

The God who is sovereign

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Date: 04 September 2016

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[0 : 00] The first reading this morning can be found on page 732. So that's page 732, Isaiah chapter 45.

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him, that gates may not be closed. I will go before you and level the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron.

I will name you the treasures of darkness and the hordes in secret places, and you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name. I name you, though you do not know me.

[1 : 08] I am the Lord, and there is no other. Besides me, there is no God. I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know from the rising of the sun and from the west that there is none besides me.

I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness. I make well-being and create calamity.

I am the Lord who does all these things. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness. Let the earth open that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit.

Let the earth cause them both to sprout. I, the Lord, have created it. Woe to him who strives with him, who formed him, a pot among earthen pots.

Does the clay say to him, who forms it? What are you making? Or your work has no handles. Woe to him who says to a father, What are you begetting?

[2 : 18] Or to a woman, With what are you in labor? Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and the One who formed him, Ask me of things to come.

Will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? I made the earth and created man on it. It was my hands that stretched out the heavens and I commanded all their host. I have stirred him up in righteousness and I will make all his ways level. He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts.

Thus, says the Lord, the wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush and the Sabaeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours.

They shall follow you. They shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying, Surely God is in you and there is no other God, no God besides him.

[3 : 28] Truly, you are a God who hides himself, a God of Israel, the Savior. All of them are put to shame and confounded. The makers of idols go into confusion together.

But Israel is saved by the Lord with everlasting salvation. You shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. For thus, says the Lord, who created the heavens, he is God, who formed the earth and made it.

He established it. He did not create it empty. He formed it to be inhabited. I am the Lord and there is no other. I did not speak in secret in a land of darkness.

I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, seek me in vain. I, the Lord, speak the truth. I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come.

Draw near together, you survivors of the nations. They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols. And keep on praying to a God that cannot save.

[4 : 36] Declare and present your case. Let them take counsel together. Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Savior.

There is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved. All the ends of the earth. For I am God and there is no other.

By myself I have sworn. From my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return. To me every knee shall bow.

Every tongue shall swear allegiance. Only in the Lord it shall be said of me our righteousness righteousness and strength. To him shall come and be ashamed.

All who were incensed against him in the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory. let's pray as we stand.

[5 : 42] I am the Lord and there is no other. Heavenly Father we pray now that as we hear your word proclaimed please would you help us to accept your word as it really is as the word of the one and true and living God and to take it to heart and we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen. Well do sit down and let me add my welcome. Very good to see you. It's a great time of year isn't it? Everyone's back from holidays. We like holidays but it's also lovely when everyone's back again.

So welcome back those who have been away and turn if you will to that reading we've just had from Isaiah chapter 45 on page 732.

Isaiah 45 page 732. Now we're starting a new series of talks today on the sovereignty of God and the aim of this series over these next four Sundays is very simple.

It is that we'd have a big view of God. Hence for those who have seen the program card the title for the series is a very big God. Now unlike other sermon series we're not working through a particular book of the Bible.

[6 : 53] Rather what we're doing each week is looking at what the Bible as a whole has to say about God's sovereignty and the implications of that for the way in which we live our lives.

So each week we're going to have a key passage but then also on the outline there'll be plenty of other verses which you can then look up later. So you'll see there are plenty of verses on the outline today.

You might be glad to know we're not going to look at all of them but they are there so you can then look at them later on on your own. But I want to begin by asking how does the prospect of a sermon series four talks on God's sovereignty make you feel?

Well I guess some of us will be excited because we'll know how important it is. But I guess there'll be others who perhaps respond to the thought of four weeks on the sovereignty of God in the same way that I do when one of my children brings home some maths homework and it's on algebra.

And I think to myself well I'm sure that's really important and I'm glad they are studying it but actually I'm very glad it's their homework rather than my homework and that I don't have to bother too much with it.

[8 : 03] Perhaps there are others perhaps you sense yourself already feeling a bit anxious or even angry. Perhaps questions just tumble over. You know if God is sovereign then why dot dot dot and I guess all of us will have different whys which finish that sentence.

It's interesting in a growth group leaders training meeting a few months ago the growth group leaders said most of them that when the issue of God's sovereignty came up in a Bible study regardless of the sort of aspect of God's sovereignty actually it seemed to cause more angst and confusion than practically anything else.

Well I want us to see and indeed I trust we will see over these next four weeks that actually God's sovereignty is a very good thing. in a nutshell God's sovereignty means that God is in control.

