

# God's Sovereignty

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Littlebourne - 7th August 2022 - Acts 4:23-31

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Over the last few weeks in chapter 3 and 4, we've seen Peter and John together. We saw the lame beggar healed - Peter calls upon God to heal this man and he is miraculously able to walk again. The spectacle of this caused a crowd to form and Peter and John stand before the crowd, while the beggar clung to them, and Peter told the crowd how they, the people of Jerusalem, were responsible for the death of their saviour and that they should repent and believe.

Chapter 4 opened with telling us that Peter and John were arrested, but about five thousand believed after Peter's sermon to them. Peter and John are brought before the high priest and the council - the Jewish religious authorities - and questioned. Peter makes their defence, tells the council much the same things that he told the crowd and the council have nothing to say. They can't argue. But what they do is to tell Peter and John to keep quiet and stop teaching about Jesus. Peter and John said they won't stop, but the council can't keep them in custody, so they are let go.

That brings us to this week's passage.

## v23

*23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.*

So Peter and John tell some version of what I've just said - an account of what has happened to them. We don't know who these friends they went to are really - maybe they are the fellow apostles, the rest of the twelve, or maybe they are a wider group, we don't know. We do know they are fellow believers though, based on their response to what they hear.

## v24-27

*24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,*

*“Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?*

*26 The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—*

*27 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 plan had predestined to take  
place.*

First, they lift their voices together and pray. We saw back in chapter 1 verse 14 and chapter 2 verse 42, that prayer was a key part of what the very early church were devoted to. Following Jesus' example, the apostles were very committed to prayer. But this is maybe not the sort of prayer you'd expect - in such a situation as this, facing danger, expecting persecution, would this be your prayer?

Their prayer starts "Sovereign Lord". Their prayer starts with the recognition that God is in charge - He's the sovereign, the highest authority, the King, the ruler. What He says goes.

The prayer expands upon this idea:

### Sovereign in creation

First, in creation:

*Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in  
them*

God's sovereignty is expressed in that He made all things, He's the creator. He has design and control over all things because He designed them and made them. All things were made for His purposes.

## Sovereign in prophecy

Second, God's sovereignty is expressed in His word and His prophecies:

*who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,*

*“Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?*

*26 The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—*

God's sovereignty is shown in that He knows past, present and future and His prophetic words are true. We could spend all afternoon exploring God's relationship to time (and probably just end up confused), but suffice it to say, that if God's prophecies are reliable, as they have proven to be, then He is certainly in control.

The scripture quoted here is the first two verses of Psalm 2. The whole Psalm tells us that God is in control and that He has made His Son, Jesus Christ, to be the King over all. King in judgement and justice, and also the King in whom we can take refuge.

## Sovereignty in Christ's life, death and resurrection

Thirdly, we see God's sovereignty over what had happened not that long before in Jerusalem - the death and resurrection of Christ.

*27 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 plan had predestined to take  
place.*

Jesus' death was not an unforeseen event - it was not an oversight or a plan B - it was the purpose of God from the beginning. Nothing that day happened without God's permission, nothing that day was purposeless, it all had meaning.

We've seen the prophecies throughout the Old Testament about Jesus' coming, his death and resurrection. We saw Peter telling both the crowd and the council that Jesus was foretold.

You might think that 'surely this was God's sovereign plan after the fall though' - that this was a sort of plan B in that sense - 'surely God couldn't have planned this before things went wrong?' But no, God's plan before the fall, his eternal purpose, was to redeem us by His blood.

We see hints of this in the narrative of Genesis, even before the fall. In Genesis chapter 2, God puts Adam in a strange deep sleep - a death-like sleep, in a world before death and suffering - and from a wound in Adam's side is built a woman, his bride. She comes from him and they become one - husband and wife. In Adam's marriage, we see a reflection of Christ and the church. Jesus' death and resurrection to secure his bride is reflected even before any need for it becomes apparent.

In fact, in Adam, we see all the telltale signs of things to come. Even the fall itself hints at the redemption to come - at a tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam sinned, failed to protect his bride and doomed humanity to death. Then at a tree, the cross, Christ obeyed, rescued his bride and defeated death.

