

SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE REAL GOD

How He Longs for You
to See Him

CHIP INGRAM

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Chapter 5

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

This is what the Lord says –

Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
apart from Me there is no God.

Who then is like Me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare and lay out before Me
what has happened since I established My ancient people,
and what is yet to come –
yes, let him foretell what will come.

Do not tremble, do not be afraid.

Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?
You are My witness. Is there any God besides Me?
No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.

Isaiah 44:6-8

Why do you think your God is better than all the other gods?"
It was an honest, fair question, not argumentative in the least. I was on a plane from Hong Kong to Beijing,

surrounded by people whose language I couldn't speak. My wife and daughter were seated about twenty rows back. I had been surprised by the articulate British voice coming from a thoroughly Chinese-looking person in the seat next to me, and I had begun to talk to her about my relationship with Christ. And this cultured, well-manicured, highly intelligent woman honestly wanted to know: "Why is your God better than the rest?"

As we talked, I found that she had grown up under atheistic communism, spending the first twenty years of her life being taught that there was no god at all. She was one of the elites, among that 1 or 2 percent – out of a billion or so Chinese – who scored high enough on academic tests to get the finest education her country offered. After graduate school in London, she began working in England for a multinational corporation and was now back in China on business. Out from under communism, she had been reading for the last ten years about various religions and beliefs. When it came to various religions' views of God, she was virtually a clean slate.

What do you tell someone who knows hardly anything about your God? She had a legitimate question, and I gave it my best shot. For the next two hours, I shared passages of Scripture and research from archaeology, philosophy, and comparative religions to help her understand the absolute uniqueness and character of the God of the Bible. I told her everything I could think of to explain why the God of Christianity is in fact Lord of lords, King of kings, and Creator of the universe.

As this woman had already discovered, we live in a pluralistic culture that tells us to be tolerant of all concepts of truth. I believe that tolerance is a very good thing, but it has been misapplied. As it is defined in the dictionary, tolerance has to do with accepting other people's race,

background, culture, and other externals, making sure that these things will not be a deterrent as we relate to them. That's a very important thing to emphasize in our society. But tolerance has taken on a philosophical meaning in recent years; it has evolved to mean that no idea or view is any more true or valid than another.

Although this concept carries a certain air of intellectual sophistication and openness, think of how it might apply to other areas of life. What if, for example, you had a life-threatening infection and you went to a doctor for help. Suppose the doctor prescribed penicillin, but one of the nurses suggested several alternatives. How would you feel if the nurse advised the doctor to be open to all the options? After all, Coumadin, Cytoxan, and morphine are all very effective drugs. Isn't it intolerant of the doctor to prescribe one drug over the other? Maybe so, but you wouldn't want him to be indiscriminate when one drug will save your life and the others will not, would you?

"I'd like a drink of water with two parts hydrogen and two parts oxygen, please."

"Sorry, that's hydrogen peroxide – not exactly a thirst quencher."

"Okay, how about one with just two parts hydrogen."

"Well, don't sit near someone smoking."

"Why?"

"You'd be inhaling some highly flammable gas. Ever heard of the Hindenburg?"

"How about three parts hydrogen and one part nitrogen, would that soothe my parched throat?"

“No problem.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, if you like ammonia.”

Water is defined as two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen.

Regardless of personal preferences, scientific credentials, alternative constructs, distaste, or even disdain, you can't change the building blocks of water. Once altered, you have a very different substance.

In our culture's laboratory of tolerance, people want to mix and match their ideas about God and hope it turns out to be God. For many, the idea of a sovereign or all-powerful God cannot be fused with a God who seems to allow free rein for evil. Unfortunately, regardless of personal preferences, scientific credentials, alternative constructs, distaste, or even disdain, you can't change the building blocks of God. Once altered, he ceases to be God.

Isn't that narrow and bigoted? We know, of course, that such a view would be disastrous. When it comes to objective reality, being tolerant doesn't cut it. Some things simply aren't relative.

But, like many in our own country, that's the kind of culture my Chinese acquaintance was living in. She had been told that all truths are equal and valid. And I found myself telling her a story about a God who had saved my life and about a God-man named Jesus who made some really outrageous claims. She had every right to ask me: “How do you know?”

I think a lot of people are asking the same question she asked me. At the time, I hoped and prayed that I gave her some pretty solid answers. But if I had it to do over again, I might present a more thought-out case for the God who is sovereign.

Why Worship This God?