He's in control of everything. He's in control of the big things. He's in control of the small things. If you've ever asked questions such as how can I know I'll keep going as a Christian why should I bother telling others about Jesus?

Why should I bother praying? How do I know my suffering will come to an end and that good will come out of it? How do I know that a bad decision I've made in the past is not going to muck up my whole life?

[9 : 23] How can I be certain God will get me to the new creation? Well the answer to all those questions and countless others is that God is sovereign. Well this first talk we're going to lay the foundations and then some of the implications over the next few weeks.

So first of all you'll see there on the outline God has complete authority. And I've put our working definition of what God's sovereignty means there on the outline.

Let me read it. God exhaustively plans and meticulously carries out his perfect will as he alone knows best regarding all that is in heaven and on earth and he does so without failure or defect accomplishing his purposes in all creation from the smallest details to the grand purposes of his plan for the whole of the created order.

The point is simple God has complete authority. He is king he's lord as we sung earlier he is ruler over everything.

We can see that in our reading from Isaiah chapter 45 have a look at verse 12 I made the earth and created man on it. It was my hands that stretched out the heavens and I commanded all their hosts. [10:48] Genesis chapter 1 at the beginning of the Bible shows us God is the creator who brings the whole of his creation into being at his command. Deuteronomy 10 verse 14 Behold to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens the earth and all that is in it.

Revelation 4 11 which John read earlier Worthy are you our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and by your will they were created.

Why does God have the right to receive glory? Because he is the creator in control of his creation. Complete authority over his creation and therefore he has the right to rule just as a child makes a Lego model.

They've designed it they've created it they know precisely where and why each piece goes and so they have the right to decide what to do with it and how it's to be played woe betide a younger brother or sister who comes along and tries to do things differently.

I put a diagram on the outline which I hope is helpful at this point to show what our world is like. So it is not like the first picture which I guess is how the atheist sees the world.

[12:11] So the atheist looks at the world and can't see God and therefore assumes God doesn't exist. The atheist simply sees the world and sees man on it and whether there's a God or not well we just have to hold up our hands and say we don't know.

But the world is not like that but nor is the world like the second picture where mankind is in the world but ruling the world in partnership with God who is represented there by the crown.

But notice for you it's a small crown and that is because this view of the world has a small view of God. A view which is compartmentalized which sees God as sort of in charge of some things whereas we are in charge of and responsible for other things.

So perhaps a God who is in charge on Sundays in church but a God who isn't in charge Mondays to Fridays at work or a God who perhaps intervenes in times of crisis in his world but doesn't intervene at other times or does intervene at other times and doesn't intervene at times of crisis.

Now our world is best represented by the third picture God is sovereign. He has complete authority and control over everything that happens in our world.

[13:29] Nothing is outside his sovereign rule however big however small. But you say hang on a moment does God rule like that in practice that's all very well to be in theory but what about in practice is God actually in control or is he like the school teacher who in theory they're in control by the fact that they're the class teacher but actually in practice everyone knows they're completely out of control.

Well God has complete authority but secondly over the page on the outline God has total control. First of all his control is totally effective.

In other words he is God and therefore he cannot be thwarted. What God plans to happen will happen. There's a wonderful refrain that runs all the way through Isaiah 45 which is one of the reasons I wanted the whole chapter read but see if you can pick it up verse 5 I am the Lord and there is no other besides me there is no God verse 6 I am the Lord and there is no other verse 14 there is no other no God besides him verse 18 I am the Lord and there is no other over the page verse 21 there is no other God besides me verse 22 I am God and there is no other God cannot be thwarted his control over his universe is completely effective he can't be thwarted by rival gods simply because rival gods don't exist except of course in the imaginations of those who worship them he can't be thwarted by

Satan even in the book of Job and we'll see this in a couple of weeks time even in the book of Job where Satan seems to be given a very long leash indeed yet at the end of the book Job says to God I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted so unlike our human plans which of course often are thwarted aren't they a couple of weeks ago I put some shelves up at home halfway through the project Rachel asked nervously how the project was going she got the tone just right that kind of nervous not too optimistic in terms of how the project was going she

knows from experience that often with these things it does not go well as I get more and more frustrated so much so actually that when I said it was going well she couldn't then conceal her amazement that here was something that was going well and I'm glad to say the shelves are still up two weeks later but you see God is not like that in other words he doesn't have some plans which kind of he can pull off and other plans which just don't really work out or which come to nothing or something else happens and they are thwarted totally effective control but then also totally complete control in other words

