the most perfect of divine ends.

V. The Comfort of Sovereignty: He Does Whatever He Pleases

Psalm 115:3 is one of the most theologically potent and most pastorally stabilizing verses in the entire Old Testament: "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (NASB 1995). In its original context, the verse is part of a polemic against the idols of the nations, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands" (v. 4), who have mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear. The contrast is total: Israel's God is in the heavens, doing whatever He pleases; the gods of the nations are earthly, made, and powerless. But the pastoral application of the verse extends far beyond its polemical context.

For the believer who is in the grip of circumstances that seem uncontrolled, uncontrollable, and utterly contrary to any recognizable good purpose, Psalm 115:3 is the most stabilizing declaration available. Our God is in the heavens. He is not on the ground, subject to the accidents and vicissitudes of earthly existence. He is not constrained by the forces that constrain us. He is not baffled by the complexity of the situations that baffle us. He is in the heavens, occupying the position of absolute, comprehensive, unchallenged sovereignty over all that He has made. And from that position, He does whatever He pleases, not with indifference to our need, not with capriciousness toward His people, but with the perfect, wise, loving, sovereign intention of the God who has promised to work all things together for the good of those who love Him.

Isaiah 46:9–11 reinforces this comfort with the most comprehensive declaration of divine sovereignty and its implications in all of the prophetic literature:

“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, 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’; 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.”, Isaiah 46:9–11, NASB 1995

The declaration has three movements that together constitute the most complete statement of sovereign omnipotence available. The first movement is the claim to absolute uniqueness: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.” The second movement is the claim to exhaustive foreknowledge grounded in sovereign foreordination: “declaring the end from the beginning.” The third movement is the claim to irresistible purposive action: “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure ... Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.” Plan, speech, and deed are a unity in the God whose sovereign omnipotence guarantees the accomplishment of everything He has purposed.

Job’s confession in Job 42:2 distills this truth to its simplest and most searching formulation: “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted” (NASB 1995). The confession comes after the divine speeches from the whirlwind, after Job has heard God’s sovereign governance of the universe displayed in its most magnificent and most incomprehensible dimensions, and it is the response of a man who has been brought to the most radical submission possible: not the submission of despair, not the submission of argument defeated, but the submission of a soul that has genuinely seen the sovereign God and recognized that no purpose of His can be thwarted. This is the theological bedrock upon which Job’s restoration will be built, and it is the bedrock upon which every suffering believer is invited to stand.

VI. Sovereignty and Prayer: The God Who Ordains Means as Well as Ends

One of the most common pastoral objections to the doctrine of divine sovereignty is the objection that it makes prayer pointless: if God has already determined what will happen, what is the purpose of asking Him to do anything? The objection seems compelling at first, but it rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of how sovereign providence operates, a misunderstanding that the Scripture itself addresses and corrects.

The sovereign God does not merely ordain ends; He ordains means as well as ends. His sovereign purposes are not accomplished by fiat alone, bypassing the secondary causes and the instrumentalities through which He has chosen to work. He ordained that the Israelites would be delivered from Egypt, and He ordained Moses as the means of that deliverance. He ordained that the gospel would reach the Gentiles, and He ordained Paul as the means of that proclamation. He ordained that Lazarus would be raised, and He ordained the groaning of Mary and Martha and the prayer of the Son as part of the context in which that raising occurred. The sovereign God who works all

things after the counsel of His will has chosen to work many of those purposes through the prayers of His people.

James 5:16 declares: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (NASB 1995). This is not a qualified statement; it is a bold declaration of the genuine efficacy of prayer. The prayer of Elijah restrained and released the rain (James 5:17–18). The prayer of Moses turned away the destruction of Israel (Exodus 32:11–14). The prayers of the early church were accompanied by the sovereign release of Peter from prison (Acts 12:5–17). Prayer is not the human attempt to change the divine mind; it is the human participation in the sovereign God’s ordered means for the accomplishment of His sovereign purposes. It is, in the most profound sense, the creaturely form of cooperation with the Creator’s governance of the world.