If I had another opportunity to answer this woman, who was so open and sensitive, I would say this: The reason I believe in the God of the Bible and worship Him is because He is *before* all things, He *created* all things, He *upholds* all things, He is *above* all things, He *knows* all things, He *accomplishes* all things, He *rules over* all things, and He is *in control* of all things. That's the reason I believe Him and have given my entire life to Him in faith and in trust that He is superior to all the other truth-claims in the world. He is not just another “-ism” out there to be considered. He is infinite and eternal, over all and worthy above all. I worship Him because He is *sovereign*.

On the salad bar of the world's religions, we haven't simply come up with a nice little system that takes a little bit from here and a little from there. Our God is not just one option among many. We worship a God who has made outrageous, ridiculous, exclusive, “narrow” claims about Himself. He insists that He, and He alone, is to be worshiped.

Think about what God says of Himself. (Scripture references have been added for further study, and I'd recommend sitting down with a cup of coffee sometime and going through these one by one.)

- He is **before** all things; all things hold together in Him. He was there before the mountains were born, He brought forth the earth, He is the Alpha and Omega, and He alone is immortal (Ps. 90:2; Col. 1:17; 1 Tim. 6:16; Rev. 1:8).
- He **created** all things, both in heaven and on earth, both visible and invisible (Gen. 1:1, John 1:3; Col. 1:16).
- He **upholds** all things, sustaining everything, holding it together by His Word (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3).

- He is **above** all things, specifically so that people in China, the US, South America, and everywhere, may know Him (Isa. 45:5-12; Eph. 4:6).
- He **knows** all things. He isn't a limited God. God knows everything completely before it happens (Ps. 139:4; Isa. 46:10)
- He **can do** all things. Nothing is too difficult for Him! Nothing – not anything – is impossible with Him (Jer. 32:27; Luke 1:37).
- He **accomplishes** all things. He orchestrates and determines what He is going to do in your life, in my life, in the president's life, in war-torn countries with rebellious rulers – everywhere! Whatever He plans in this world and for this universe, He does (Isa. 14:24; 46:10; Eph. 1:11).
- He **rules over** all things. This is what sovereignty is. All strength and power are in His hands (1 Chron. 29:11-12; Dan. 4:34-35).
- He is **in control** of all things. Whenever the economy goes sour, or whenever earthly kings rage out of control, God is in control. When Satan wants to mess with your life, he has to ask God's permission (Job 2:3-6; Rom. 8:28).

If you want specific examples of what exactly is under God's control, take a look at the following verses:

- earthly kings (Prov. 21:1; Rev. 19:16)
- human events (Ps. 33:9-11; Dan. 2)

- good angels (Col. 1:15-16; Rev. 4:8)
- Satan and fallen angels (Job 1:6; Eph. 1:21; Phil. 2:10)
- human decisions (Acts 2:23; 13:48; Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:11)

God makes numerous claims about Himself in the Bible that many other religious systems don't even attempt to rival. When He claims His sovereignty, He is pointing to Himself as the ultimate source of all power, authority, and everything that exists.

What Does That Mean?

I don't know about you, but the first time I heard the word *sovereign*, it didn't register with me. I was a new Christian in a Bible study in college, and some tragic news had come to us about a member in our group. One girl in the Bible study said, "I know it's a terrible situation, but I know God is sovereign." And being the smart, intelligent, spiritual guy that I was, I thought to myself, *What in the world does that mean?* I had never heard the phrase "God is sovereign" in my life. So later I went to a close friend and asked him to explain it to me.

This may surprise you, but one of the greatest tools for Bible study is the dictionary. Webster's defines sovereignty like this:

sovereign-adj. 1: above or superior to all others; chief; greatest; supreme 2: supreme in power, rank, or authority 3: of or holding the position of ruler; royal; reigning 4: independent of all others 5: excellent; outstanding **-n.** 1: a person who possesses sovereign authority or power; specifically, a monarch or ruler

If someone is sovereign, he's the boss. He calls the shots and has the authority. What he says goes. He's "the king." God claims to be the King, not just of this planet, but of the entire universe. He is outside of time. He is infinite. He had no beginning, he has no end. He is the ruler of everything.

When I think of sovereignty, the phrase I like best is that "God is in control." That's such a comfort. When a loved one lies in a hospital bed, God is in control. When we think of our most difficult times with a child, God is in control. When a close friend is in ICU, God is in control. When the economy – national or personal – is on a slide, God is in control. Nothing will enter your life that God does not either decree or allow. And nothing will ever enter your life that, if you are willing to trust in Him, He cannot work out for your good. That's what it means to be sovereign.

