

## The God Who is Sovereign Acts 17:26

We have been going through this sermon of Paul's said in Athens before the Athenian counsel. And it is an incredible sermon. So often the sermons recorded in the Book of Acts the audience of Paul or whoever else have some idea of who God is. The Athenians with all their learning and all their statues of various different deities throughout the city have no idea of who God is. They actually had a statue to an unknown God. And they thought they might have missed a deity so they erected this statue. It was not that they thought they might be wrong with their other gods but just in case they missed one, they honoured that God through this idol.

So Paul presents the God that they do not know — the God they are utterly ignorant of, and the one and only true God. And often we are eager when presenting the gospel to get right to the problem of human sin and the remedy or the good news in Jesus Christ. And we never ask the question — what does this person believe about God? Do they believe he is personal or just some force? Star Wars seem to inform so many people of who God rather than the Bible. Do they believe in multiple gods or that God is somehow self-centred or uncaring about the plight of humanity? A.W. Tozer. In his book "The Knowledge of the Holy", he wrote, "**What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.**" And he is absolutely right. What we believe about God shapes so much about us — our actions, thoughts, and how we function. Faulty thoughts about God lead to faulty thoughts about self and our goodness and our righteousness and how we relate to God.

And here is the incredible thing: Paul teaches about the One true God who is so above and beyond any of the imaginations that any could have as far as his bigness and how glorious and good he is. He begins with God is the creator of everything. All things exist not because of various deities or systems working in tandem but because of this one God. He is truly the God of all power. He is the God who is not serve in Temples, or confined to a certain geographical location but one who is present everywhere. He is the omnipresent God. God is here right now. He is glorious. He is grand. There is no one like our God. And he is the great sustainer of life. The reason we can move, breathe, think and live right now is not because of us but because of our personal God and his will. The Bible's revelation of God holds us and stuns us, but it is here that we start to also see the enormity of sin.

But Paul is not done with his presentation of God. He now wants to present God's sovereignty in verse 26. When we speak of sovereignty we mean that God determined in eternity past what would come to pass, and then he orchestrates all things in life and history to bring those purposes to pass. And he does all of this to display his glory. Nebuchadnezzar after losing his mind for seven years, humbly recognizes the sovereign rule of God when he writes in Daniel 4:34-35, "**At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among**

**the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’”**

And the amazing thing is the scriptures never shy away from the absolute sovereignty of God. God is in absolute control even though it looks many times like the opposite. And the cross of Christ is the most glorious example that God can and does ordain evil but is never culpable of that evil, but has ordained and planned it, and uses it for his good purposes. So Peter earlier preaches in Acts 2:23, **“this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”** Whose ultimate plan was it? Not the religious leaders. They had their wicked plan but God had his good and glorious plan to provide eternal salvation to us.

Now we recognize the need for people to know God and his authority. But I think for us as believers we need to know who God is and keep that knowledge before our hearts and minds all the time. One of the most comforting truths and may I say stabilizing truths in our lives is God is in perfect control of my life, and I can count on him. There are so many bad and wicked things and things that we never thought we would go through, and here is where we suffer our suffering. We think we are in more control than we are, or there is no control. We do not learn to follow and rest in Christ. And where has life come crashing down? Where in life do you think you are more in control than you truly are? Where in life do you doubt God’s control? We miss the comfort here. We need to have our eyes fix on the one who is above and in control of all things. So let us seek to broaden our thoughts of God and his sovereignty and then seek to see if we can apply his truth right here in verse 26.

1. We need to understand his sovereignty takes in every aspect of life. V. 26.

Think of the things that people get angry about. It might be the political leaders and the policies they change. We might be angry even at the public that elected such people. But who gives us political leaders? And that answer is God. He establishes the powers that be. The Greeks of Athens were once the most powerful people having leaders like Alexander the Great, but now they are a conquered people under Roman authority. Who controls the power that come and go? God, but God is sovereign not just internationally but personally. Think of your life. Think of not only the good things but every single struggle, pain, obstacle and suffering in your life. God has sovereignly placed all of that in your life. And if you are not a believer, he has placed all of that in your life to bring you to this point where you are sitting in a church service hearing about him. Think of all the things, people and events that needed to take place to bring you where you are right now. If you are a believer, know this about all the pains and difficulties of your life — God is all good and he is for you. That means whether we can see that good or not, God is up to the highest good in our lives, and he can be trusted. Wow, now this is rest and comfort.

