

Ten Aspects of God's Sovereignty Over Suffering and Satan's Hand in It

Desiring God 2005 National Conference

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

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The impetus for this conference comes from the ultimate reality of God as the supreme value in and above the universe. God is absolute and eternal and infinite. Everything else and everybody else is dependent and finite and contingent. God himself is the great supreme value. Everything else that has any value has it by connection to God. God is supreme in all things. He has all authority, all power, all wisdom—and he is all good “to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him” (Lamentations 3:25). And his name, as Creator and Redeemer and Ruler of all, is Jesus Christ.

In the last four years, 9/11, Tsunami, Katrina, and ten thousand personal losses have helped us discover how little the American church is rooted in this truth. David Wells, in his new book, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World*, says it like this:

This moment of tragedy and evil [referring to 9-11] shone its own light on the Church and what we came to see was not a happy sight. For what has become conspicuous by its scarcity, and not least in the evangelical corner of it, is a spiritual *gravitas*, one which could match the depth of horrendous evil and address issues of such seriousness. Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore.”¹

In other words, our vision of God in relation to evil and suffering was shown to be frivolous. The church has not been spending its energy to go deep with the unfathomable God of the Bible. Against the overwhelming weight and seriousness of the Bible, much of the church is choosing, at this very moment, to become more light and shallow and entertainment-oriented, and therefore successful in its irrelevance to massive suffering and evil. The popular God of fun-church is simply too small and too affable to hold a hurricane in his hand. The biblical categories of God's sovereignty lie like landmines in the pages of the Bible waiting for someone to seriously open the book. They don't kill, but they do explode trivial notions of the Almighty.

So my prayer for this conference is that God would stand forth and reassert his Creator-rights in our lives, and show us his crucified and risen Son who has all authority in heaven and on earth, and waken in us the strongest faith in the supremacy of Christ, and the deepest comforts in suffering, and the sweetest fellowship with Jesus that we have ever known.

The speakers who have come to help us have all suffered. For some it is more plain than others. You don't need to know the details. Suffice it to say that none of them is dealing with a theoretical issue in this conference. They live in the world of pain and loss where you live. They are aware that people are coming to this conference who are dying. People are here who love those who are dying. People who live with chronic pain. People who have just lost one of the most precious

persons in their life. People who do not believe in the goodness of God—or in God at all—who count this conference their one last effort to see if the gospel is real. People who are about to enter a time of suffering in their life for which they are totally unprepared.

These speakers are not naïve about life or about who you are. We are glad you are here—all of you. And we pray that you will never be the same again.

The approach I am going to take tonight is not to solve any problem directly, but to celebrate the sovereignty of God over Satan and all the evils that Satan has a hand in. My conviction is that letting God speak his word will awaken worship—like Job’s—and worship will shape our hearts to understand whatever measure of God’s mystery he wills for us to know. What follows is a celebration of “Ten Aspects of God’s Sovereignty Over Suffering and Satan’s Hand in It.” And what I mean in this message when I say that God is sovereign is not merely that God has the *power and right* to govern all things, but that he *does* govern all things, for his own wise and holy purposes.

1. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s delegated world rule.

Satan is sometimes called in the Bible “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) or “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4) or “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), or a “cosmic power over this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12). Which means that we should probably take him seriously when it says in Luke 4:5-7 that “The devil took Jesus up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, ‘To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’”

And of course that is strictly true: If the sovereign of the universe bows in worshipful submission to anyone, that one becomes the sovereign of the universe. But Satan’s claim that he can give the authority and glory of world kingdoms to whomever he wills is a half truth. No doubt he does play havoc in the world by maneuvering a Stalin or a Hitler or an Idi Amin or Bloody Mary or Saddam Hussein into murderous power. But he does this only at God’s permission and within God’s appointed limits.

This is made clear over and over again in the Bible. For example, Daniel 2:20, “Daniel answered and said: ‘Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.’” And Daniel 4:17, “The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” And when the kings are in their God-appointed place, with or without Satan’s agency, they are in the sway of God’s sovereign will, as Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.”

Evil nations rise and set themselves against the Almighty. “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision” (Psalm 2:2-4). And do they think that their sin and evil and rebellion against him can thwart the counsel of the Lord? Psalm 33:10-11 answers, “The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.”

God is sovereign over the nations and over all their rulers and all the Satanic power behind them. They do not move without his permission, and they do not move outside his sovereign plan.

2. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's angels (demons, evil spirits).

Satan has thousands of cohorts in supernatural evil. They are called “demons” (Matthew 8:3; James 2:19) or “evil spirits” (Luke 7:21) or “unclean spirits” (Matthew 10:1), or “the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). We get a tiny glimpse into demonic warfare in Daniel 10 where the angel who is sent in response to Daniel's prayer says, “The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me” (Daniel 10:13). So apparently the demon, or evil spirit, over Persia fought against the angel sent to help Daniel, and a greater angel, Michael, came to his aid.

But the Bible leaves us with no doubt who is in charge in all these skirmishes. Martin Luther got it right:

And though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim
We tremble not for him,
His rage we can endure
For low his doom is sure.
One little word will fell him.