Because God is sovereign, He is without equal: the King of kings, the Lord of lords, without limitation in any way. He is the only *absolutely free* being in the universe. I love A. W. Tozer's explanation of sovereignty in his book *The Knowledge of the Holy*:

Quick Definitions

God's sovereignty is the attribute by which He rules His entire creation, and *to be sovereign God must be all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely free*. The reasons are these:

Were there even one datum of knowledge, however small, unknown to God, His rule would break down at that point. To be Lord over all creation, He must possess all knowledge. And were God lacking one infinitesimal modicum of power, that lack would end His reign and undo His kingdom; that one stray atom of power would belong to someone else and God would be a limited ruler and hence not sovereign.

Furthermore, His sovereignty requires that He be absolutely free, which means simply that He must be free to do whatever He wills to do anywhere at any time to carry out His eternal purpose in every single detail without interference. Were He less than free, He must be less than sovereign.¹

When you bow your head to pray – when you’re in a jam and you need to ask God for something –are you aware of whom you’re talking to? The one to whom you pray has power over the entire universe, over every single atom, and yet He is infinitely loving and He cares about you. *That’s* who you’re talking to. That’s why we worship Him.

Can you imagine what my Chinese friend might think of this idea? It was an utterly foreign concept to her. And behind her polite dialogue and earnest questions, I could hear her heart saying, “I know *you* believe what you just told me, but I’m going to need more evidence that you’ve given me if *I’m* going to believe.” As our conversation progressed at 33,000 feet, I could hear in her voice both the longing to know and the fear of making a mistake and believing the wrong thing. She wanted to let go of her childhood world without God, but she wasn’t sure which of the gods being offered to her was the best or true alternative. She understood the implications of belief – it would have to lead to obedience and worship. As I looked into her eyes, I could almost hear her say, “If what you’re saying to me is true, that there is someone who loves me and has the answer to all my problems, I want to get to know Him. But I need more evidence. How has the God of the Bible, if He exists, revealed His sovereignty?”

How Has God Revealed His Sovereignty?

Intellectually, my friend didn’t have a problem with the sovereignty of God. I mean, who wants to believe in a helpless, impotent god who

may care but can't do anything to help us because he isn't in charge? But emotionally and spiritually, she wanted to know God's sovereign credentials. Both of us had been required to show our ID in the airport before boarding the plane. She was asking me if the God of the Bible had any ID she could look at.

The Bible is God's traveling papers, His documents that demonstrate His sovereignty. There is a lifetime of information in those pages that will deepen your understanding of who God is, but let me point out five key areas in which God has revealed His sovereignty.

Through His Titles

First, God has revealed His sovereignty through His titles. The world is full of rival religious systems and ideas, but step back for a moment and think about the way other religions present their gods. On one extreme, impersonal mechanisms and forces are in charge, using methods like reincarnation to recycle us until we no longer exist. On the other extreme, there are the personal gods of "the religious salad bar" that end up as a slightly larger version of the believer, easily altered by that believer if the god in question doesn't satisfy.

Contrast this with the bold, personal, complex claims of the God of the Bible. These claims are so outlandish that they are either complete lies or essential truths for everyone to grasp. God says about Himself:

- I am sovereign.
- I am the Most High.
- I am the Alpha and the Omega.

- I am the King of kings and the Lord of lords.
- I am who I am, the eternal, self-existent one.
- I will be addressed in reverence because of My own greatness.

These are unequivocal claims. They set Him apart and do not allow us to see Him as just one of many gods.

Through His Promises

The second way God reveals His sovereignty is through His promises. Anyone can make promises; not everyone can keep them. God's promises, as comprehensive and ultimate as they are, can only be kept if He is, in fact, sovereign. Consider the following two promises, for example.

The first is the promise we count on in my family whenever there's a crisis. We have quoted it often. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). That's quite a promise! Amazingly, God can somehow take all the events, all the situations, all the people, the doctors, the medicines, the prayers, the relationships – everything involved in whatever difficult situation we're in – and work it together for the good of those who trust Him. He could never stand behind that promise unless He knew *everything*. Unless He had unlimited power, was all-wise, had created everyone, and could dictate what happens down to every atom and molecule. You simply cannot work all things for good unless you are the sovereign King of the universe. But God makes that promise, and millions throughout history have testified to its truth. It's a testable claim, and God has proven His ability to back it up time and time again.

