

Sovereignty

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[0:00] I'm going to ask you to be wide awake. It's a huge subject and a wonderful subject.! Help the speaker and help the hearers.

For Jesus' sake, Amen. Well, people will ask this. What if we look around the world? How does it? You know, is it just chance and random?

I know that there's a sort of scientific philosophy which would say, you know, it's all chance. It's all random. That's all there is to it. But I don't think many people live as if that was the truth.

Is there any personal or moral direction in the world? So popularly, in the West, people use the idea of karma.

You do something bad and it comes back at you. So even that's got a sort of primitive idea of there being a moral direction behind this world.

[1:25] And is the world actually going forward to this idea of progress? That's sort of built into the evolutionary philosophy, but it also affects the way we think there's a word progressing.

Is there a goal that it is progressing to? Is there a meaning to things as they go on or what? Or perhaps, as people might say, is there a higher power that gives meaning to my life, individual lives?

Do we fit in somehow? And when we come to Christian faith, we sometimes might be thinking this, how much do I, as a person, how much am I the subject of God's care and concern over the events of my life?

What sort of interaction does he have with that? And as I go forward, is my life, you know, does God just sort of say, well, off you go, go and do it.

Is it all down to me? Or is there some sense that I have some security? There's a text which says, underneath are the everlasting arms. Is there a sense in which I, as a Christian, have got someone's arms underneath me?

[2:51] Or to put it in terms of hands, am I in some hands from whom no one else can pluck me? Well, that's what I'd like us to think about in this matter of God's rule.

It's a big subject, and I'm not going to try and get too bogged down in any particular aspect. But the rule of God over his world, the technical term is sovereignty.

You will have heard that word used in connection with Brexit. You know, UK sovereignty. Do we have rule over ourselves? We know that, as we've been following this through, the Trinitarian God is the uncreated creator.

And here is his world with stars. God certainly likes stars. There's masses of them. And the sun and the moon, which he's put there for us to rule the seasons, and mountains, and trees, and animals like elephants, and weather, and people.

And this is the world that the uncreated creator has made. And I'm asking, what is his grip on the world he's made? How much does he touch it?

[4:07] How close is he to it? What is his involvement with creation? I believe the term for his closeness to the world that he has made is his imminence.

But let's stick with the idea of how close is he to his world? And there's another technical word, his providence, meaning more perhaps the way he acts in his world.

And that's the sort of thing we're going to look at. And I look at, have a go at two, no, not two, three areas. His rule over things, so the creator and his creation.

His rule over human beings, including the nations. If God rules over everything, how can he blame people for things that they do wrong, for example? And his rule over salvation, the matter of saving sinful people for the new heavens and the new earth?

How does God's rule fit with whether I go to heaven or go to hell? So those are the sort of areas I'd like to have a look at. They're all quite deep. I'm going to try and do justice a little bit to each one of those.

[5:14] So let's look at, you happy with that? Yep. So we'll look at things, people and salvation. So let's look at God's involvement with things, first of all.

So his close involvement, his imminence. When the Apostle Paul speaks to the intellectuals in Athens, he says, God is not far from each one of us.

And that's an interesting way of putting it. He is not far, you know, he is not far away from each one of us. And the Bible speaks in many occasions about God's involvement with the world as it now is. So we had in Revelation chapter 4, by your will they were created. Okay, that's the past. And present, by your will they have their being.

So that text invites us to think of God, God's will involved actively in just things as they now are.

[6:23] Hebrews 1 verse 3 talks about the Son, the Lord Jesus, and it says, he is sustaining all things by the word of his power, by his powerful word.

So all things, the chair that you're sitting on, your breathing function, your heartbeat, all upheld by the word of his power, sustaining all things.

Psalms 104 is a wonderful psalm, what you might call a nature psalm or a creation psalm. And I believe this is quoted on a little wall in Ed Burton.

Is it Ed Burton, the other side of the down? Full King. And what it says is, he makes the springs pour water. That sounds like a very simple sentence, but just imagine what that's saying.

How do springs work? How do rivers work? How does the water cycle work? Well, the Bible says, God makes it work. He makes the springs pour water.

[7:36] And in that same psalm, it says, he makes the grass grow. So that's an interesting one for, what's his name? Alan Titchmarsh. How does the garden grow?

