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### THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD – NEGLECTED PERSPECTIVE

By Wallace Benn

When I was a curate, my first vicar often used to say that the sovereignty of God was the doctrine that kept you sane in the Christian life and in the ordained ministry. Certainly I would echo that comment from my own experience. God's sovereignty, and his love in exercising that sovereignty, seems to me to be the linchpin of sanity as a Christian and a doctrine of unspeakable peace and comfort.

I have been struck again recently with how this great truth comes out so clearly in the prayer life of the early church (Acts 4:24-30). They had a great sense of God, and an awareness of his control of the events that surrounded and involved them. Jim Packer, in his classic *Knowing God*, reminds us forcefully that a pigmy view of God produces pigmy Christians. The early church suffered from no such problem.

Let's look at the prayer in Acts 4 and see how this belief in God's sovereignty was focused by the early Christians.

#### God's sovereignty in creation

God made the world and everything in it by his power and might (v.24). As a recent proud father, the wonder of creation makes me gasp—not only the world, but heaven and the universe! This God is a great God. How easy it is for us, in the joy of friendship with the living God, to reduce him in our thinking. Anyone with a real experience of God will begin to see his or her own smallness in the light of his greatness. As the chorus puts it: 'Our God is so great, so strong and so mighty...' If God then is for us, who can be against us? How insignificant in the end is opposition to God and his gospel. Do we not need to capture the greatness of God in our church life? We have a God who made mountains and can remove mountainous problems! In our churches we often face mountains—financial, opposition to the gospel, indifference. Whatever it is—God is greater!

#### God's sovereignty in revelation

The early Christians saw God's sovereignty at work in revelation (v.25). Their sovereign Lord had spoken in a way that they could hear and understand. It was through God's servants, so that it was their words and their style of writing and speaking, but supremely it was 'by the Holy Spirit'. All that was spoken was consistent with God's holy character as true and truthful. John's gospel spells out to us that God the Father wants worship in spirit and truth; that Jesus is the truth; and that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth.

How wonderfully practical that is! The Word which we preach and share with folk is God's sovereign production. It is true, completely reliable, and from the very mouth of God. It contains all that Jesus would say to us if we were to see him with our eyes. How important the Word of God should be to us and our congregations—the very Word of the God who loves us and has redeemed us. How seriously we should take its study and be prepared to let it judge our thoughts, actions and opinions!

We must not seek to 'make it more palatable'. We must not tamper with it or relativise its commands. We need help to understand its customs and background, but that does not mean we can escape its teaching. In our last article we considered what the Bible says about hell—here is but one important area where we must bow before what God tells us and not try to 'improve' or 'soften' our

message. God knew what he was doing when he gave us the Bible. It is our job to proclaim the whole counsel of God (v.29), with love in our hearts, and with the help of the Holy Spirit.

### **God's sovereignty in the events of our lives**

God's providential overruling of events and situations is most clearly seen in the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. Guilty men nailed him to a cross (vv.26, 27). But behind man's best efforts to thwart God's will, God overruled and caused it to be done: 'They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen' (v.28). Here is the superb biblical balance between human responsibility and divine sovereignty. In the end, God's will *will* be done!

What a comfort that is to us. It does not mean an easy get-out of our sins and failures. They need to be repented of and forgiven. But it gives us a healthy perspective on things—that God can and does work things out and even overrules our mistakes.

It is God's work we are privileged to be involved in—not our own. 'Success' may come and go, but a grasp of God's sovereign providence ought to lead us to those strong and challenging words of Horatius Bonar: 'Thy way, not mine, O Lord. . .' May our faith be like that—a faith that bows in trust and worship before a loving sovereign Lord!

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