We see glimpses of those little words at work, for example, when Jesus comes up against thousands of demons in Matthew 8:29-32. They were possessing a man and making him insane. The demons cry out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”—they know a time is set for their final destruction. And Jesus spoke to them, *one little word*, “Go.” And they came out of the man. There is no question who is sovereign in this battle. The people have seen this before in Mark 1:27 and were amazed and said, “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.” They *obey* him. As for Satan: “We tremble not for him; his rage we can endure.” But as for Christ: even though they slay him, they always must obey him! God is sovereign over Satan's angels.

3. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's hand in persecution.

The apostle Peter describes the suffering of Christians like this: “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:8-9). So the sufferings of persecution are like the jaws of a satanic lion trying to consume and destroy the faith of believers in Christ.

But do these Christians suffer in Satan's jaws of persecution apart from the sovereign will of God? When Satan crushes Christians in the jaws of their own private Calvary, does God not govern those jaws for the good of his precious child? Listen to Peter's answer in 1 Peter 3:17, “It is better to suffer for doing good, *if that should be God's will*, than for doing evil.” In other words, if God wills that we suffer for doing good, we will suffer. And if he does not will that we suffer for doing good, we will not. The lion does not have the last say. God does.

The night Jesus was arrested, satanic power was in full force (Luke 22:3; 22:31). And Jesus spoke into that situation one of his most sovereign words. He said to those who came to arrest him in the dark, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was

with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But *this is your hour, and the power of darkness*" (Luke 22:52-53). "The jaws of the lion close on me tonight no sooner and no later than my Father planned. 'No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (John 10:18). Boast not yourself over the hand that made you, Satan. You have one hour. What you do, do quickly." God is sovereign over Satan's hand in persecution.

4. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's life-taking power.

The Bible does not take lightly or minimize the power of Satan to kill people, including Christians. Jesus said, in John 8:44, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning." John tells us, in fact, that he does indeed take the lives of faithful Christians. Revelation 2:10, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. *Be faithful unto death*, and I will give you the crown of life."

Is God then not the Lord of life and death? He is. None lives and none dies but by God's sovereign decree. "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand" (Deuteronomy 32:39). There is no god, no demon, no Satan that can snatch to death any person that God wills to live (see 1 Samuel 2:6).

James, the brother of Jesus says this in a stunning way in James 4:13-16:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "*If the Lord wills, we will live* and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

If the Lord wills, we will live. And if he doesn't, we will die. God, not Satan, makes the final call. Our lives are in his hands ultimately, not Satan's. God is sovereign over Satan's life-taking power.

5. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's hand in natural disasters.

Hurricanes, tsunamis, tornados, earthquakes, blistering heat, deadly cold, drought, flood, famine. When Satan approached God in the first chapter of Job, he challenged God in verse 11, "Stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And then the Lord said to Satan (in verse 12), "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand."

The result was two human atrocities and two natural disasters. One of the disasters is reported to Job in verse 16: "The fire of God fell from heaven [probably lightning] and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." And then the worst report of all in verses 18-19, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead."

Even though God had loosened the leash of Satan to do this, that is not what Job focused on. "Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord'" (Job 1:20-21). And the inspired writer

added: “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”

Job had discovered with many of you that it is small comfort to focus on the freedom of Satan to destroy. In the academic classroom and in the apologetics discussion, the agency of Satan in our suffering may lift a little the burden of God’s sovereignty for some, but for others, like Job, there is more security and more relief and more hope and more support and more glorious truth in despising Satan’s hateful hand and looking straight past him to God for the cause and for his mercy.

Elihu helped Job see this mercy in Job 37:10-14. He said:

By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish *all that he commands them* on the face of the habitable world. Whether *for correction* or *for his land* or *for love*, he causes it to happen. Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God.

Job’s first impulses in chapter one were exactly right. When James wrote in the New Testament about the purpose of the book of Job, this is what he said, “You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11).

God, not Satan, is the final ruler of wind—and the waves. Jesus woke from sleep and, with absolute sovereignty, which he had from all eternity and has this very moment, said, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:39; see Psalm 135:5-7; 148:7). Satan is real and terrible. All his designs are hateful. But he is not sovereign. God is. And when Satan went out to do Job harm, Job was right to worship with the words “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

There’s not a plant or flower below,
But makes Thy glories known;
And clouds arise, and tempests blow,
By order from Thy throne.
 (“I Sing the Mighty Power of God,” Isaac Watts)

6. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s sickness-causing power.

The Bible is vivid with the truth that Satan can cause disease. Acts 10:38 says that Jesus “went about doing good and healing all who were *oppressed by the devil*, for God was with him.” The devil had oppressed people with sickness. In Luke 13 Jesus finds a woman who had been bent over unable to stand up for eighteen years. He heals her on the Sabbath and in response to the criticism of the synagogue ruler he says (in verse 16), “Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham *whom Satan bound for eighteen years*, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” There is no doubt that Satan causes much disease.

