

# The Sovereignty of God (4): Paul

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[ 0 : 00 ] Are you afraid of the dark? It's not just little children who are afraid of the dark. No shame in being afraid of the dark.

We're creatures of the day, not of the night. It's instinctive to us as human beings to go into defensive mode when it's dark.

But, you know, darkness doesn't always have to be a bad thing. For those hours where we are deprived of whatever sight we may have, we learn how to depend upon other senses.

In particular, our hearing becomes more acute, and we're able to hear sounds which otherwise we would miss. A squirrel moving on the ground.

A hedgehog rustling through leaves at the back of the garden. A bird flying from one branch to another. Now, I'm going to assume that most of us here this evening are professing Christians.

[ 1 : 03 ] Are you afraid of the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God? Are you afraid of the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God? Do you associate it with words like doom and darkness?

Destiny and determinism? The historic caricature of the Scottish Calvinist is that of a gloomy old man resigned to his fate at the hands of a judgmental, angry God.

Is the sovereignty of God the dark side of Christianity to you? Or do you welcome the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God?

Associating it rather with words like fatherly care, daily grace, divine purpose.

You know, just as easy as you can be afraid of the dark, so you can be afraid of the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Or just like you welcome the darkness so your other senses can work properly, so you can rejoice in the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God because it assures you of your father's deep and daily care for you.

[ 2 : 21 ] Well, what about the Apostle Paul? If you read through Romans 9-11, Romans 9-11, you might suppose that Paul thinks of the sovereignty of God rather like a child thinks of the darkness.

But in Philippians 1, verses 12-14, we get the wider view. Far from being filled with gloom, the knowledge that God is in sovereign control of all things fills Paul with confidence and with joy.

It doesn't tie him in doom-laden knots. It liberates him to serve Jesus and to speak about Jesus.

You know, as we come out of the coronavirus pandemic, we all need to know that God is in the throne of heaven and earth and that he knows what he is doing with his world, with his church, and with us as children.

And this evening, we want to ask the question, can God be trusted with the future of the gospel?

Can God be trusted with the future of the gospel? And from these verses, the answer is an emphatic yes.

[ 3 : 40 ] Our Heavenly Father knows what he's doing. we can trust him. I want us to consider this subject in two ways. First, the sovereignty of God is an open secret.

And second, the sovereignty of God is an opportunity to speak. Take confidence. Have joy in this most marvelous of biblical doctrines.

Your Father cares for you and gives you daily grace and has a purpose for your life and that's what we call the sovereignty of God.

First of all then, from these verses, the sovereignty of God is an open secret. It's an open secret.

There's actually a slide with this, Jonathan, if you want to put it up. Paul begins by saying, I want you to know, brothers, that what's happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

Well, what is it that's happened to Paul such that he wants the church in Philippi to know all about it? They're secret things. The hidden things of the sovereignty of God.

[ 4 : 54 ] Paul's saying to them, I want to tell you a secret. I want to declare to you something which is hidden. And they are, in the first instance, the things that have happened to him.

The epistles of Philippians and Ephesians and Colossians and Philemon are often called the prison epistles. So called because Paul wrote them from prison.

Commentators differ on what prison Paul wrote them from. But when it comes to Philippians, it would seem the consensus is he wrote them from prison in Rome. Having appealed his case to Caesar in Acts 28 and so on, Paul's transported to Rome, held under house arrest until his case is heard.

He's confined to quarters, as it were, carefully guarded by Roman soldiers. His movements are limited and to all intents, he's a prisoner. Now, suppose you were in charge of the early Christian church.

You've got the apostle Paul, your star man. Everywhere Paul goes, there are churches planted, Christians strengthened, and great missionary advance.

[ 6 : 11 ] Wherever he goes, there is spiritual energy and new life. To use a football analogy, he's the main man. He is the Lionel Messi of the early church, the 30 to 40 goal striker without whom the team will always lose.

As is happening to Barcelona at the moment. He's mentoring young leaders like Titus and Timothy. He's building a theology of mission which is still going today.

If there was one Christian leader you would not want locked away, it's Paul the apostle. For all the world, it doesn't make sense to have him in prison in Rome rather than on the loose preaching the gospel.

Getting rid of your star player is a head scratcher. But then the sovereignty of God often seems to make no sense at all.

William Whiting Borden was one of America's brightest lights in the first decades of the 20th century. A graduate of Yale and Princeton Universities, Borden was a world-class yachtist and a multi-millionaire to boot.