So look at this verses once again, **“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.”** Again God is Creator. He made man, but this really would have been shocking truth because in all their philosophies they had nothing that came close to this. All of humanity has been created by God but all of humanity traces themselves back to Adam and Eve in the Garden, to a single set of

parents. Think of all the divisions in our world and even in our society today, and this one great truth unifies us all together. Every single person finds their origin in the Creation of Adam and then Eve. We all have the same ancestry. We are all image bearers although that image is marred by sin. And God had a purpose for Adam and Eve. He commanded that Adam and Eve would be fruitful and multiply. His goal or intent was to have the earth full of those who worshiped and adored and revered him. Again, it is all about his glory. And that kingdom is coming and His purposes will be realized. And the reason why is he is in sovereign control. The reason we have all the various different people groups of the world today is because of God. And all the different races and cultures and people groups are meant to speak and proclaim his glory. But we are bound together by not only common ancestry but through the work of Christ. Those purposes will be realized, and our salvation is part of the fulfillment of those end time purposes. Listen to Revelation 5:9-10, **“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’”** God’s sovereign purposes will come to pass. The earth will be filled with one family of God worshipers.

And we realize his sovereignty, his control to bring these purposes to pass. But it is not just that he works globally but individually in our lives. Look at what he says here in the rest of the verses because it is absolutely stunning when you look at your life and you look at my life, be amazed at what he says here, **“having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.”** The word there “determined” speak of the will of God. He has a will and nothing in all of the cosmos can go against or alter his will. And think of it because he speak of two things here that really take in our whole lives. One is that God has determined allotted periods. Now what does that mean? It means that God has determined the the beginning and end of your life. In fact of every person. If you have ever looked at a grave stone, and it says two dates and in between the two dates is a hyphen, the one who not only controls the two dates but the hyphen — the allotted days and periods is none other than God. He decided that I would be at such and such an age and that I would exist in 2026. He decided that I would be this many days old. And he has decided what day I will die and depart this world. And nothing can stay his hand.

Listen to what the Psalmist says about this in Psalm 139:16-17, **“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!”** Every single day and every single hour of my life has been ordained by God. Every single moment of every single life that has ever existed comes and goes, with all the good things and all of the suffering because of the absolute sovereignty of God. And this is true of every single person. There is a book that is written of everything before it ever comes to pass. Doesn’t it amaze you with the comprehensiveness of God’s sovereign control?

But his sovereignty even goes further, **“and the boundaries of their dwelling places.”** Now again think of what that means? Don’t pass over it. It means wherever I am or whoever I have been, I am there by the sovereign hand of God. Why was I born

in Manitoba on an armed forces base? Why did I live in Nova Scotia during my formative years? Why was I in a place where I heard the gospel? How was I even willing to listen to that message at that point in my life? How did I ever get to South Carolina and study for the ministry? How did I ever get to Windsor Ontario where I have preached for more than 25 years the glorious of our great God? I could have not controlled all the things that made that possible. But there is One who controls all of that. There is one who is writing my story.

And think of why you are here this morning. Sickness or some delay or just apathy or a thousand other things could have kept you from being here. But you were chosen to be here. You were ordained by the absolute sovereign hand of God to be here this morning. We should never take anything for granted. All our days are not only numbered, and that number cannot be altered, but at the same time he has ordained every single event that happens in every day for my good and his glory. The sovereignty of God is so practical in our lives and in the comfort of our lives.

2. So how can we live in light of these truths?

Think of your life because life is tough. Life is hard. And one of the hardest and most difficult things about life is suffering. Suffering always confronts us with our delusion that we are in control. That I can control the health and longevity of my life through the right diet or exercise. Or I can control my financial security by earning enough money and investing it wisely. Or I can live a life of marital bliss and really change my spouse if I just follow these simple principles. Or I can cause my children to love and follow Christ. Or I can overcome my pride and anger on my own. Suffering in any of these areas explodes our delusion that we were in control. When some of these goals come to pass, we love to take credit for them as if we were in our control. But when they don't we often make our suffering worse because we believe that I had the authority, power, ability and control to really bring these things to pass, even manipulate others to bring it to pass.

