

*Coincidence?*  
*Series: Reformed School*  
*Daniel 4:34-37, Psalm 135:3-14, Eph. 1:3-12*  
*November 22, 2009*

We finish up our series on the Reformed faith today with what is perhaps the most fundamental and central principle of the Reformed tradition. And already I know what you may be thinking. I got the question at CLASS 101, our membership class, last Sunday. You know the question I mean? The one about the ‘P’ word? Not Presbyterian, that *other* ‘P’ word. Predestination. Many people think that the central belief of Presbyterians is predestination. And most people don’t like the idea of predestination, though it must also be said that most people do not really *understand* the doctrine of predestination. In any case, let me be clear: Predestination is *not* the central doctrine of the Presbyterian church. Predestination is really a subtopic of the larger doctrine which really *is* central to what Christians in the Reformed tradition like us believe. And that’s what I want to speak with you about today. I want to speak with you about the sovereignty of God.

‘Sovereignty’ means very simply, ‘rule.’ A sovereign is a monarch, a ruler, a king or queen. To be sovereign is to have supreme rank or authority. So to say that God is sovereign is to say that God is King, so God gets to exercise supreme authority. God’s sovereignty is His exercise of rule as king over His creation. This is in a real sense the key to all Presbyterian thought about God. And we get this—as we get all major doctrines—from the Bible.

In our preparation Scripture from Daniel 4:35: He [that is, God] does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: “What have you done?” And again, in Psalm 135:6: “The LORD does whatever pleases Him, in the heavens and on the earth...” To say that God is sovereign, *the* Sovereign, the King—affirms three key things:

God’s ownership: The Bible says and we believe that all things and people were created by God and belong to God. That means you and all you own and all you can see and touch belongs to God, because He made it. Your flat screen TV does not really belong to you. God owns it. Your body may seem to be yours, but in reality it belongs to God. So you are not free to do whatever you want with your flat screen TV or with your body. Because they’re not yours. They’re God’s.

God’s authority: The Bible says and we believe that God has an absolute right to impose His will on all His creatures. Just like a mother has an absolute right to impose her will regarding her child’s use of the internet, so God has an absolute right to impose His will on us. And He is under no obligation, really, to explain Himself to us.

And God’s control: The Bible says and we believe that God is in control of everything. Yes, *everything*. Psalm 135:7.

Another word for sovereignty is providence. The Westminster Confession of Faith, one of the statements of faith in our Book of Confessions, describes God’s providence this way: “God, the

great Creator of all things, does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence...”<sup>1</sup> “*All* creatures, actions, and things are directed and governed by God.” You know, I looked up that word ‘all’.... In Matt. 10:29-30, Jesus says, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” God is in control of everything: even the birds. And if you don’t have what you consider to be the right number of hairs on your head, that’s God, too.

Have you ever heard anybody say this: “Everything happens for a reason”? People say that all the time. And it is true. But let me be clear: The reason that things happen they way they do is because God wills it. There are no coincidences. God is sovereign, God is in control, even over things that *seem to us* to be coincidence, seem to us to happen randomly. Prov. 16:33, NLT: “We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall.” There are no coincidences, only God-incidences. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God insists that *everything* that happens does so because God wills it to happen, wills it to happen *before* it happens, wills it to happen *in the way* that it happens. In Isaiah 46:9, God says: “My purpose will stand and I will do all that I please.”

And that kind of absolute ownership, authority, and control in the hands of any one being could be a scary thing. I mean, think about if *I* had that kind of authority, that kind of control? Terrifying, isn’t it? But because we know the character of God, His sovereignty is not a cause for fear, but a source of comfort. Psalms 145:17: The LORD is righteous in all His ways, and loving toward all He has made. The Bible says and we believe that God’s sovereign activity is carried out as the work of the personal, loving, and just God—the God whom we know most clearly and fully in Jesus Christ. You see, not only is God “over us” as King, God is “with us” as Comforter and Counselor, Shepherd and Father and Friend by the Holy Spirit. God is not just an impersonal Creator, who made everything and set the world in motion but now sits back in His Lazy Boy with His giant remote, keeping one eye on the game and with the other just watches from afar as things unfold. And God is not just an almighty King sitting up in heaven on His throne wielding his power indiscriminately and arbitrarily.