[ 7 : 35 ] Sensing a call to mission to the Uyghur people of northwestern China, Bill Borden sailed to Cairo in order to study Arabic and Islamic tradition.

Before him lay a lifetime of productive and fruitful service in today's Uyghur province, so much heard of in the news. Who knows what might have happened had Bill Borden, the zealous Christian missionary, who knows what might have happened had he reached his final destination.

Perhaps the Uyghur people would have turned to Christ en masse a hundred years ago. But in 1913, Bill Borden contracted cerebral meningitis and died while still in Cairo.

The star player of American, if not world, mission to China was taken off the scene. For all the world, it didn't then, and it still doesn't now, make any sense as to why God would do such a thing. Surely, if he'd been allowed to reach today's Xinjiang province, preach the gospel there, many hundreds, many thousands of Uyghur Chinese would have turned to Christ and the world would be a very different place from what it is today.

[ 9 : 02 ] It's a secret for why Borden was taken from us that only God knows anything about. secret. And that's the way the sovereignty of God seems to work so often, in secret.

Paul's imprisoned in Rome, Bill Borden's buried in Cairo. Isn't this all so much a waste? The answer seems to lie only with God, because if we were in control, things would never have turned out this way.

And yet since 1913, the story of William Whiting Borden and his selfless passion for mission has been made widely known.

It hasn't been swept under the carpet by a church embarrassed at God's failure. It's been made known to such an extent that today, if you should type up on your Wikipedia Bill Borden, you can read and be inspired by his life.

Though the reason God took him away at such a young age is a secret known only to God himself, the facts surrounding it are an open secret. He sailed to Cairo, he died of cerebral meningitis.

[ 10 : 19 ] The church hasn't hidden these facts away, it has not kept them in the family, as so often scandals were treated in the past. Rather, they have been made fully known and opened out to analysis and criticism.

And Paul felt the same way. Rather than hide his sufferings and imprisonment, those things which had happened to him, he made them all known to the Philippine Christians.

The reason God took his star and played it off the scene seemed to be a secret known only to God himself, but Paul made the facts surrounding it an open secret.

And so he told them all about his scars, and about his chains, about his imprisonment, and about his frustration, and about his torture.

He's not keeping these things to himself because while at the beginning of his ordeal, he may not have known why these things were happening to him, he now does. As we'll see in the next point, it's all got to do with the impact his imprisonment had upon the advance of the gospel, both in his speaking to the courtiers of the emperor and in the emboldened preaching of everyday Christians in the church.

[ 11 : 43 ] But here's the point. More than his successes, he wanted the Philippian Christians to know about his scars.

More than his successes, he wanted the Philippian Christians to know about his scars. These scars are not embarrassing to him, they are not the mark of God's failure, they are the mark of God's sovereign purpose to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ to more people in more places.

Now let me apply this in a couple of ways. First, notice to whom Paul makes those things which have happened to him known.

I want you to know brothers, brothers, fellow believers, I want to be very careful here, but it seems to me that the sovereignty of God is first and foremost a doctrine for those who are already Christians.

Because only those who already know God as Father will view his sovereignty not as the dark side of Christianity, but as marks of his fatherly care, his daily grace, and his divine purpose.

[ 13 : 04 ] For those of us who know God as Father, his sovereignty is a friend. Yes, even if that friend should mean prison for us. But for the gloomy old man for whom the doctrine of God's sovereignty is like to fate or destiny or doom, it's an enemy.

The second application concerns Christian ministry itself, and I especially want the young people to listen very carefully to what I'm saying, because this is very counter-cultural in the evangelical church.

church, do not trust a Christian leader who for all his gifts, who for all his skill, who for all his charisma, for all his looks, and for all his successes, will not or cannot show you his scars.

The mark of Paul's authenticity as a gospel preacher weren't his powerful sermons, but his painful scars.

Not his charismatic leadership, but the cuts of the lash on his back. In today's evangelical world, we elevate certain men beyond what is deserved.

[ 14 : 25 ] We don't judge them on their scars, judge them on their sermons. Do not do this. Be so shallow, lest you rob gospel ministry of its authenticity and power.

Go looking for the scars on the minister's back, and see the scars on his heart and in his mind.

There's the authentic gospel minister. I'm going to name drop here, okay?

I can think of one of my colleagues, and I hope it doesn't mind me mentioning him by name, Norman Mackay from Govan. Now there's a man with scars.