God is not like some divine clock maker in the way in which he's made the world so making a beautiful clock winding it up and then just putting it on one side and leaving it just to look after itself and just to keep ticking all the time he hasn't made the world like that he is intricately involved in all the details of our world both big and small so over creation Isaiah 45 verse 7 I form light and create darkness I make well-being and create calamity I am the Lord who does all these things or Psalm 65 verses 9 to 11 he's Lord over the weather you visit the earth and water it you greatly enrich it the river of God is full of water you provide the corn for so you have prepared it in Proverbs 16 33 he is sovereign over what we would call chance the lot is cast into the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord in other words there's nothing which is sort of random in our world nothing that

[17:39] God hasn't purposed which he hasn't decided to accomplish Matthew 10 29 he is Lord even over the most insignificant of his creatures are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father you see God isn't so big so sovereign that he then becomes completely remote so sort of bound up with all the big issues of running the world that he isn't concerned about the smallest of his creatures the tiniest corners of his creation so totally complete control over creation and over history let's look at Isaiah 45 in a bit more detail verse 1 thus says the Lord to his anointed Osiris whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings to open doors before him that gates may not be closed now the central character in

Isaiah 45 is king Cyrus so here we are seven eight hundred years or so before the birth of the Lord Jesus he is the ruler of the mighty Persian empire which is the big superpower of the day and the chapter is looking ahead to the time when God's people will be in exile in Babylon and yet God says he has plans for the city of Jerusalem which now lies in ruins he has plans for the future of his people chapter 44 verse 28 God says of Cyrus he is my shepherd and he shall fulfill all my purpose saying of Jerusalem she shall be built and of the temple your foundation shall be laid now how is that going to happen that Jerusalem the city destroyed how is it going to happen that Jerusalem once again is going to be at the very heart of God's purposes for his world well he will raise up Cyrus verse 1 who will subdue nations before him verse 2

Cyrus who will raid other nations verse 3 who will gain their treasure and their territory and indeed the historians tell us that Cyrus' rise to power was indeed swift and impressive and the reason verse 4 that God is going to do all this through Cyrus is for the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen in other words just as the Lord raised up the mighty Assyrian and Babylonian empires to cast his people into exile to experience the judgment of God so now you see God is saying he is going to raise up Cyrus the mighty Persian empire such that his people are then sent back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city God is completely in control over history but then also over everyone's lives and decisions in verse 1

Cyrus is described as the Lord's anointed what a shock that would have been God's anointed describes the person who is at the very heart of God's purposes and here it's going to be a pagan king who is bent on conquering his enemies and building an all-powerful empire and to the person who kind of raises their arm in objection and says God what are you doing raising up someone like this and using someone like this surely that can't be right this pagan king God robustly defends his freedom to do as he pleases verse 9 woe to him who strives with him who formed him a pot among earthen pots does the clay say to him who forms it what are you making or your work has no handles and yet verse 13 he shall build my city and set my exiles free not for price or reward in other words God won't be forcing

Cyrus to do what otherwise he wouldn't want to do proverbs 21 verse 1 the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the lord he turns it wherever he will next time you wash your hands just enjoy moving your hand under the tap under the flowing water and seeing how actually the slightest movement of your fingers or the slightest movement of your hands will completely alter the course of the water well in the same way you see God changes the course of history he changes the

course of history he is involved in the lives even of kings and rulers and yet Isaiah 45 verse 15 truly you are a God who hides himself at the time as God's people endured exile in Babylon all they would have been aware of as the Persian empire got bigger and bigger all they would have been aware of was that he was another great power on the move with all the sort of disturbing possibilities for the future that involved you know what's going to happen are we going to be safe what's he going to do no doubt they felt themselves to be completely powerless just like sort of driftwood just floating on the sea at the complete mercy of world events around them yet behind them is the hidden hand of God

[23 : 26] God has total control of his world effective control complete control and yet thirdly our decisions are real we make real decisions our decisions have real consequences in other words we're not robots we're not kind of mere play things in the overarching sovereignty of God our choices are real and we are accountable for the decisions and the choices that we make in Isaiah 45 Cyrus the pagan Persian emperor he's not thinking of God's glory all he's thinking of is his own glory as he seeks to make his empire and his name great and yet as he does say God brings the end of the exile just as he intended we'll just think of the life of