This understanding of the relationship between sovereignty and prayer is deeply liberating. It means that prayer is not a futile attempt to persuade a reluctant God to change His plans; it is the confident address of a creature who knows that the sovereign God has ordained prayer as one of the means by which His purposes are accomplished, and who therefore prays with the confidence that his prayers are not shouted into an empty sky but addressed to the sovereign God who hears, who acts, and who accomplishes His good purposes through the very means He has appointed.

VII. The Pastoral Significance: Sovereign Omnipotence as the Unshakeable Anchor

The pastoral significance of omnipotence and sovereignty is, in many respects, the most urgent pastoral contribution that any single lesson in this series can make, because the questions that omnipotence and sovereignty address are the questions that suffering, chaos, and apparent divine inaction generate with the most desperate intensity. Let us close Lesson 17 by pressing the pastoral significance of these attributes into the specific situations where they are most needed.

A. For the One Suffering Under Circumstances That Seem Random and Senseless

There is nothing in the experience of the suffering believer that is random. Nothing falls outside the governance of the One who works all things after the counsel of His will. The illness that seemed to come from nowhere was within God’s sovereign purpose before the first cell of your body was formed. The loss that blindsided you was fully encompassed within the plan of the God who declares the end from the beginning. This is not a cold comfort that explains away the pain; the pain is real and the grief is legitimate. But it is the most stabilizing possible truth in the midst of that pain: the God who governs all things is the same God who loved you enough to give His Son for you (Romans 8:32), and the sovereign governance of your suffering is in the hands of that love.

B. For the One Facing the Apparent Triumph of Evil

When evil seems to triumph, when tyrants flourish, when the wicked prosper, when the church is persecuted, when the gospel is opposed, when the righteous suffer while the

unrighteous seem untouched, the sovereignty of God is the theological anchor that prevents the drift into despair. No purpose of God can be thwarted (Job 42:2). The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD (Proverbs 21:1). 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 (Daniel 4:35). The apparent triumph of evil is not evidence that God has lost control; it is the scene within which God is at work, bending the wickedness of men toward the accomplishment of His own purposes, as He did supremely at the cross.

C. For the One Whose Prayer Seems Unanswered

The believer whose prayer has seemed to go unanswered, who has prayed for healing that has not come, for restoration that has not arrived, for resolution that has not appeared, may be tempted to conclude that either God is not listening or God is not able. The doctrine of sovereign omnipotence addresses both temptations directly: He is listening, because nothing escapes His omniscient awareness; and He is able, because no purpose of His can be thwarted. The answer that has not come is not the answer that has been ignored; it is the answer that the sovereign God has chosen to give in a way, a time, or a form that the praying saint has not yet seen. "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases", and what He pleases is always, ultimately and finally, the good of those who love Him.

D. For the One Paralyzed by Anxiety About the Future

The anxious soul that lies awake cataloguing the scenarios of a future it cannot control is a soul that has temporarily forgotten whose sovereign governance the future lies within. Isaiah 46:10 declares that God announces the end from the beginning; Psalm 139:16 declares that all our days were ordained before one of them came to be. The future that seems so threatening, so unpredictable, and so beyond control is the future that lies entirely within the governance of the One whose purposes cannot be thwarted and whose power is without limit. This does not mean that the future will be free of difficulty; it means that the God who governs the difficult future is the God whose power is absolute and whose love for His people is everlasting. Cast your anxiety on Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7), and He who cares for you does whatever He pleases in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

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.”

Psalm 115:3

“But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.”

Daniel 4:34–35

“But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. 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?’”

Isaiah 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, 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’; 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.”

Job 42:2

“I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Omnipotence	The divine attribute affirming that God possesses all power and is able to do all that is consistent with His nature and will. Not the power to do anything grammatically expressible (including logical contradictions) but the absolute, underived, unlimited power of the One who is the source of all power in the universe. The qualifying clause (“consistent with His nature and will”) is a statement of divine perfection, not limitation.
Sovereignty	The comprehensive exercise of God’s omnipotence in the governance of all things according to the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11). God governs all nations, all events, all human hearts, all natural phenomena, and all of history, from creation to consummation, without exception or limitation. Distinguished from omnipotence (the capacity for absolute power) as its exercise in the purposive administration of all creation.
Counsel (Boulē)	Greek boulē in Ephesians 1:11: deliberate, purposive intention; a plan formulated with wisdom and carried out with resolve. God’s sovereign governance is not reactive or improvisational; it is the deliberate, wise, eternally settled administration of all things

