

Is God in Control? Reflections on the Sovereignty of God

By Rev. Susan Gritman

If you have not already done so, I recommend that you first read my article called
“Why Do Bad Things Happen to God’s People?”
www.joyfullysusan.com Click here: [Why Do Bad Things Happen.pdf](#)

Most Christians believe God is sovereign but they struggle to understand how God could be in control when the world is filled with so much suffering and evil.

What does “sovereign” mean? Possessing supreme or ultimate power and authority; being above all others in character, importance, and excellence. God is sovereign because He’s the greatest ruler and independent of all others.

Pastor Chip Ingram writes:

The way I like to explain God’s sovereignty best is simply to say, “God is in control.” There is absolutely nothing that happens in the universe that is outside of God’s influence and authority. As King of kings and Lord of lords, God has no limitations... being sovereign means being the ultimate source of all power, authority, and everything that exists. Only God can make those claims; therefore, it’s God’s sovereignty that makes Him superior to all other gods and makes Him, and Him alone, worthy of worship. Just as peasants always bowed before their king for fear of offending the one who had the authority to take their life, God’s sovereignty compels us to bow before Him. But unlike corrupt earthly kings who abuse their authority to terrorize their subjects, God rules in love. He loves you and wants the best for you.¹

These terms describe God throughout Scripture, yet reconciling these truths about God with the suffering we see in the world can be confusing.

In what ways is God involved and in control of calamities such as tsunamis, earthquakes, flooding, etc.? For some divine purpose, is God directly causing the hurricane that wipes out much of New Orleans, Louisiana? (And if so, why did He not wipe out the French Quarter in New Orleans where there is so much decadence?) Is God in control when a marriage breaks up, when a child contracts a disease, when a drive-by shooting takes the life of a pastor doing God’s work?

Scripture is our guide for understanding God. The Holy Spirit helps us interpret Scripture, so through prayer and study, I offer this interpretation for your reflection. But realize I am not (nor is anyone) the final authority on the nature of a God who is beyond our complete understanding. We use the revelation He has given to come closer to a right understanding of God’s nature and God’s ways.

In the NIV translation there are only 29 occurrences of the word “control.”

- Most of these are about control *by a government or people*. For example: “After the kingdom was firmly in (Amaziah’s) control, he executed the officials who had murdered his father the king. (2 Chr. 25:3).”
- Some of the verses are about the *control given by God to humans*. For example: “The LORD established the kingdom under (Jehoshaphat’s) control; and all Judah brought gifts to Jehoshaphat, so that he had great wealth and honor (2 Chr. 17:5).”
- Others are about *self-control*. “Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city (Prov. 16:32.)” 1 Thes. 4:4 “...each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable.” And Gal. 5:22-24 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”
- **The word “control” is not in the gospels. Jesus never spoke of God’s “control.”**

God could control everything because He is sovereign and all-powerful, but He has delegated and gifted humans with a measure of control. We who are created in the image of God are given the privilege and responsibility for tending and caring for the earth (Genesis 2:15) which means God is not controlling all that happens on the earth. In addition, He has given us the responsibility to control ourselves (self-control), therefore, if we sin, we cannot blame God and say “God made me do it” any more than we can say “The devil made me do it.” We have free will given to us by our sovereign God, and God’s role is to try to guide us to make good choices. God has done that in various ways such as through the Ten Commandments, prophetic preaching, the example of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. We cannot make God responsible for or the cause of *all* of the *consequences* of our own choices. (I emphasize the word “all” because God allows natural consequences much of the time, but there are cases in Scripture where it is stated that God directly and intentionally applied a consequence as punishment or for our education/discipline.)

The word “punish” or “punishment” is used 125 times in the NIV; but there are only about 17 instances in the New Testament where it speaks of God’s punishment. Most of the time in the New Testament it speaks of God’s *judgment* (not punishment) and of the consequences for those who do not belong to Christ Jesus. In John 12:48 Jesus said, “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day.”

The fact that God will *judge* the earth shows He is sovereign over the earth *and* that He has given us responsibility for our choices, i.e. we have control over our choices. God is not controlling *us*, therefore, we can’t say “God controls everything.” Not everything that happens is a direct result of God’s control over the earth but everything that happens has been *allowed* by God due to His own will and choice to give responsibility to humans.

God has given us the responsibility to govern ourselves. Government was established by the God of order for the good of our society. Some examples:

- 1 Sam. 9:17 When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, “This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.” [*Commentary: Saul was chosen by God, therefore we can say God is influencing events and people. God charged Saul to seek divine guidance for how he ruled the people, but Saul exercised his free will to move away from God’s will later in his life. There were natural consequences for the nation when they did not follow God’s will.*]
- Romans 13:1-5 “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. [*Our sovereign God has delegated governing to authorities.*] Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. [*Natural consequence of free will and a sinful choice.*] For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.”

Reflecting on Psalm 8, Rachel G. Hackenberg writes: “God’s order – God’s method of creating, empowering, and renewing life – is not impervious to dissent and defiance... The Psalmist would be less than truthful if he rejoiced over God’s sovereignty but neglected to acknowledge the nagging problem of cruelty and chaos... How will God care for and repair the order of life so deeply injured?”²

That last question is important in understanding God’s character and nature. Even though God will not take back the freedom He has granted to us, He still is “in control” in the sense that **He has a plan to restore the brokenness of the world.**

Chip Ingram writes:

Romans 8:28 promises that *in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose*. That’s an amazing promise not only because it demonstrates that an all-powerful God cares about you and me, but because it cannot be fulfilled unless the One Who gives it is all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful, and all-loving. The promise itself is a testimony to God’s sovereignty.

Think about the implications of that promise. Because God is sovereign and He loves you, nothing will ever come into your life that He does not either decree **or allow**. Consequently, no matter what you face in life, you can take comfort in the fact that God is sovereign. (Emphasis added)¹

God is “in control” in the sense that He has a plan and He has not lost control, but God in His sovereignty is not “controlling” us or every circumstance. God is the author of the created order and set natural laws in place that He *usually* allows to operate without His control

or constant intervention. (I say “usually” because God reserves the right to intervene and sometimes does intervene.) Allowing a course of action by divine permission is not the same thing as divinely engineering the action.

I highly recommend a small book of three sermons: *The Will of God* by Leslie Weatherhead.³ The message of this book gives us a way to understand our sovereign God’s will for our world – His original intent, His circumstantial will based on our sinful choices, and His ultimate will that cannot be thwarted.

IN SUMMARY:

God is sovereign – supreme in power and authority. He rules with both justice and compassion. He is in control in the sense that He has a plan and has not lost control. To humans He gives free will with the privilege and responsibility of working in the world. Therefore, He does not control people or all things. He gives us guidance to influence us to make good choices but does not take away the gift of free will. When we make sinful decisions, God is actively seeking to turn us back to Him – to **save** us through Jesus Christ – and to restore us and our world. Jesus showed us how to live in God’s will and plan for the world. He warned us that there are natural consequences of not living in God’s will and that a time of judgment is coming when those who have not repented nor submitted to God’s authority will be punished for their choices.

NOTES

Note 1: Ingram, Chip. *Why do You Worship God? “What Does the Phrase ‘God Is Sovereign’ Really Mean?”* 2004. www.christianity.com/theology/what-does-the-phrase-god-is-sovereign-really-mean-11555729.html. Web 7, July 2016.

Note 2: Hackenberg, Rachel G. *The Upper Room Disciplines 2016*, The Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN, 2015. p. 173.

Note 3: Weatherhead, Leslie D. *The Will of God*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1999.

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