Joseph in Genesis turn back to Genesis chapter 50 verse 20 beginning of the Bible Genesis chapter 50 page 52 remember Joseph the proud arrogant brother the one with dreams of greatness the favorite son dressed up in his amazing technicolor dream coat in their jealousy his brothers intended to kill him although in the event greed got the better of them and they sold him into slavery bought by high-ranking Egyptian army officer given responsibility then imprisoned the result of a terrible injustice and then left languishing in prison and yet by the end of his life he has become the prime minister of Egypt and here in Genesis 50 as he meets his brothers this is how Joseph looks back on all the ups and downs of those years he says to his brothers Genesis 50 verse 20 as for you you meant evil against me but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today

God meant it for good he intended it for good notice that Joseph does not say that during a momentary lapse of sovereignty on God's part his brothers sold him into slavery but then God sort of just about had enough of a grip on the situation that he was able to redeem it and eventually he managed to get Joseph into a position where he was prime minister no in that one event Genesis 50 verse 20 in that one event of selling Joseph into slavery there were two parties note both with an intention the brothers to do evil but God to do good in other words God is not like a car driver driving on a motorway with their cruise control on whereby most of the time they can just sit back and all they need to do is steer but actually the car is basically driving itself except for the one or two occasions when something happens and the driver quickly needs to rest back control and do everything themselves God is not like that as he runs his universe he is in control of everything and every detail all the time or just think of the death of the

Lord Jesus turn on to Acts chapter 2 on page 1097 Acts chapter 2 page 1097 here is the end of the first Christian sermon so to speak at Pentecost Acts chapter 2 verse 23 why was Jesus killed well what does the apostle Peter say this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men why was Jesus killed well because of the definite plan of God why was Jesus killed because lawless men planned to kill him Pilate the religious establishment Judas plotted to do so they were responsible but actually God was sovereign it was equally the plan of God God is much bigger than we imagine him to be he is sovereign over every twist and turn of human existence while at the same time we take real decisions and we are responsible for the actions that we take now that is something the Bible insists on without any explanation as to how both those two things can be true simultaneously the temptation of course is to move to one of those two extremes either to effectively deny that God is sovereign or to deny that we are responsible but of course as soon as we do that then we completely distort the overall picture of the Bible as well as distorting God's character C.H.

[28 : 54] Spurgeon the Baptist minister at the Metropolitan Tabernacle put it like this they are two facts that run side by side like parallel lines can you not believe them both and is not the space between them a very convenient place to kneel in adoring and worshipping him whom you cannot understand as someone else put it if God was small enough to completely understand he would not be big enough to completely trust now in the next three weeks we're going to be looking at some of the implications of this and doing so in relation to salvation suffering evil and guidance and decision making but for now I just want us to finish by thinking about the implications for our own lives and

just sort of generally in terms of the way which we look at our lives both past, present and future so first of what are the implications for the past I guess for all of us we'll look back on things in the past and there will be regrets opportunities we didn't take opportunities we did take things you know if only I done that if only I hadn't done that so easy to look back like that if only my family upbringing had been different if only my background had been different some of those things in the past would have been the result of sinful actions at yours or others just like with Joseph but God is sovereign he has mapped out your life just as he intended to map it out your life has gone just as he wants it there are plenty of things as

I look back in my life that in a sense I would wish hadn't happened but you see behind them all is the sovereign hand of God or what about the implications for the present some of us I guess will be struggling with discontentment perhaps disappointing exam results or a job that hasn't turned out the way we hoped or health concerns all sorts of things or perhaps you feel unsettled as you think about your life at the start of the summer the start of the autumn as you think about your life over the next few weeks and months or so in the direction of your life or you look at others and you think well if only I would like so and so again remember Joseph God is not just the God of the good times he's the God of the hard times as well if we're finding things particularly difficult at the moment that is not a sign that God has abandoned us any more than it is a sign that God had abandoned Joseph God is sovereign he has you just where he wants you don't spend your life imagining the grass is greener on the other side of the fence live the life God has given you rather than the life you wish that you had so implications for the past implications for the present implications for the future what do you get anxious about what do you worry about what do you fret about what do you fear for career relationships children money health family all sorts of things but you see it is God's job to secure your future it is not your job to do that the doctrine of God's absolute and complete sovereignty and control over every event should banish all grounds of fear from the hearts of those who belong to him your future is in

God's hands of course you don't know what it is but we can trust the one who is completely sovereign completely in control of everything the big things and the small things so no bitterness about the past no discontentment about the present no anxiety about the future God's sovereignty is a wonderful thing because God is a loving heavenly father he urge to