There's an authentic gospel minister through whom God works powerfully to the salvation of souls. He ain't slick. He ain't cool. He ain't kicked back.

He is genuine. He makes known his vulnerabilities. He doesn't hide them. They're not embarrassment to him and somehow the failure of God to support him.

[ 15 : 38 ] They're a mark of God's grace upon his life. The sovereign fatherhood of his God in his daily life and ministry. Sovereignty of God is an open secret.

to us it's not darkness you know. It's light. Well second the sovereignty of God is an opportunity to speak.

It's an opportunity to speak. In verse 12 Paul writes I want you to know brothers that what's happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

Rather than Paul's sufferings and scars retarding the expansion of the kingdom of God they propelled it forward. Word studies reveal that the word advanced here in verse 12 means a movement forward to an improved state progress advancement furtherance.

In other words those things which have happened to Paul the scars in his back have moved the kingdom of God forward to an improved state. They have progressed they have furthered the gospel.

[ 16 : 52 ] The exact opposite from what was designed has actually happened. Rather than the gospel being squashed under foot it has risen triumphant.

You know I used to work as a research and development chemist and during my PhD in Aberdeen one of the materials I used to work with was an intensely purple very explosive so Ross and Ross Pocasco would have loved it.

Very intensely purple very explosive chemical called trillithium iodide. Even the name sounds scary. One tiny crystal of trillithium iodide provided a daytime entertainment for a student.

If you threw one crystal of trillithium iodide on the floor of one of the laboratories it would sit quite happily. That is until an unfortunate first year undergraduate would come along and unknowingly step in it applying pressure to it and causing it to explode.

But rather than being consumed the explosion would only serve to throw out shards of smaller trillithium iodide crystals in all directions.

[18:10] And so the next step that unfortunate pressure took exploded more crystals. And then more crystals. And all the time my senior PhDs were like geeks laughing at the put unfortunate undergraduates trying to play a game of crystal maze to avoid the tiny purple crystals.

The point is rather than being consumed trying to squash trillithium iodide only served to spread its explosive influence further and further.

That's what happened to Paul while he's imprisoned in Rome. Squashing him, confining him to quarters, placing him in shade.

It only served to spread the gospel's explosive influence further and deeper into the Roman Empire. Whereas we might look upon what happened to Paul as an obstacle to the growth of gospel, he saw it as an opportunity to speak the grace of the gospel.

And rather than sulking, he opened his mouth and he spoke to his jailers and through them, as we read in verse 13, it became known throughout the entire imperial garden to all the rest that his imprisonment was for Christ.

[19:36] what others may have seen as an obstacle and embarrassment, he saw as an opportunity and a springboard for evangelism. Sovereignty of God's placed him under Roman house arrest.

But rather than viewing the sovereignty of God as a dark, constraining force, Paul recognized his father's hand in it all. In love for Paul, and in order to move the kingdom of God forward to an improved state, God in his sovereign grace had transported Paul from Jerusalem, where it had all started, to Rome, the very heart of the empire, and in Rome, Paul spoke the gospel and Roman people were saved.

You see, far from squashing the gospel, Paul's suffering served to spread the gospel. and all because rather than sulking at God's failure, he spoke the word of the gospel.

And then even more, read in verse 14, most of the brothers having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Not only are Paul's sufferings serving to open his mouth, but other Christians are becoming bolder in their proclamation of the gospel also.

Rather than being cowed by the prospect of persecution, they're becoming more confident. Christ and his gospel are being proclaimed with passion, with intensity.

[21:22] This is the trillithium iodide effect of the sovereignty of God upon the gospel. That rather than view our sufferings as obstacles, we view them as opportunities to share Christ and his gospel with new groups of people who, if we weren't suffering in the way we are, would never otherwise hear of Jesus.

Do you hear that? It's an opportunity to share the gospel with people who, if we were not suffering the way we are, would never otherwise hear the gospel.

Our Father's hand is in where we are and in what we are going through. His daily grace is sufficient for us in all our weaknesses. But more than that, God lovingly places us where we might do the most good for him if we will but see our circumstances not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity to preach Christ to new people or to reinforce the certainty of the gospel to Christians we already know.

Now think of the impact that such a way of thinking could have upon us as a church. So, we are looking for a new building for which to fish for the souls of Glasgow's peoples.