We've seen God's sovereignty on display in his eternal plan and purpose here, but we also see it in a more human way - in that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, God himself, came to earth willingly, knowing what he faced. He, the sovereign over all, humbled himself to death on a cross.

This prayer gives a clear affirmation that nothing, not even the wrongful death of God's Son, happens apart from God's sovereign will and control. The certainty of God's plan for the world is established by His sovereign "plan" and ensured by His almighty "hand."

## **v29-30**

*29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

The prayer has established that God is in control - he is sovereign. Now they move on to petitioning God.

What's interesting is that they don't start with prayers asking God to protect them, or to make them safe. They don't ask for their enemies to leave them alone. They ask God to make them *bolder*. They ask that they might continue to speak with boldness and that there would be more signs and wonders to accompany this.

This prayer illustrates the way in which the church should be empowered and encouraged by God's sovereignty.

Sometimes the question arises, "If God is sovereign, if he's got his own plan for everything, why pray at all?" Now there's something to the question - if you think you can change God's mind through prayer or any other means, you're mistaken. He knows better than you. So on that level, if your prayers are always about getting your own way, then

sure it's going to seem pointless to pray.

But if our prayers are modelled after that great prayer which Jesus gave us, the Lord's prayer, then we'll be praying 'your will be done' and then it's extremely comforting that God's in control. If we weren't sure that God was sovereign, we could not confidently pray that. We pray to God knowing that he can make a difference, he does listen and influence events - he is sovereign.

We're commanded to pray in scripture, James 5 for example. Jesus showed us how to pray. God works through the prayers of his people - he has designed things such that our prayers are effectual. He ordains the means as well as the ends.

One thing that prayer absolutely changes is ourselves. When we step into a relationship with God, when we approach God and pour out our desires and longings, our worship and praise, our thanks and our repentance, we are reinforcing our relationship with God, we're deepening our relationship with Him.

In suffering also, God's sovereignty is of comfort. Those praying about God's sovereignty here were facing persecution, they didn't know what would happen to them. But to believe that the God who would suffer for you is the God that is in control of all the affairs happening around you is of great comfort. Romans 8:28:

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*

In view of God's sovereignty, no suffering is meaningless - it all has purpose and meaning. We may find it hard to discern the purpose at the moment, but in time, all things will be clearly working for the good of God's people, and for His glory.

So in the face of the threat of persecution, the church turned to prayer, affirmed God's control of the situation and, encouraged by this, they petitioned for greater boldness.

## **v31**

*31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

Their prayers were answered - they continued to speak with boldness. Not boldness in their own ability, but boldness granted by their being filled with the Holy Spirit. God not only heard their prayer, but in his sovereign power and plan gave them a sign that they were answered - the shaking of the place they were in.

## Conclusion

We've looked at God's sovereignty in creation and redemption. God is totally in control of everything. Looking at Psalm 2, which we saw quoted in this passage, we can see the effect of God's sovereignty.

Psalm 2:

*Why do the nations rage*

*and the peoples plot in vain?*

*2 The kings of the earth set themselves,*

*and the rulers take counsel together,*

*against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,*

*3 "Let us burst their bonds apart*

*and cast away their cords from us."*

*4 He who sits in the heavens laughs;*

*the Lord holds them in derision.*

*5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,*

*and terrify them in his fury, saying,*

*6 "As for me, I have set my King*

*on Zion, my holy hill."*

*7 I will tell of the decree:*

*The Lord said to me, "You are my Son;*

*today I have begotten you.*

*8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,*

*and the ends of the earth your possession.*

*9 You shall break them with a rod of iron*

*and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."*

*10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise;*

*be warned, O rulers of the earth.*

*11 Serve the Lord with fear,*

*and rejoice with trembling.*

*12 Kiss the Son,*

*lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,*

*for his wrath is quickly kindled.*

*Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

God's sovereignty is a terror to those that oppose Him. They rage and plot, but in vain. They say 'let us burst from the bonds of God's sovereign power', but in the end it's just talk. You can rage against Christ, but you can't win. God's justice comes for them swiftly. "To walk out of His will, is to walk into nowhere." (C.S. Lewis)

But for those who fear the Lord, for those who accept God's sovereignty and praise Him as their King, he is a refuge. He is comfort and security, as He was for those praying in Jerusalem. To be guided by His will is our great privilege.