Not because Alan Titchmarsh does it, although, obviously, he's part of that. But God makes things grow. He makes the grass grow. It says in that psalm, I'm going to look it up because I don't always have it all in my mind.

It's Psalm 104, where he says in verse 27, all creatures look to you, you to give them their food at the proper time.

When you give it to them, they gather it up. So the psalm is saying, all these processes that go on in the world, water cycle, grass growing, animals feeding, God is doing that.

You give them food at the proper time. And the psalm also gives you the alternative, if you don't do that, if you were to stop giving food, making grass grow, sustaining all things, it would all collapse.

[8:49] When you hide your face, they are terrified. When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. And the psalm ends, how many are your works, O Lord, in wisdom you made them all.

And I think if we get the idea of this, we begin to realise what an ongoing, wonderful miracle it is, that the world around us is full of God's activity.

He's making grass grow. Let's hear what the Lord Jesus says about it. When Jesus was talking to his disciples, he said, you shouldn't be so worried about provision for yourself.

Look at the birds of the air. He says, your heavenly father feeds them. And you can say, oh, I thought they just dug worms out of the ground or picked up crumbs.

He said, no, actually, well, yeah, that's true. But there's a deeper level than this. Your heavenly father feeds them and actually you are worth more than many sparrows. Interesting, isn't it?

[9:56] Jesus says this about the sun and the rain. The father causes his son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

All these things that are happening, the sun shining, the rain coming down, that is God at work. That doesn't mean you can't be a meteorologist. It doesn't mean that you can't be an astronomer

and calculate the distance from the earth to the sun and look at sunspots and things. Those are all true causes and effects. But underneath, the reality is that God is doing that. He makes the sun rise. He sends the rain.

And you might be, I think it takes a bit of getting our heads around in our sort of scientific world view. But of course you might say, well I thought these things ran themselves. I thought they just happened.

And I'd invite you to think of a juggling act where constantly the balls are thrown from one juggler to another. If the jugglers stop, it all falls to the ground.

[11:03] But it seems to just be going. But it's going because they're constantly at work doing this juggling act. Things do not just work by themselves.

God, in his sovereign rule over creation, upholds all things. If he were to stop upholding, then the things wouldn't be.

They wouldn't work. Water wouldn't be wet. Light wouldn't travel. Planets wouldn't orbit. Only by his wise, continued action do these things continue.

And this is God's sovereign rule over his created world. He gives things a nature.

Water has the nature of wetness. Light has the nature of illumination. Time has the nature of going forward. He's given these natures and he uses them.

[12:04] He uses cause and effect. If somebody hits you on the head with a cricket bat, you will certainly get a headache. That's cause and effect. He uses secondary causes. He sends the rain by using the secondary cause of low pressure coming in from the Atlantic, meeting cold air or warm air and causing rain to fall.

He uses those secondary causes, but that's not all there is to it. It is God who is working everything. And this is God's sovereign rule over creation.

Quite a few years ago, we had a friend from, I think from the Elim Church, and she said, Philip, we had a prayer meeting last week and somebody was healed and God is still in business.

And I said, well, amen, that's great. But actually, God is still in business all the time, isn't he?

Because when the sun rises, God is in business. When the rain falls, God is in business.

We should look around and see everything as being from the hand of God. So we should praise God for this wonder and mystery of his providence, his constant hand throughout creation.

[13:35] I think perhaps it's helpful to think of a hand in a glove. And the hand moves the glove, if you like, but the glove both hides the hand and expresses the hand.

And I think that's a little bit like God and creation. He's hidden.

You can't see him. You can't spot him. But the whole of creation expresses who he is, filled with his presence, filled with his care. That Psalm 104 says that God cares about his creation.

He makes it abundant. He makes it fruitful. He makes grass grow for the cattle, plants for man to cultivate, wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, bread that sustains their hearts.

It shows us a caring, abundant, extravagant, generous God. So we should thank him for his sovereign rule, for his caring provision, for his fatherly goodness.

[14:45] We thank you, Lord our God, with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices, who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love and still is ours today.

Does that make sense? Yeah. God's hand and his rule over creation. So let's come now to his rule over people.

Because I've tried to paint a picture of God who is very much in control of the world and the things that go on in it in this way which doesn't overrule the secondary causes.

Now, what about people? So there's creation. Let's include the world of people. Because people are special, aren't they?