The second promise is found in Philippians 2:9-11. There will come a day when every knee of those who are seen (us) and those who are unseen (angels) will, at the name of Jesus, bow before him, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. He makes that promise. How in the world can He make a ridiculous promise that every tongue will confess and every knee bow, unless He holds all power over history, both its visible and invisible aspects? The very promise is a claim to be sovereignly guarding and directing history towards His own ends.

Through History

Third, God makes His sovereignty known through “His story” – history. As you open the pages of Scripture, you see the story of a nation called Israel. Early in the pages of Genesis, God reveals that history – not just of Israel or the world, but yours personally – is under His sovereign control. For an amazing glimpse of how God works, find a quiet corner and read Genesis 37-50. More than 25 percent of the first book of the Bible is dedicated to the story of one man who gets raw deal after raw deal, but finds that the Lord was sovereignly orchestrating even the most painful and unfair circumstances in his life for his good and to fulfill God’s purposes.

God let Joseph suffer difficulty after difficulty, including being sold into slavery, put into prison, betrayed, and forgotten. But God moved Joseph into a unique position through those difficulties – into Egypt by the treachery of his brothers and into prison by the treachery of Potiphar’s wife – so that Joseph could interpret Pharaoh’s dreams and be elevated to the second highest position in the land. Why? Because years and years earlier, God had made a promise to Abraham. He said He would make Abraham’s descendants as numerous as the sand of the sea and the stars of the sky. He would multiply the descendants of a one-hundred-year-old

nomad who had a ninety-year-old wife. (You'd better be sovereign if you make a promise like that.) Abraham had a son, as promised, and Genesis 37 picks up with Joseph when we're much further down the road of this family's history.

When his family was about to die in Canaan because of a famine, God provided. God had already used all the evil and repeated injustices of others to place Joseph in a strategic position in Egypt so that the seventy family members would come down and find food and life. Through God's sovereign plan in Joseph's life, Egypt became this family's incubator until they had multiplied to two or three million people in fulfillment of God's promise.

After Joseph's father died, the brothers were very concerned – with good reason, considering their treachery – that Joseph was now going to kill them. But in Genesis 50:20 he turned to his brothers and gave us the classic biblical testimony to God's sovereignty over a personal and national history: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." What did Joseph believe?

That God was sovereign. Even when he was sold, put into prison, betrayed and forgotten, God was in control.

God wants you to know that he is sovereign in your history. When your ex-spouse says something that bothers you, when your kids do something that troubles you, when there's a problem at work, or when the market goes down, there is a God who is in total control. He is all-

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

knowing, all-wise, generously good, infinite in His love. He's the King, and you're His child.

God not only reveals His sovereignty in personal history, He also reveals it macroscopically – over all of history. Great examples of that are found in chapters 2 and 7 of Daniel and also in the book of Revelation. There you will see God revealing His sovereignty in history by telling His prophets the kingdoms that will come. He tells Daniel specifically, "I want you to know that Babylon is going to fall, and after that the Medo-Persians are going to come in, and after that the Greeks will take over, and after that Rome will take over, and by the way, I want to give you a few details. Alexander the Great will take over, and when he dies there will be four kingdoms." God lays out the next four dynasties and kingdoms before they happen. He's in charge of history. God has never sat around biting His nails, wondering what Attila the Hun, Pol Pot, Hitler, or Osama Bin Laden was going to do. He does not sit on the edge of His seat unsure of what Kim Jong-un, ISIS, or home-grown terrorists are going to do. And you don't have to wonder either. Sovereignty doesn't mean that we should choose to be ignorant or passive about cruel injustices in the world, but it does mean that we can have a sense of peace and trust because the world is not spinning out of God's control.

Through Fulfilled Prophecy

One of the most amazing testimonies to God's sovereignty is his ability to tell the future 100 percent of the time with 100 percent accuracy. Look at Isaiah 44:6-8

This is what the LORD says –

Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:

I am the first and I am the last;
apart from me there is no God.

Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare and lay out before me
what has happened since I established my ancient people,
and what is yet to come –
yes, let him foretell what will come.

Do not tremble, do not be afraid.

Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?

You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?

No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.

Did you notice the top of God's business card? "King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty." And then He proves it by telling the future. He is not an alternative religion that you might subjectively want to choose over Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormonism. He lays down a challenge that no one can rival: "Let him foretell what will come...Did I not proclaim this and foretell it?"