Paul David Tripp writes in his book on Suffering, **“Because we assume greater control than we actually have, we blame ourselves for things we have no power to cause. A loving wife of an unfaithful husband haunts herself with questions about what she could have done to keep him from wandering. Good parents blame themselves for the spiritual and relational rebellion of their children. People who have invested with untrustworthy investors kick themselves for being so trusting. Even children tend to find reasons to blame themselves for the separation of their parents. In all these cases, people are adding to their suffering by assuming power and control that they didn't have and never will have.”**

Now even here we have to be so careful, because we can suffer our suffering in this way also, we might conclude God is control, but we let our suffering define who God is rather than letting God's sure word define who he is. It is so easy to go through suffering and think that there is no good thing that can come out of this. And much of suffering seems to be a mystery. But because we define God by what we are going through it is so easy to think that he is not all good. If I was God, I would do this so this good thing would happen. Or we might conclude since there is no good in our suffering than God truly cannot be in control. In your suffering as a believer, what conclusions

are you telling yourself about God? Or what conclusions are you making about yourself? Do you think that you are truly in control of much of life that you cannot be possibly in control of?

Because here is the thing about our text. God is in control. He has established the length of our life and all the events of our lives. And please here this — are you hopeless? Hopelessness is a good thing, because it is the gateway to real and authentic and lasting hope. Now that almost sounds like a contradiction. But here is the hopelessness we should have in our lives — and that is in our self-sovereignty. Whatever control you think you have in this life, you are not in control. You are not sovereign. But here is where hope comes in. I know the One who is in control. I know who he is because I have not figured it out but I know who he is because he has revealed himself through his Word. He even has shown me through the gospel how he can control the most heinous event act — that at the cross — and bring the absolute greatest good, and my eternal good. And no one who was around the cross as Jesus expired expected the good that would come through the butchery and slaughter of none other than the Son of God. Don't distance yourself from God in suffering and pain. Don't redefine God through your experiences. People think they are protecting themselves but they are really robbing themselves of the great comfort they could ever have. Hopelessness in self is the gateway of glorious and wonderful and substantial hope in our sovereign and loving God. Rest in him. Rest in his love and know because he is in control, nothing can ever separate you from his love in Christ Jesus.

Think of this because we often ask the question in suffering “why?” We want to know. We know God has purposes so what is his purpose? We demand to know, but really we are called to trust in him. God is under no obligation to answer any of our queries. He is the great God. We do not invert that order. And he has given enough evidence in his word that not only is he in control, but also he is good and can be nothing but good. But think of why God brings suffering. The highest good that he has for your life and my life is his glory. It is to display his character. You can see that at the cross. You see his justice, mercy, love, wisdom, sovereignty all on display. We praise Him! Well, it is the same in our lives. It is all about his glory. So think of the greatest good in my life. It is the magnification of Jesus Christ. And God seeks to change us, mold us into the image of Christ so that our lives would speak of his glory.

So think of it, God will send us through things, and is sending us through things that we would never choose to go through in order to bring change in my life that would never come unless I went through this painful process of suffering. God has the highest purpose. If we were sovereign, there would be no suffering in our lives. We would eliminate it completely. But there would be no change, or the change would be just living self-indulgent lives. We are all familiar with Romans 8:28, **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”** What works for good? And the answer is not some things but all things. Everything in my life is there by divine appointment, every relationship, every struggle, every physical pain. Every up and down of today. And everything works according to his purposes not mine. But here is the thing — they not just his purposes but his good purposes. They work together for good.

And often we leave it right there, and we leave our suffering as basically a mystery as far as the good that comes from it. But after verse 28 comes verse 29, and

verse 29 has a key word at the beginning. It is the word “For” and it is giving or explaining the good that God is doing for the people of God. Listen to that verse, **“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”** For those he foreknew mean those who have been chosen to be recipients of faith beforehand. It is the doctrine of election. We have been fore-loved by God. So being loved by God he predestined the greatest and highest good in your life and mine, and that is that we would be conformed into the image of his Son — that our character from the inside out would reflect Christ. So God will send us through the trials and discomforts of life in order to bring that change. Your struggles and pain are never wasted. In fact, they are also a sign that you are so loved by our God. You see God’s rule and sovereignty is not distant. But he is right in your life and so close that all the events, relationships, and all the happening have been ordained, have been written for your good and his glory. Here is hope. Here is glory. There is meaning. There is encouragement. There is the strength we need and the joy we need to carry on.

I have made it a practice in my first prayers to start the day, to thank God for the previous day. He ordained and brought me through that day with all the struggles and trials that were called yesterday. He has brought me one day closer to being with him. He wrote that day. But I also thank him for this day that he has ordained whatever will come, whatever obstacles or trials or heartache. It didn’t just come out of nowhere, but came from the hand of the one who loves me more than I can love myself, and in his infinite wisdom knows truly what is best for me and how to change me. Let me read this verse one more time about the comprehensive sovereignty of our great God, and revel in him. Find your hope in him. **“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.”** Our God is sovereign and our God is so good!