You are special. You're sitting next to somebody who's special because they're made in the image of God. And you're sitting next to somebody who is not a rock or a cauliflower or a bunny rabbit.

[15:59] Wonderful though those things might be. You are sitting next to a person. People made in the image of God. You're sitting next to a minor miracle, actually.

Because God, we cannot describe him or limit him. He is a creator. He makes things out of nothing. And the person sitting next to you is a tiny creator.

And when you talk to them, you will say something and they will respond in speech like the God who has made us. And they will make up a sentence that nobody else has said before.

You know what I mean. And even in the act of speaking, they are creating something. And, you know, what an amazing thing it is to be a human being made in the image of God.

You're not a machine. You're not a vegetable and you're not an animal. You're a person. So, what does that do in terms of God's rule? If he so rules over his creation, what about people?

[17:05] Are they just puppets? Now then, I want to bring in this. I'm going to term it this way. Free moral agency.

There's another term that people bring up which I'm just going to leave to one side because it's a bit more confusing. But I'm going to stick with this one. Free moral agency. It means that, for example, I don't know whether if this gets on YouTube, whether it would be banned because I'm going to use a word here that might...

There's somebody firing a gun with a bullet and the gun shoots and kills someone.

That's the word, I guess. If that happened, would you take the gun, arrest it, take it to prison, arrange for it to go to court and accuse the gun so that it's...

You say, I blame you. You need to go to prison for 70 years for what you did. Would you do that to a gun? No, because it's a machine, isn't it?

[18:18] It doesn't have moral responsibility. It's just a machine. But the person who pulled the trigger, that person has moral responsibility.

They decided whether to pull the trigger or not and they take the praise or the blame for doing it. So that person, you might arrest, you might take them to prison, you might put them in court.

It rather depends if they killed. If it was a terrorist or if this was a soldier, the enemy, you might well say, well done. You might well praise them for what they've done and give them a medal.

But you see, there is a moral responsibility. It is appropriate to people to say, that was wrong.

You are blameworthy. And it is appropriate to people to say, that was brilliant. You are praiseworthy. You can say that to people but you don't say it to machines. And actually, we're people.

[19:22] We're not machines. There is free moral agency. So, there's a real difference between the way you treat machines and the way you treat people. And that's, there's something really quite profound about this.

That God is right to blame the sinner for their sin. You chose this. You did it. You thought it. You reacted that way.

Don't blame me for it, says God. That was your responsibility. That's down to you. And that is a fundamental thing about being human. That we are free moral agents.

If we do sin, it's not anybody else's fault but our own. I know it's more complicated than that in the sense that you might have been put under pressure, you might have been drugged, your brain might be stewed up with all sorts of things.

So, it's a little bit more complicated but the fundamental is if you do sin, that's your fault and we are people that bear the blame or the praise for our moral choices.

[20:29] And of course, it's true of God and we praise him for being a good God, don't we? I think all the good things he does and it's right to praise him and marvel and admire and so God, the great person from whom all other personhood comes.

I had this example and it was what we read earlier and you might like to flip over to it again. It was in Isaiah chapter whatever it was, 10.

It was in Isaiah 10, it's on 695 in your Bible. Let me just fill in a little bit because I did it rather quickly when I read it. This is a map.

This is the Mediterranean, that's Cyprus, Baphos is there and this is where Israel is at that time.

And in Isaiah 9 and 10, God blames his people for their sin. He says, you are rebellious and forgetful.

[21:52] You are arrogant and proud and they are warned of God's wrath and God actually gives them lots of warnings and he says, there are consequences for your sin.

You will bear my wrath if you continue to sin. You should repent and they take no notice despite God's patience and God's invitations.

And God says, okay, my patience is large but it is not infinite, it comes to an end and I will bring my wrath on you via this horrible superpower, Assyria.

Assyria. And that's what he does. And Assyria is spoken of as God's stick or rod, chapter 10, verse 5, the club of my wrath.

And here is God using the Assyrians to bring wrath on his people. and they are sent by God's plan and purpose because God has been saying this is what he's going to do and these people are not receptive, they've not been saying, Lord, what is your will for my life?

[23:15] They've just been carrying on as normal and it said what was in their mind in chapter 10, verse 7, this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind and it gives you a long soliloquy of all the things that Assyria is thinking, look at me, look how strong I am, look how, what's the word, undefeatable I am, what's the word for undefeatable?

