

“Who Is In Charge?”
Daniel 5:18-22; Psalm 8;
1 Timothy 6:10-16; Luke 18:10-17

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February 1, 2015
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Sovereignty. It's not a word that we bandy about all the time. I suppose one team today will try to say they have sovereign bragging rights or something like that. But sovereignty is not something we think about a lot. Sometimes we think about it in terms of whether a nation has the right to do things within its own borders; does it have sovereignty. So when we begin to think about sovereignty, it's not one of those concepts that most of us cozy up to. It's not a warm and fuzzy kind of thought. And yet, it is something that we've held as a way of thinking about God throughout our history. Certainly in the reformed faith tradition, within which the Presbyterian Church lies, sovereignty has been one of the big ideas. So I think it's useful to think about it. What does it mean when we say God is sovereign?

I think one thing that we tend to do when we begin to think about God as sovereign is to think about what it's like to have a person who is sovereign. What does it mean to have somebody completely in charge, to have all that power? Well, that means they are free to do whatever they want. We begin to think about that. If God is The Sovereign, God is free to do whatever God wants. If we put a human being in that position, we know that it would begin to feel a little arbitrary. We heard today about what Nebuchadnezzar did. He could do whatever he wanted, and it wasn't all good. Sometimes we begin to think of God a little bit that way, that God is sovereign—free to do whatever he wants.

Then, if that's not enough, if we put somebody in power like that they are going to want everything done the way they want it done. Think about that. I'm going to call that determinative power. They want what they want to be done, done. So we think about God. If God is sovereign, then everything that happens must be the will of God—determinative power. And let me just suggest that that is a place where a conflict begins to arise between a particular way of thinking theologically and a way of thinking scientifically, because scientifically there are other things that make things happen. So you have a conflict. Is it the will of God, or is it just the way things work in the world? I'm not going to answer that right now, but there is a conflict there.

Again, it's a way we think about people. They want things to happen a particular way. And, if you get that much power, it would almost be impossible to use it in a way that is consistent all the time, that cares for everybody all the time. And in some of our minds and many of the great minds before us, it felt like to be consistent—to be the same yesterday, today, and forever—meant that God didn't have feelings and couldn't be affected by what we do. It seems that way with a great king. What we do as individuals doesn't matter much to that king.

Finally, we think about that dominating, controlling power of the king. It's a power of coercion, almost. The king gives an order and everybody has to do it.

So that's one vision of sovereignty. There are a number of ideas there. Some of it is influenced by philosophy. A lot of it is influenced by how we see ourselves. There was a time when there was a doctrine called the divine right of kings, so the king, the noblemen, the merchants, the peasants were in the positions they were because that was the way God set things up. So this whole idea of sovereignty fit a certain segment of the population, those in power, and they really liked it.

Whenever I look at an explanation, one of the things that helps me understand it is to look at who it benefits. Sometimes I can look at the argument and find out a lot about it by who it benefits. So I think we might look at that and think about who benefits from this kind of perspective on the sovereignty of God.

Shirley Guthrie, the author of the book we are studying on Sunday evenings, suggests this view of sovereignty is a speculative approach and maybe we should look at a biblical perspective on sovereignty because the biblical perspective on sovereignty doesn't deny that God is powerful (in fact, all-powerful), that God is creator, but it does begin to suggest that there are some ideas about God we might want to pay attention to. If God is completely free to be God, will God be arbitrary? Over and over, the bible tells us that God is full of steadfast love and faithfulness. We get to the New Testament where Jesus shows us the love of God, and then in 1 John, it tells us God is love. If we go to scripture, we begin to see there is a character to God that is not arbitrary. So we begin to think about the power of God, but with the character of love.

When we begin to think about God as one who has the character of love and is creator, God seems to have created something in which we get to live. When God created that, it doesn't seem that God decided he was going to create a bunch of automatons that were just going to do things the way he wanted things done. He wanted to create something that was of a dynamic nature. I would even suggest that when he created the world and gave us life, he invited us on an adventure to move into this life. He didn't come and set up all these rules that we were supposed to just follow. He set up a world that works in a particular way and he seems, then, to come alongside us and say, "If you want your life to go well, listen to me." That might get us to where some of the scriptures are today. It takes a certain bit of humility to listen to God.

I think about it as whether God comes along and pushes us to make us do things, or whether God comes along and beckons us, saying, "Come on! You've got a life to live. Let me show you the way." I think there's a real difference and I think God is much more saying, "You've got some decisions to make. I'm here to guide you and to help you and to show you the way, and to lead you into abundant life." New life, as it says in the New Testament. So we can begin to think of God as sovereign with all this power, who comes not to coerce, but to invite; not to overpower, but to liberate.

If we walk through scripture, it doesn't seem to me like God is without feeling. I don't know what it means, exactly, for God to have feeling, but scripture suggests over and over again that God cares. God hears God's people crying out and God responds. Then Jesus comes and goes through a passion and suffers. Remember last week

when we talked about God and the Trinity, when one aspect of God, one person of the Trinity, experiences something, all of God does. God knows our suffering. It feels to me that God has set up this world that is dynamic and allows us to make decisions, and through the inevitable suffering God then comes along side and encourages and cares and would lead us through.

In fact, if you look at the word *sin*, it means to miss the mark, to stray off the path. The very word *sin* has that idea that God has a goal for us and wants to lead us someplace. Jesus doesn't come as a king and begin giving edicts, he comes and teaches and gives us hope in resurrection. He leads us. He invites us into everlasting life.

Think about that first image of a king, of one that comes and is dictatorial. Jesus gives us a very different image. Just before the last supper, he showed his disciples how he wanted them to be. What did he do? He washed their feet. He invited them to serve. That shows sovereignty in a really different way. He invited us to use what power we have like he does. In fact, what I would suggest is that because he first loved us, we are invited to love one another. We recognize that we are moving toward a goal to live the good life because Christ has called us. Even in 1 Timothy, where it says live purely, it's an invitation to live that way. He invites us to do that, and he will be our guide. He comes in humility, trusting God, in order to lead us into the future. What an incredible sovereign.

The final thing he does that I'm going to talk about today is he sets a table for us. The King comes into the midst of the people and sets a table to invite everyone to become part of a family, to become a community, to recognize that we are given sustenance and grace and are encouraged to share what we have been given—the very love of God—with one another.

So when I think of sovereignty, I've quit thinking about a dominating, controlling kind of king when I think about God because I think of a God that loves us, invites us, moves us, inspires us, changes us, feeds us. What a wonderful God we have.

Let's pray:

Lord, we come to you with all kinds of visions of who you are. Sometimes we think of you as a tyrant. Help us see how you break through that as you send your Son to be with us. You send us your grace that we might recognize how you might remove the barriers we have to being in relationship to you. You invite us around a table. You invite us to be your children, to come to you. Let us come, Lord, as children to receive your blessing, to know your grace, and to see how you lead us into life. Amen.