A third of the Bible is prophetic. Several hundred prophecies were fulfilled in Christ. God wants you to know that you don't have to put your brains on the shelf to believe the reliability of Scripture; you can know objectively that whatever He has said He has also fulfilled. Jesus fulfilled hundreds of specific prophecies regarding the day He was born, the place He was born, who His mother was and what kind of woman she would be, and more – all to demonstrate and prove that He is the sovereign King. And there's another set of promises you need to remember about His return. He will bring history to a close. Instead of being the suffering servant who died in your place on a cross, He will then be the ruling warrior on a white horse, and He will bring about justice. He wants His people living in anticipation of the day of His return.

There are plenty of areas in which to study the power of biblical prophecy, but consider this one: can you name any people group in all of history, that, after being pushed out of its land, has kept its identity? Think that through. We talk about European Jews, American Jews, and Arab Jews. How have they kept this identity? It was foretold, and God had fulfilled his promises. God said that after His people had been spread abroad for almost two thousand years, He would bring them back into their land again; and in 1948, Israel became a nation. Thousands of years after God's prophets spoke about the return of Israel to its Promised Land, where are the eyes of the world? They are on that tiny strip of land. The prophetic evidence is amazing.

Through Jesus Christ, the Messiah

As you might expect, God's clearest demonstration of His sovereignty comes wrapped up in His Son, Jesus. Consider the phrase in Galatians 4:4, for example – that Jesus came “in the fullness of time.” When Jesus was born, there was a unique set of conditions that the sovereign God of history had brought about. Greek had become a “universal” language. Travel and communications were at an all-time high. The *Pax Romana*. The Roman-enforced peace, allowed for rapid evangelism. Synagogues had been dispersed all over the Roman Empire so that when the church was birthed it would have strategic centers of operation.

Jesus clearly identified Himself as the sovereign King (Matt. 28:18; Rev. 19:16). Even in His death, no one killed Him against His will. We can't get mad at the Romans or the Jews; according to Jesus, no one took His life from Him. He laid it down on His own initiative (John 10:18). He hung on

that cross not by nails but by His choice because you matter and He loves you.

Then there's the resurrection. That's what cuts through everything else in the world of religious claims. He died and then He rose from the grave. He remained on earth for forty days after His resurrection. Jesus didn't just tell one eyewitness who then claimed a vision and asked everyone to buy into His beliefs. There were five hundred eyewitnesses who saw Him, touched Him, and heard Him speak. At least a hundred and twenty watched Him ascend into the clouds. The resurrection is not a nice story that is optional for Christians; it is a historical fact that demonstrates the authority of Jesus. Christ is the crowning glory of God's revelation of His sovereignty.²

If I could have that conversation again with my Chinese friend, I would have explained some things differently. If she could read the last several pages written here, I think she would eagerly do some personal research and actually look up the passages that give evidence for God's sovereignty. My experience is that, unlike people who have grown up with Christianity and often accept the evidence at face value, those who come with an open mind and actually search the Scripture for themselves discover that God speaks to them personally and powerfully. Conviction comes when you have a hunger in your heart and a desire to dig into God's Word. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and does something in you that births faith.

If you will take the time to examine God's evidence, He will birth that faith in you. God will reveal that He is far bigger, more powerful, more loving, and more in control than you ever imagined. As you begin to see God as He longs for you to see Him, your prayers will change and your faith will be transformed. You will experience peace like never before.

God's Sovereignty Raises Two Questions

Anyone who thinks about God's sovereignty long enough will face two pretty big questions. The first is this: If God is really in control and above all things, sovereign over all of history's circumstances, why does He allow evil, pain, and suffering? If He can see all the unspeakable things people are doing to each other, and if He can do something about it, why doesn't He? Why didn't He stop the world's suffering before it began?

This is a huge question that enormous amounts of literature have addressed throughout the centuries. There's simply no way to discuss such a deep issue in such a short space in a way that is fully satisfying. Those who want to explore the issue further may want to check out a good book on the issue of evil, such as C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*, for one example. But at the risk of oversimplifying, let me give what I think in a nutshell is the gist of what the Bible says on the subject.

Why didn't God prevent suffering? Because He created us in His image. The high price tag for a loving relationship among people is freedom. Human freedom means we have the willful opportunity to say yes and to love God, but we also have the willful opportunity to say no and to do what is wrong. God thought it was so important to maintain our dignity that He gave us the opportunity to freely love or reject Him, knowing that our freedom would result in pain. But He allowed it, knowing before the foundation of the earth that the only remedy for that pain would be Jesus – He would come and die to pay the price that restores that relationship.