Concurrence	according to a purpose that was established in the divine counsel before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4–11). The doctrine that God’s sovereign governance and the creature’s genuine action operate simultaneously and at different levels of causation without either eliminating the other. God’s sovereign purpose is the ultimate (primary) cause; the creature’s genuine choice is the proximate (secondary) cause. Illustrated in Genesis 50:20 (Joseph and his brothers), Acts 2:23 (the crucifixion), and Acts 4:27–28. The theological account of how comprehensive divine sovereignty and genuine human freedom and responsibility are both true simultaneously.
Primary Causation	God’s sovereign, ultimate, comprehensive causation of all events according to the counsel of His will. God is the primary cause of everything that occurs, including the free actions of creatures, without directly producing those actions in a way that bypasses the creature’s own agency. The doctrine of concurrence holds primary causation and secondary causation together without identifying them or collapsing one into the other.
Secondary Causation	The genuine causal agency of creatures operating within the framework of God’s sovereign governance. The creature’s free choice is a genuine cause of the event, even though God’s sovereign purpose is its ultimate cause. The reality of secondary causation is what makes human beings genuinely responsible for their choices, genuinely engaged in real acts of agency, and genuinely participants in the governance of the world, even as the sovereign God works all things after the counsel of His will.
Providence	God’s continuous activity by which He upholds, cooperates with, and directs all things toward His appointed ends. Encompasses preservation (sustaining creatures in existence), concurrence (cooperating with creaturely actions), and government (directing all things toward the fulfillment of His sovereign plan). The practical expression of divine omnipotence and sovereignty in the moment-by-moment governance of the created order.
Meticulous Sovereignty	The Reformed theological affirmation that God’s sovereign governance extends to every detail of the created order, not merely to the large events of history but to the apparently trivial: the lot cast into the lap (Proverbs 16:33), the sparrow that falls (Matthew 10:29), the hairs numbered on every head (Matthew 10:30). Distinguished from general sovereignty (which governs only the broad strokes of history) by its comprehensive, exhaustive, detail-encompassing scope.
Author of Sin	A charge that the doctrine of divine sovereignty must categorically deny and carefully guard against: the claim that if God ordains all things, He must be morally responsible for sin. Reformed theology rejects this charge on biblical grounds (James 1:13; Habakkuk 1:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21) and theological grounds: God ordains the