God *is* Creator and He *is* King, but because of Jesus, we know that God is *personally involved* in every aspect of His creation and the lives of His creatures. And not only is God personally involved, we know that God is involved in *loving* ways, *just* ways, *good* ways. The Bible tells me so. So we can say that, “God can do anything,” and that is true. But we must also say that God *cannot* do anything that would deny His own character. Everything God does must be in accordance with the way God has revealed Himself in Christ. And so God’s sovereignty—God’s will, God’s authority, God’s control—is holy, all-knowing, all-powerful, gracious, loving, faithful, and merciful. *Because* God is holy, all-knowing, all-powerful, gracious, loving, faithful, and merciful.

Now I realize, this begs a few questions: “If God is in total control of everything in the universe, what about ‘free will’? Do human beings have free will? And the answer is: Yes and no. We do have free will of a sort. We can choose to go to the store or not. We can choose to turn on the

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Confessions, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 6.024.

television or not. [Mostly, I recommend not.] We can make everyday kinds of choices. But in Reformed thought, we do not have “free will” if by that term we mean that we are free and able at all times, in all circumstances, to choose the good, or to choose to do God’s will by our own powers of choice.<sup>2</sup> Because our wills are infected by sin, so we are not able to choose to do God’s will in every case. We are sinners by nature, the Bible says. “Captive to sin” is how Paul puts it. Now, it seems to *us* that our will is free. And God *does* allow human beings to make choices, even sinful ones; that’s how He set up the universe. And many times we make what we think are our own choices about things, but in reality God has worked in us to cause us to make the choice we think *we* are making on our own. And so we can say at one and the same time that we choose *and* that God has caused it. We are not merely puppets with God pulling all the strings. But even though we choose according to what seems to be *our* will, God still accomplishes His will through our choice.

I suppose this is as good a time as any to talk about predestination. There is no time for me to totally unpack this concept today. But let me say this: it *is* in the Bible from beginning to end, and it is part and parcel of God’s sovereignty, so let me say a couple of things about it. First is this: Predestination is not fatalism. It does not allow for a *Que sera, sera* attitude toward life. You may be predestined to pass your math test, but you’d still better study! Let’s look for a moment at our passage from Ephesians, chapter 1. Eph. 1:4-5. Paul, writing to believers in the church, says that God “chose us in Christ before the creation of the world.” Predestination means that, before the beginning of the time, God picked you out to belong to Him, through Jesus. If you are a believer in Jesus, it’s because even before God said, “Let there be light,” He said, “Let there be a child of God called John...” Paul says here that God “predestined us to be adopted as His children” and that this fact is “in accordance with His pleasure and will.”

V. 11: Here’s what Paul is saying: God chooses us, we do not choose Him. God saves *us*, adopts *us*, forgives *us*, lavishes grace on *us*. God goes first. God is previous. We are saved from death both spiritual and eternal, physical death, forgiven and set free, and called God’s children *totally* and only at God’s initiative. *For a reason*: to be the church, the body of Christ. The physical presence of Jesus in the world today. To show the world what God is like. That’s who we are, church. That’s our purpose. Predestination simply says it was God’s purpose before it was ours.

Another question is the question of evil: If God is good and God is in control, why is there evil? Why are there natural disasters, if God could prevent them? First of all, it must be said that the Bible says and we believe that God hates evil. Evil is that which is opposed to God and God’s will.<sup>3</sup> We do not really know why evil is present in the universe or why it occurs. But we do know that human evil is caused by humans and the actions they take. And we do know that God has the power to bring good even out of the most horrifying evil. Augustine wrote: “For the Almighty God, who...has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil.” If God allows or even causes something that appears to us to be evil, it must ultimately be for some greater good—for our instruction or for God’s glory. God uses all things to fulfill His purposes and even uses evil for His glory and our

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<sup>2</sup> Donald K. McKim. *Understanding the Reformed Tradition*, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52

good. Some greater good *must* come from sin and evil, something that would not come about had there been no sin or evil.