The second question regarding God's sovereignty is about human responsibility. If God is sovereign over all people and events in history, doesn't that make a sham of human responsibility? Is God a cosmic

puppeteer who lets us think we're making decisions on our own? Are all our decisions predetermined, such that He is pulling the strings and making our choices an illusion?

Of course not. The Bible clearly teaches that God is sovereign, but we make decisions of our own free will. We will be rewarded, held accountable, and judged for those decisions. But there's a balance. We don't understand exactly how that works, and people who try to explain it generally fall into one of two major Christian camps – Calvinism or Arminianism (named after two sixteenth-century figures of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin of France and Jacobus Arminius of Holland). Within those camps, many people take their explanations further than Calvin or Arminius would have taken them. Without going into a lesson on these two important figures of church history, I'll simply say that there are extreme views within those two camps that are unbiblical. Some extreme forms of Calvinism, through will-intentioned, guard God's sovereignty so protectively that it virtually eliminates human responsibility. No one who holds this belief would state it that way, but that's how it plays out. It makes God a cosmic puppeteer and denies that we have any real choices. That's unbiblical. At the other end of the spectrum are extreme forms of Arminianism. Also out of good intention, these attempt to guard free will and human responsibility so protectively that it creates a God who is up in heaven biting His nails, hoping everything will work out, and waiting for our decision so He can figure out what to do. Both extremes violate Scripture.

Scripture teaches a tension between the two. God is absolutely sovereign. No plan of His can be thwarted, and He is in control of all people, events, and history. But the Scripture also teaches that we are free, moral agents who make decisions, and those decisions can impact

things for eternity. How those two truths go together is a mystery. (for interested readers, *Chosen But Free* by Norman Geisler deals with the issue in a balanced and biblical way.) Either extreme will land you in a theological ditch. But what amazes me is that the apostle Paul, who wrote so much about God's sovereignty, didn't seem to have a problem with this balance. In Philippians 1, when he was thinking he might die, Paul said he was certain that his deliverance would occur because of the church's prayers (human responsibility) and because of the provision of the Spirit in Christ Jesus (sovereignty). In chapter 2, he tells them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (human responsibility) because it is God who is working in them both to will and to desire his good pleasure (sovereignty). Like two telephone poles that hold their wires in tensions, at one end you are responsible, and at the other, God is sovereign. One brings great comfort, the other great responsibility.

How Do We Respond to a Sovereign God?

Bow before the King of the universe.

Think of the implications. If there is a sovereign King over all the universe, the first response would be to bow before Him. The day will come when every tongue will confess Him and every knee will bow in submission and surrender. For those who trust in Christ while alive on this planet, it will be a joyful day of awesome celebration. And it will be a day of horror for those who have stiff-armed God and said, either passively or with active rebellion, "I'll be the king of my life, I'll call the shots." Why? Because He's the sovereign King who has provided a way, and a person who has willfully chosen to reject that way has rejected Him. Out of respect for our

dignity, the consequences for anyone who says “I want my way” will be God’s consent: “You can have it.”

What’s the practical application? Absolute surrender of all that you are and all that you have. That has profound implications for both the unbeliever and the believer. For the unbeliever, it means acknowledging all your sin, self-will, pride, and inability to know and love God on your own terms. It means giving your life over to Christ and following Him as Lord.

For the believer, absolute surrender means that what you once thought of as *your* time, *your* money, *your* talents, *your* career, *your* sexuality, and *your* interests, is all His. It means that you turn your ideas and philosophies, your plans and your future, your dreams and your abilities over to him. It means you are no longer yours. You’ve been bought by the One who made you.

Is there anything in your life that you have not submitted to the sovereign Lord? Does He hold the same place in your heart that He holds in heaven and in the universe – and that He’ll hold forever? Is there any barrier between you and the King? Have you surrendered your time? Your future? Your relationships? Your money? Your will? What God wants from you is a living sacrifice.

Remember the old movies, when the king would come by and the serfs would bow down in honor? Why would they do that? Because they knew that the king had the power to take their life, if he chose to. They dared not offend him. But we’re not talking about a human; we’re talking about the sovereign Lord, the King of glory. The wisest, most intelligent move you can ever make is to surrender all that you are and all that you have to the One who loves you like no one else can ever love you and who is in control.

Believe all that comes into your life is either allowed or decreed by a good God who will use it for your benefit.