Theodicy	occurrence of sin without being its efficient moral cause; He permits sin without approving it, and He governs it toward His own purposes without being the agent who inspires or delights in it.
	Greek theos (God) + dikē (justice): the attempt to justify or vindicate the goodness and justice of God in the face of the existence of evil and suffering. Theodicy is ultimately a pastoral task rather than a purely philosophical one: the suffering need a Savior and a sovereign God more than they need a syllogism. The cross is the definitive theodicy: God did not remain distant from evil but entered it, bore it in His own Person, and conquered it through the death and resurrection of His Son.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that God is genuinely, comprehensively, and meticulously sovereign, that He works all things after the counsel of His will, that no purpose of His can be thwarted, that He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth. We must believe that the apparent limitations of omnipotence, God's inability to lie, sin, or contradict Himself, are expressions of His perfection rather than restrictions upon His power. We must believe that divine sovereignty and genuine human responsibility are simultaneously true, that the doctrine of concurrence holds both without sacrificing either, and that the cross is the supreme demonstration that this is so. And we must believe that sovereignty over evil is not authority that is ever exercised against God's holy character but always through it, so that even the most heinous human wickedness is governed toward ends that are genuinely, ultimately, and comprehensively good for those who love Him.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The sovereignty of God should produce in the believing heart a profound and stable peace, not the peace of circumstances that have finally become manageable, but the peace of a soul that has anchored itself in the God who is in the heavens and does whatever He pleases. It should produce a bold confidence in prayer: not the confidence that prayer changes the divine mind, but the confidence that prayer is itself one of the means through which the sovereign God accomplishes His sovereign purposes. And it should produce a holy freedom from the anxiety that the illusion of control generates in those who imagine that the outcome of their lives depends upon their own management of their circumstances. God is sovereign. His purposes cannot be thwarted. He who did not spare His own Son will freely give all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:32). Let that be the resting place of your soul.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Memorize and pray Psalm 115:3.** In moments of chaos, confusion, loss of control, or apparent divine inaction, the eight words of Psalm 115:3 are among the most stabilizing available: Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Not the gods of the nations, not the idol of human autonomy, not the idol of political power, not the idol of natural process, but our God. In the heavens. Doing whatever He pleases. Let this verse be the anchor when the waves rise.
2. **Use the doctrine of concurrence to guard against both fatalism and anxiety.** Fatalism says: since God has determined all things, my choices do not matter and my efforts are irrelevant. The doctrine of concurrence refutes fatalism: your choices are genuine, your efforts are real, and God accomplishes His purposes through the secondary causation of creaturely agency. Anxiety says: since my choices matter, everything depends on whether I choose rightly. The doctrine of concurrence refutes anxiety: the sovereign God governs all things, including your choices, toward His appointed ends, and no mistake of yours can ultimately frustrate His purposes.
3. **Pray boldly in the confidence of sovereign omnipotence.** The sovereign God does not merely ordain ends; He ordains means, and prayer is one of the most honored means He has appointed. Pray not as one trying to persuade a reluctant deity but as one participating in the sovereign God's appointed instruments of governance. Pray with the confidence of Elijah, whose prayer restrained and released the rain. Pray with the urgency of the early church, whose prayer was accompanied by the sovereign release of Peter. The effective prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much (James 5:16).
4. **Interpret your suffering through the lens of Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28.** The same God who meant Joseph's slavery and imprisonment for good is the God who is working all things together for your good. This does not mean that what you are suffering is good in itself; it means that the sovereign God is governing it toward a good that He has ordained for you, a good that may not be visible from inside the suffering but that is as certain as the character of the God who promises it. Trust the sovereignty. Trust the love. They are the same sovereign, loving God.
5. **Preach and teach the sovereignty of God without apology or qualification.** The sovereignty of God is one of the most unpopular doctrines in contemporary Christianity, unpopular because it threatens human autonomy, challenges the therapeutic assumption that God exists to serve human preferences, and generates the questions about divine governance of evil that many would rather not face. Preach it anyway. It is the doctrine that the suffering most need, the one that most transforms the experience of chaos and loss, and the one that most faithfully reflects the comprehensive witness of Scripture. A truncated sovereignty produces a truncated gospel and a truncated hope.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The sovereignty of God is not a doctrine to be feared; it is a doctrine to be inhabited. The God who has saved you did so according to His sovereign,

electing purpose (Ephesians 1:4–5), which means that your salvation rests not on the fragile foundation of your own initiative or consistency but on the immovable foundation of the sovereign God’s eternal purpose. You did not choose God first; He chose you (John 15:16). And having chosen you, He is the sovereign God who works all things after the counsel of His will, including the completion of the good work He has begun in you (Philippians 1:6).

For the one in the midst of suffering: No purpose of God can be thwarted. The suffering you are experiencing does not mean that God has lost control, that His governance has failed, or that His love for you has been overcome by adverse circumstances. It means that you are in the hands of the sovereign God who governs all things, including this, toward His appointed end, an end that, for those who love Him, is always and finally good. Cast your anxiety on Him. He is in the heavens. He does whatever He pleases. And what He pleases, for those who are His, is always ultimately good.

For the one who struggles with the sovereignty of God and the existence of evil: The cross is the theological answer to theodicy that no philosophical argument fully provides. The God who governs all things, including evil, is the God who entered the suffering of the fallen world in the Person of His Son, bore the full weight of evil on the cross, and conquered it in the resurrection. He is not the distant, unaffected sovereign of a philosophical deism; He is the sovereign God who suffers with His people and redeems their suffering through the most personal and most costly act in the history of the universe.

For the pastor and teacher: The sovereignty of God is the doctrine that the suffering church most needs and that therapeutic Christianity most resists. Preach it with theological precision, pastoral warmth, and the full weight of the biblical testimony. Let your congregation know that the God who is in the heavens and does whatever He pleases is the same God who did not spare His own Son (Romans 8:32), who numbers the hairs of their heads (Matthew 10:30), and who has promised that neither death, nor life, nor any other created thing will be able to separate them from His love (Romans 8:38–39).