There's a nice word which has escaped me, undefeatable, invincible, that's right, look how invincible I am. This is what Assyria is thinking and they invade the north kingdom and God's, and then God says, okay, I sent you and then when that's all done, chapter 10, verse 12, when the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, I will punish the king of Assyria for his willful pride and the haughty look in his eyes.

So do you see what's happening here? Assyria thought they were doing it themselves, they were actually doing God's will and then God says, the fact that you did this wicked thing, I know it was planned by me but it was wicked and you will be punished for your wickedness.

Do you see the point here about the different ways that God works? Assyria I hope that makes sense. Assyria has been sent by the sovereign God to do God's will but Assyria is held responsible for his wicked, proud, arrogant, violent sin.

He can't say, oh God made me do it. Do you see? I mean, in a sense God did make him do it but such is the mystery of the way this works.

[25:09] Assyria can't use that as an excuse. He did it himself. Think of some other examples. Joseph. You remember the story of Joseph who was betrayed by his brothers and sold as a slave?

Talk about dysfunctional family. God arranged things in his own time and in his own way so that Joseph should end up prime minister of Egypt and when Father Jacob suffered famine he sent the brothers to Egypt to get life-saving bread and so they were fed and Joseph said am I in the place of God?

You intended to harm me which they succeeded in doing but God intended it for good to accomplish the saving of many lives. Aren't God's ways marvelous?

Isn't he a wonderful God? That he can work in this complex web of human sin and folly and everything else to bring about his purpose the saving of many lives.

And then think most of all about the Lord Jesus who bore the wrath of God for our salvation pre-planned and how he was betrayed and wrongly condemned and executed wickedly wrongly and how Peter can say this man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge and you with the hands of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross but God has raised him from the dead.

[26:55] It was all planned by God but you are wicked to do that. God's sovereignty does not remove human responsibility and of course it was all for tremendous good.

Jesus says about Judas the son of man will go just as it is written of him so it's pre-planned as written it'll happen but woe to the man by whom he is betrayed.

And on those examples I've given you God's overruling of wicked evil deeds with this huge purpose of doing good saving many lives through Joseph and his appointment and in the cross producing a wonderful redemption salvation to save us even though in his plan he involved the wickedness of

evil people but he saved us through it.

Amen. And here's a text that Paul slips in in Romans chapter 8 which I think is a hugely helpful text for people who've got the idea of God's sovereignty.

God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose and if we are beneficiaries of God's saving purpose then he works all things around us together for good and the old Puritans would enlarge on that and they'd say he uses the good things for good like fellowship and prayer encouragement happiness and he uses the bad things for good illness disappointment losses and crosses he uses them for good as well he works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose let's move on third thing God's so we looked at God's sovereignty in creation we looked at God's sovereignty as regards the way he uses people and doesn't stop them from being people let's look now at

[29:19] God's sovereignty and salvation and perhaps this is the deepest mystery of all am I responsible to believe in Jesus and the answer is yes you should believe in the Lord Jesus you should turn to him but you might say well isn't it all pre-planned by God I mean what what choice do I have in this matter where am I in this matter if it's all pre-planned it's just an illusion can he blame me if I don't believe well we've actually seen that God does blame people for their sin and if I do believe do I take credit for being so clever and so selfless and so spiritual I hope not what made things different for me have you ever asked yourself that question how is it that I came to faith and my brother never how was it when I was sitting in a congregation and when I heard it I came to faith and the person sitting next to me didn't well it is a deep mystery isn't it and I would like to trace this back to the eternal choice of the sovereign

God it's a big issue a big subject and I just like to do it with a couple of references quite happy to say some more about it but let's try and do it quickly like this there is a lovely verse in Deuteronomy 29 29 which says the secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever that we may do all the words of the law and Moses there is saying that there are things it's a bit like an iceberg I like to think of it as an iceberg there's above the surface and below the surface and there are secret things which belong to the Lord our God below the surface they belong to the Lord we're not allowed to poke too far into those deep mysteries and the stuff above the water line and it is I did look it up the stuff that is above the water line that is clear and revealed the revealed things so we've got the hidden secret things which belong to the Lord and the revealed things which we're to do the fact that there are secret things shouldn't stop us doing the revealed things so I'd like us to turn please to what Jerome read for us John chapter 6 and you can help with this because I might ask you some questions John 6 verse 39 it says this is the will of him who sent me that I shall lose none of all that he has given me but raise them up at the last day that's a straightforward sentence isn't it this is the will of him who sent me so that's the father isn't it who sent him this is the will of him who sent me that I shall lose none of all those he has given me but raise them up at the last day so there are there's some people how many have I got six people representative of a larger group this is the will of the father now what does the father do with some of these people gives them to