The second appropriate response to a sovereign God is to believe. Think about what His sovereignty means for your circumstances: all that comes into your life is either allowed or decreed by a good God who will use it for your benefit. The present conflict within your marriage? God will work it for good. The present trials with your children? God will work them for good. The present situation with the stock market, your retirement, your emotional pain and hurt, your depression? Believe that everything that has entered your life – any circumstance or relationship – has been divinely allowed or decreed by Him to work it out for your good. And the good that He wants more than your circumstance or your happiness is that you be conformed to the image of His Son. All those things you're looking for – love and joy and peace and patience – these are the fruit of the Spirit working in and through you in the midst of your life's circumstances. His sovereignty ensures it.

Oswald Chambers turned God's sovereignty into a foundational principle: *Absolutely refuse to worry.* Your retirement is going down the drain? Keep working, but refuse to worry. You've been working on your marriage and are not making any progress? Pray intensely, but refuse to worry. Someone is lying in ICU? Refuse to worry. I've seen devastating circumstances, some of the worst situations imaginable, cause supernatural breakthroughs in relationships and open up opportunities for people to share Christ with power and effectiveness. God is doing things that you don't understand, things that are deeper and better and more wonderful than you imagined, but you must believe! Refuse to worry. You can stop trying to manipulate situations and trying to figure out how to make them work out because you know who is in control. You can rest in His sovereign goodness.

***Behold in awe the mystery and majesty of His kind,
compassionate, just, and sovereign rule over all that is
or will ever be.***

The third application is to behold in awe the mystery and majesty of His sovereign rule. We don't do this very often. We're more likely to say, "I don't understand it; I can't figure it out." But God's sovereignty should prompt us to worship.

I'm always interested when people argue about God's sovereignty and treat each other like heretics because another Christian doesn't believe exactly the same thing about it. Paul, whom the Spirit of God inspired to pen chapters 9-11 of Romans, gets to the end of this great passage of looking at God's sovereignty, and what does he do? Does he declare his theological position and tell everyone in the church that they need to agree with him? No, he sees the mystery of God's sovereignty and says:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond
tracking out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been His counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?"
For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever! Amen (Rom. 11:33-36)

He worshiped. He broke out in praise. A proper understanding of God's sovereignty doesn't bring about arguments. It brings about awe and wonder and the bowing of the heart that says, "I'm a small, finite little person. I can't pull it all together, and I hurt in a fallen world. But I worship

the Creator, the sovereign King, who has made me the object of His affection.”

I think back to my acquaintance on that airplane from Hong Kong to Beijing. I can still see her business suit, her fine jewelry, and her carefully tended appearance. I can still hear her fluent English, her intelligent comments, and the sincerity in her voice. And I can still hear her question: “Why do you think your God is better than all the other religions out there?” It’s a fair question, and I wish I could go back again and answer it in a way that truly reflects the mountains of evidence that God has given us throughout history and through His Word: He is before all and above all, infinite and wise, all-knowing and all-powerful. He is sovereign.

My Experience with the Sovereignty of God

In 1990, I made one of the biggest lordship decisions of my life. I had been a pastor in rural Texas outside of Dallas for the previous eight years, and I knew God was up to something new in our future. I prayed He would send us east, closer to family and support, as one of my teenage sons was going through the beginning of a rebellious streak.

God’s call came, and it was west, not east. We moved an additional two thousand miles from all our family. Theresa and all four kids were crying as we pulled out in our van for the long drive to our new life. They didn’t stop crying until Amarillo. We were obeying the clear orders of the King, but emotionally it felt terrible. I was the family leader taking everyone away from friends, family, and all that was familiar. How could a good God let obedience to His will feel so terrible? The adjustments were hard, the new church presented challenges I’d never faced, and my rebellious son became more rebellious. Where was this loving, good, and sovereign God now? I felt so alone, so confused, and often deeply discouraged.

Fast-forward twenty years. The new church and its challenges developed skills, character, and a ministry beyond my wildest dreams. The adversity brought a deeper unity into our family and took our marriage to a whole new level. The rebellious son did a “one-eighty” and had opportunities in music that were nonexistent in Texas. God built a family, grew a church, launched a radio ministry, and turned a rebellious son into a Christian songwriter and worship leader for God’s people. What felt like disaster, and what seemed so unfair, was the good hand of a sovereign God working out His highest and best purposes for my life and my family?

So how about you? What are you going through that feels hard, unfair, depressing, or impossible? What would it look like to stop fighting, stop resisting, stop complaining, and start trusting your sovereign heavenly Father?

Live It Out – B.I.O.

“Bio” is a word that is synonymous with “life.” Found in those three simple letters, B.I.O. is the key to helping you become the person God wants you to be.