A couple of weeks ago somebody came and sat in my chair and asked me this question: “If God is good, why did my father suffer with a mental illness?” I think we all have our own version of this question: “Why do people suffer?” If God can prevent it, why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? The Bible does not shy away from this question. Story of Joseph: Sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, falsely accused and imprisoned for years. And yet, in the end Joseph can say: Gen. 50.20. While it is true that sometimes we cause our own suffering by the sinful choices we make, at the end of the day, we must admit that we cannot and will not always know why people suffer. Even Job is not given a direct answer to his questions about all the calamities that happened to him. But in his questioning, in his pain, Job did come to recognize God’s presence with him. God did not abandon him but rather revealed Himself to Job in the midst of his pain.

Dear ones, no matter how painful or difficult your circumstances are right now, know this: God is still in control. And God has not abandoned you; He is with you. God has a purpose in what you are going through. Whatever it is that causes you pain, whatever it is that causes you sorrow, know this: *All* of it is directed toward your good and the greater good. And God will use it for good. God doesn’t waste anything. Remember, God has said, “*Never* will I leave you, *never* will I forsake you.” You know, I looked up never.... In this world, bad things *do* happen to good people. But when they do, let us remember and claim the promise of the Scripture: Rom. 8.28.

And then of course, there is the question of prayer: If God already knows what He is going to do, why pray? Well, the simplest answer is that we pray because God tells us to. “Pray without ceasing, continually.” That’s 1 Thess. 5:17. In fact, we pray *because* God is sovereign, not in spite of the fact that He is. Author Jerry Bridges writes: “Prayer assumes the sovereignty of God. If God is not sovereign, we have no assurance that He is able to answer our prayers. Our prayers would become nothing more than wishes. But while God’s sovereignty, along with His wisdom and love, is the foundation of our trust in Him, prayer is the expression of trust.”<sup>4</sup> We pray precisely because we trust our good and loving God to hear, to care, and to act. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is ultimately a call for us to trust God. To trust Him in everything.

The trouble is that when things don’t make sense to us, we tend to trust how things look or seem to us. We forget God. We forget that God is always at work around us. Consider the heart-wrenching cry of Jacob in Genesis 42. “Everything is against me!” His favorite son, Joseph, has been killed (he thinks), and now son Simeon is gone, too (he thinks), and now the sons who are left want to take youngest son, Benjamin, to Egypt to secure food in the midst of a famine. “Everything is against me!” Here’s the mistake Jacob made, and the mistake we often make: Jacob failed to take God into account. When what we see, hear, touch or reason about says one thing to us, we trust that. It looked like Joseph was dead. It seemed that Simeon was as good as dead. And it seemed like little Benjamin would be next. But Jacob failed to include in his thinking the invisible hand of the all-powerful, good, loving, faithful, wise, and sovereign God.

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Is God Really in Control? Trusting God in a World of Hurt*, 69-70.

It may be that the “facts” about the situation staring you in the face right now need to be interpreted another way. As the saying goes, “God works in mysterious ways.” But we know that God works. *And* that He causes all things to work together for good. “If God is for us,” Paul proclaims, “Who can be against us?” It’s a rhetorical question, the answer is obvious: “No one.” One writer has said this: “As God’s children, we may not always appreciate *what* it is that God may be doing in our lives; but we are to trust that in every aspect of it God is fulfilling the best of plans that ultimately will be for our good.”<sup>5</sup>

A woman sat in a rocking chair, working on a piece of embroidery. Her daughter sat at her feet, looking up at the embroidery from underneath. To the little girl, the embroidery just looked like a jumble of threads that criss-crossed, some hanging loose, some in knots. It just looked like a mess to her. She couldn’t see the picture of what her mother was embroidering at all. But from the top, her mother could see the tapestry of colors and shapes stitched together according to the design to form a beautiful picture.

We have a benediction we use around here pretty regularly that begins like this: “You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there, He has a purpose in your being there.” Friends, this is the sovereignty of God: that God is in control of the universe and of your life. And He has a purpose and a plan, and they are good. So do not be afraid. God will never leave you. He will never fail you. Trust in God. Because God is sovereign. And God is good. *All* the time.

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<sup>5</sup> Derek W. H. Thomas. *What is Providence? Basics of the Reformed Faith Series*, p. 34.

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