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. When you face circumstances that seem out of control or chaotic, situations where the outcome is uncertain and your ability to influence it is limited, what is your instinctive emotional and spiritual response? How does the doctrine of divine sovereignty address that response? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Ephesians 1:3–11. What is the context of verse 11’s declaration that God “works all things after the counsel of His will”? What are the specific sovereign acts Paul has described in verses 4–10 before he arrives at this comprehensive declaration?

What does the Greek word *boulē* (counsel, deliberate purpose) contribute to the meaning?

3. Read Daniel 4:28–37. What specific event brings Nebuchadnezzar to the point of the confession in verses 34–35? What three specific claims does he make about God’s sovereignty in verses 34–35? How does his confession connect the sovereignty of God to the humility of the creature?

4. Read Isaiah 46:8–11. Identify the three movements of the passage: (1) the claim to absolute uniqueness, (2) the claim to exhaustive foreknowledge grounded in foreordination, and (3) the claim to irresistible purposive action. What specific historical example does God give in verse 11 (see Isaiah 44:28 for identification)? What does the fact that this prophecy was given decades before Cyrus was born declare about the relationship between divine foreknowledge and divine foreordination?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain what omnipotence does not mean. Why is the inability of God to lie, sin, or contradict Himself not a limitation on His power but an expression of His perfection? How does this clarification actually strengthen rather than weaken the doctrine of divine omnipotence?

6. Explain the doctrine of concurrence. How does Genesis 50:20 (“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”) illustrate the simultaneous reality of divine sovereign purpose and genuine human moral agency? How does Acts 2:23 make the same point with respect to the crucifixion?

7. What does it mean that God is “never the author of sin” even though sin never escapes His sovereign governance? How do these two affirmations relate to each other without one negating the other? What is the biblical basis for the claim that God is never the author of sin?

8. The lesson argues that the sovereignty of God makes prayer more meaningful, not less. How does the concept of God ordaining means as well as ends support the efficacy of prayer? How is this different from the claim that prayer changes the divine mind?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. Job confesses: “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.” Is this confession currently functioning as an anchor for your faith in your present circumstances? What specific situation in your life most needs to be surrendered to the sovereignty of the God whose purposes cannot be thwarted?

10. The lesson identifies two errors that the doctrine of concurrence guards against: fatalism (my choices don’t matter) and anxiety (everything depends on whether I choose rightly). Which of these errors is a greater temptation in your own life? How does the doctrine of concurrence correct the specific error you are most prone to?

11. Romans 8:28 declares that God “causes all things to work together for good” for those who love Him. Think of a specific painful or confusing circumstance in your life that you have struggled to see as part of God’s sovereign governance toward good.

How does the sovereignty of God, not as a philosophical proposition but as a living trust in the character of the God who governs all things, change your relationship to that circumstance?

12. Psalm 115:3 declares: “Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.” The first word is “Our”, the sovereign God is not a distant abstraction but our God, the God who has bound Himself to His people in covenant love. How does the covenantal dimension of divine sovereignty, the fact that the One who does whatever He pleases has chosen to please Himself with the salvation and the good of His people, transform the doctrine from a source of philosophical discomfort to a source of personal comfort and confidence?

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer with the declaration of Psalm 115:3: Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Let the weight of each word settle upon you: Our God, not an abstract sovereign, but the covenant God who has bound Himself to His people in love. Is in the heavens, occupying the position of absolute, unchallenged sovereignty over all that He has made. Does whatever He pleases, not constrained by any force or circumstance or adversary, but freely and sovereignly accomplishing every purpose He has purposed.

Then bring before this sovereign God the specific circumstances in your life and in your congregation's life where chaos, suffering, unanswered prayer, and the apparent triumph of evil most threaten the stability of faith. Bring them not as complaints against His sovereignty but as confident petitions to the One who governs all things: Lord, You are sovereign over this. No purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Work all things after the counsel of Your will, and work this thing, this suffering, this uncertainty, this apparent setback, toward the good that You have purposed for Your people.

Close with the confession of Job 42:2: I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. And with the doxological conclusion of Romans 11:36: For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. The God who works all things after the counsel of His will is the God from whom all things come, through whom all things exist, and to whom all things return. To this sovereign, omnipotent, covenant-keeping God be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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