- B** *Come BEFORE God daily.* Meet with Him personally through His Word and prayer to enjoy His presence, receive His direction, and follow His will.
- I** *Do Life IN COMMUNITY weekly.* Structure your week to personally connect in safe relationships that provide love, support, transparency, challenge, and accountability.
- O** *ON MISSION 24/7.* Cultivate a mindset to “live out” Jesus’ love for others through acts of sacrifice and service at home, work, play, and church.

Come BEFORE God

- Write the following definition on a notecard, your smartphone, or tablet and place it where you will read it when you get up in the morning and when you go to bed. Don't try to memorize it. Simply read it in a spirit of prayer and let the reality of God's sovereignty gently pour over your soul.

The sovereignty of God is that which separates the God of the Bible from all other religious, truth claims, or philosophies.

When we say God is sovereign, we declare that by virtue of his creatorship over all life and reality, his all-knowing, all-powerful, and benevolent rule, that he is in face the Lord of all lords, King of kings, and in absolute control of time and eternity. Nothing will come into my life today that he did not either allow or decree for my ultimate good.

- Near the definition, write Romans 8:28 and meditate on that amazing promise. Then write Genesis 50:20 in the same note as a reminder that your present circumstances and difficulties don't tell the whole story. Each time you read it, begin by asking, "What good thing has God released into my life today?"

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. (Gen. 50:20 NASB)

- Join me in making the following prayer your own for the next seven days:

O Sovereign Lord, King of all creation, Lord of all that is visible and invisible for all time and eternity, grant that I might this day

- *allow You to hold the same place in my heart that You hold in all the universe. Teach me to submit to Your wise counsel and command even as the angels of heaven do so with joy and delight.*
- *so fully believe that You are both good and sovereign that I would absolutely refuse to worry, knowing You are working all things for my good today – even those things I don't understand and that seem so unfair.*

O Sovereign Lord, thank you for Jesus, who by His willful death and supernatural resurrection has defeated death, sin, and Satan, both now and forever. I confess you, Lord Jesus, as my King, my God, and my faithful Friend and Savior! Amen.

- What present circumstance in your life is causing you anxiety and worry? Are you trying to manipulate and control the situation? In what ways?
- Give your worry to the King of the Universe and surrender to Him. Ask God, who is good, to help you believe that He has allowed this circumstance and He will use it for your ultimate good.

Do Life IN Community

- Read Colossians 1:16-18. “For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or power or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.”
- What do we learn about the supremacy and sovereignty of Christ in this passage?
- Surrender to Christ is one of the ways we respond to Christ’s sovereignty. What do you need to ask to help you in your journey to live a life of total surrender? Get together with a friend and ask them for help, and then spend time praying together.

Be ON Mission

- Is there anything that God is calling you to do that requires you to surrender?
- Spend some time praying and reflecting on that question. Then, obey whatever God reveals to you.

NOTES

1. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 108, emphasis added.
2. If you want to examine God's remarkable revelation through Christ more thoroughly, spend some time pondering these passages: on His birth – Galatians 4:4; Matthew 2:3-6; on His prophecy-fulfilling life – Matthew 4:14; 12:15-21; on His power over the natural order – Matthew 8:23-27; 9:1-26; 14:15-21; on His teaching – John 8:48-58; on His death and resurrection – John 10:17-18; on His ascension and reign – Acts 1:9-11; Revelation 19:11-21.

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THERE IS A DEEP SENSE OF UNEASE IN OUR RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD. We all know something has been lost but don't know why or where it all leads. Popular culture says it's all about *me*—that the end justifies the means, that love means self-satisfaction, that status and appearance are what count. And this ultimately self-destructive perspective has thoroughly infiltrated the church as confusion replaces conviction.

OUR DISTORTED VIEW OF GOD IS AT THE ROOT OF ALL OF OUR PROBLEMS.

We've created a god in our minds who only faintly resembles the God of Scripture. These mental idols comfort our emotions, but they are powerless to deliver us from evil or transform our lives. The way back, the path of hope, starts with knowing God for who He really is.

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CHIP INGRAM is the senior pastor of Venture Christian Church in Los Gatos, California, and teaching pastor and CEO of Living on the Edge, an international teaching and discipleship ministry. A pastor for over thirty years, Chip has a unique ability to communicate truth and challenge people to live out their faith. Chip is the author of many books, including *Culture Shock*, *The Real Heaven*, *The Invisible War*, and *Love, Sex, and Lasting Relationships*. Chip and his wife, Theresa, have four grown children and nine grandchildren and live in California.