But at every stage God has clearly shut the door on us finding a new premises that are either too expensive to buy, too expensive to fit out, that are in the wrong place, they have been sold before we even get a chance to see them.

[ 23 : 03 ] We know that God is sovereign over all things and so we even view this search not as an obstacle to the growth of our congregation, we viewed it as an opportunity for gospel proclamation.

We are experiencing on a congregational level the trillithium iodide impact of the sovereignty of God and rather than resent God's providence and sulk away, we embrace it and grasp the opportunity it brings to think different and perhaps consider things we wouldn't otherwise.

One thing is for sure, if we see this move as an opportunity, who knows what new avenues of gospel proclamation we might take advantage of.

Paul could not have predicted what would happen to him while in prison in Rome. We can neither predict what's going to happen to us moving to a temporary location partick.

But we know that what lies ahead of us if we see it as an opportunity, not an obstacle, is an opportunity for gospel growth.

[ 24 : 29 ] think also of the way in which such a way of thinking could have upon us as individual Christians. So a ministerial friend of mine has been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

It's not cutable. It will certainly shorten his life. He's just a little bit older than I am. Now the gloomy hyper-carbonists among us might shake our heads and give in to the spirit of fatalism and say ah. But he doesn't see it that way. He's not sulking. Rather than viewing it as an obstacle to the gospel, he sees it as an opportunity for growth and development.

His email to all of us as his colleagues reads this way. Remember, this is a man just a bit older than me and he's just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He's going to die.

Please pray for my wife and family at this time and pray that I will honour Christ in the way I deal with the diagnosis, with the treatment, and with whatever lies ahead.

[ 25 : 45 ] Very far from being fatalistic on one hand or lackadaisical on the other. He is genuinely viewing this tragic diagnosis as being an opportunity to honour Christ.

Those in his connegation will be strengthened by his faith in seeing him deal with mishaps in the road. He will speak about Jesus to those he's receiving chemotherapy with.

Believe me, not for one second do I want to change places with Donnie G right now. But then we've all got our paths to tread in which if we'll view our scars as opportunities we might speak the gospel even more faithfully than we've ever done before.

Whereas we might view his diagnosis as being dark, my friend sees it as light. as Christians we are not to associate the biblical doctrine and the practical experience of the sovereignty of God with words like darkness, doom, determinism and destiny.

We are not to adopt the stoical gloomy attitude of the hyper-Calvinist caricature. We are to associate it with terms like daily grace.

[ 27 : 12 ] divine purpose, fatherly care. Break the mold and in so doing adorn the gospel of Jesus Christ with your faithfulness and joy in him.

The coronavirus pandemic has taken it out of all of us. We have lost dear friends like Georgina Allah to this vile disease.

We have been broken and remade our relationships are forever changed with each other and church will never be the same again.

It will never be the same again. Is God in control? You can be sure he is. Is your father's hand on the teller of your life?

You can be sure it is. Is his daily grace enough for you? You can be sure it will be. As we close I want to take you very briefly to a small hill just outside Jerusalem where 2,000 years ago our Lord was crucified.

[ 28 : 21 ] This is where all the passages we have studied concerning the doctrine of the sovereignty of God lead. Whether it is Joseph in Egypt or Joshua in the Jordan, whether it is the disciples in Galilee or Paul in Rome, his father's purpose led Jesus to that cross and for all the world it looked like darkness and foolishness.

What good could the death of the son of God achieve other than to drive home the supremacy of the evil of mankind and the darkness of death? What purpose does waste?

Is the sovereignty of God darkened by the ultimate sacrifice of his son? And then on the third day we see our Lord bursting forth from the tomb.

The darkness of death is defeated and the light of God is triumphant. The sacrifice he made for us and all our sins upon the cross is vindicated and the gospel of his gracious love for a rebellious world issues forth like an unstoppable waterfall.

All that Jesus suffered is an open secret and why he suffered presents us as the church with an opportunity to speak forth the glory of the love of God and invite those who do not yet know him to come in faith and trust and experience for themselves the forgiveness of all their sin and the transformation of their dirty hearts.

[ 29 : 59 ] This is the greatest of all demonstrations of the sovereignty of God. If you should ever doubt your father's care his daily grace his good purpose for your life look at the cross look at the cross and there see the great sovereignty of God in all its splendor and look back at yourself look in the mirror and say if God did not spare his own son but gave him up for me how will he not along with him freely give me all things?

Let us pray. I