Jesus so let's look I mean we don't see this this is sort of hidden in the counsels of God there's Jesus represented by that and there is this giving and so let's assume that person is given to the Lord Jesus that person is given to the Lord Jesus that person is given to the Lord Jesus this is not universalism they're not all given not everybody is raised on the last day but those people are given to the Lord Jesus and raised and will be raised on the last day that one that one and that one and how many of these will Jesus lose none and what will he do to every single one of them raise them on the last day those are the people who will be raised on the last day that's a sentence which is as clear as it could be when were they given

I don't know maybe a long time ago it's a past thing that gets happened given to the Lord Jesus and raised on the last day okay it's like two sides of the same coin because let's look above the water line and that was the will of the father and now here's the will of the father in verse 40 for that my father's will is that everyone who looks to the son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise them up at the last day so let's draw the picture again and this time it's put in different

terms it's the same picture and there's Jesus and what are the people supposed to do regarding Jesus in verse 40 believe look and believe isn't it and the sentence from our saviour tells us how many people would this be true for if they look and believe how many people would that be true for all of them does it say everyone does your bible say all who

[35:32] I looked it up it says all in Greek everyone so look here's above the water line everyone who looks and believes in Jesus so let's put some lines there if you look and believe in Jesus you will what does it say what does it say will happen if you what can you promise to people who look and believe in Jesus get eternal life and I'll raise them at the last day yeah and it says everyone so you could go into the open market and shout out everyone who looks to the Lord Jesus and believes in him will receive eternal life and Jesus will raise you up at the last day no sense of limit on it you just say that to everybody it's what technically you call the free offer of the gospel and the fact that there's another verse verse 39 does not limit what was said in verse 40 do you see the point of that this verse says anyone so you can go out on the authority of

God and say to the people in your office the people in your class people in your family anyone and everyone who looks to the Lord Jesus and believes in him will receive eternal life and will be raised up at the last day you can promise people that and I'm promising that this morning and if you haven't looked to the Lord Jesus and haven't believed in him why not do so now this minute because here is the promise to you if you do that you'll receive eternal life and be raised up in the last day so it's those people these two diagrams are the same these people will receive eternal life and only these people will receive eternal life because Jesus says in verse 44 actually there's an inability no one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws them so if you're sitting there and you haven't looked and believed in

Jesus let me believe in him and you need to help me to do that and if you help me to do that I would love to look to him and believe in him and the promise is if you do that you have eternal life and you'll be raised on the last day what a brilliant gospel it is isn't it to everyone and everyone everyone who looks if you haven't looked do so now the promise did you ever wonder why you looked to Jesus and here's the answer because I think before the ages were before the world was made the father said you know that person who's going to be living in Brighton you know that funny one you know I want them he says to Jesus I want you to save that person I'm going to give that person to you and it's your job to give them eternal life and through thick and thin raise them up at the last day that's how you were a Christian it's amazing isn't it that God thought of us before the worlds were made and said to his son I'm giving it's your responsibility now you save them keep them raise them on the last day and really your salvation comes down to this do you think Jesus is competent to do that I think so

I wouldn't be confident of me but I'm confident of him if the father has given me to Jesus I believe Jesus has the power and the competence to look after me all the way through my sins and my foolishness and the ups and downs of life and whatever happens to me when I get even older than I am now that he will keep me to the end and that goes for you too amen to that because the sovereign lord decided to give you to his son and tasked him with giving you eternal life and raising you on the last day and do you think Jesus is competent to do so yes so believer the sovereign god gifted you to the son chose you before the world began tasked does this is the god who is sovereign over the mountains and the seas and the hills and the weather and the nations and your finances and your health and your family and sovereign over all of that and he has decided in his sovereignty that nothing will separate us from the love of

[41:18] God which is in Christ Jesus nothing in this life or the life to come nothing will separate us from to Thank you.