This is why Christ’s healings are a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God and its final victory over all disease and all the works of Satan. It is right and good to pray for healing. Christ has purchased it in the death of his Son, with all the other blessings of grace, for all his children (Isaiah 53:5). But he has not promised that we get the whole inheritance in this life. And *he* decides how much. We pray and we trust his answer. If you ask your Father for bread, he will not give you him a stone? If you ask him for a fish, he will not give you a serpent (see Matthew 7:9-10). It may not be bread. And it may not be a fish. But it will be good for you. That is what he

promises (Romans 8:28).

But beware lest anyone say that Satan is sovereign in our diseases. He is not. When Satan went to God a second time in the book of Job, God gave him permission this time to strike Job's body. Then Job 2:7 says, "Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." When Job's wife despaired and said, "Curse God and die" (2:9)," Job responded exactly as he did before. He looked past the finite cause of Satan to the ultimate cause of God and said, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not accept evil?" (2:10).

And lest we attribute error or irreverence to Job, the writer closes the book in the last chapter by referring back to Job's terrible suffering like this: "Then came to him all his brothers and sisters . . . and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (42:11). Satan is real and full of hate, but he is not sovereign in sickness. God will not give him even that tribute. As he says to Moses at the burning bush, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11; see also 2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

7. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's use of animals and plants.

The imagery of Satan as a lion in 1 Peter 5:8 and as a "great dragon" in Revelation 12:9 and as the "serpent of old" in Genesis 3 simply makes us aware that in his destructive work Satan can, and no doubt does, employ animals and plants—from the lion in the Coliseum, to the black fly that causes river blindness, to the birds that carry the avian flu virus, to the pit bull that attacks a child, to the bacteria in your belly that Drs. Barry Marshall and Robin Warren just discovered cause ulcers (winning for them the Nobel Prize in medicine). If Satan can kill and cause disease, no doubt he has at his disposal many large and microscopic plants and animals.

But he cannot make them do what God forbids them to do. From the giant Leviathan that God made to sport in the sea (Psalm 104:26) to the tiny gnats that he summoned over the land of Egypt (Exodus 8:16-17), God commands the world of animals and plants. The most vivid demonstrations of it are in the book of Jonah. "The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (Jonah 1:17). And he did exactly as he had been appointed. "And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land" (Jonah 2:10). "Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah" (Jonah 4:6). "But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered" (Jonah 4:7).

Fish, plant, worm—all appointed, all obedient. Satan can have a hand here, but it is not sovereign. God is.

8. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's temptations to sin.

Much of our suffering comes from the sins of others against us and from our own sins. Satan is called in the Bible "the tempter" (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5). This was the origin on earth of all the misery that we know—Satan tempted Eve to sin and sin brought with it the curse of God on the natural order (Genesis 3:14-19; Romans 8:21-23). Since that time Satan has been tempting all human beings to do what will hurt themselves and others.

But the most famous temptations in the Bible do not portray Satan as sovereign in his tempting work. The Bible tells us in Luke 22:3-4 that "Satan entered into Judas who was called Iscariot. . . . And he went away and discussed with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them." But Luke tells us that the betrayal of Jesus by Judas was the fulfillment of Scripture: "The

Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas” (Acts 1:16). And therefore Peter said that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). As with Job, the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away—the life of his Son, Jesus Christ. Satan was not in charge of the crucifixion of Christ. God was.

Even more famous than the temptation of Judas is the temptation of Peter. We usually think of Peter’s three denials, not his temptation. But Jesus says something to Peter in Luke 22:31-32 that makes plain Satan is at work here but that he is not sovereign: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And *when* you have turned again [not: *if* you turn], strengthen your brothers.” Again, as with Job, Satan seeks to destroy Peter’s faith. God gives him leash. But Jesus intercedes for him, and says with complete sovereignty, “I have prayed for you. You will fall, but not utterly. When you repent and turn back—not *if* you turn back—strengthen your brothers.”

Satan is not sovereign in the temptations of Judas or Peter or you or those you love. God is.

9. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s mind-blinding power.

The worst suffering of all is the everlasting suffering of hell. Satan is doomed to experience that suffering. Revelation 20:10 says, “The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” Satan’s aim is to take as many there with him as he can. To do that he must keep people blind to the gospel of Jesus Christ, because the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). No one goes to hell who is justified by the blood of Christ. “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Romans 5:9). Only those who fail to embrace the wrath-absorbing substitutionary work of Christ will suffer the wrath of God.

Therefore, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4, “In their case the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” This blinding is the most deadly weapon in the arsenal of Satan. If he succeeds with a person, their suffering will be endless.

But at this most critical point Satan is not sovereign, God is. And Oh, how thankful we should be! Two verses later in 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul describes God’s blindness-removing power over against Satan’s blinding power. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The comparison is between God’s creating light at the beginning of the world and God’s creating light in the darkened human heart. With total sovereignty God said at the beginning and at your new birth, “Let there be light.” And there is light.

We were dead in our trespasses and sins, but in great mercy God made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:5). We were blind and spiritually dead. We saw nothing compelling or beautiful in the gospel. It was foolishness to us (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23). But God spoke with sovereign Creator authority, and his word created life and spiritual sight, and we saw the glory of Christ in the gospel and believed. Satan is a terrible enemy of the gospel. But he is not sovereign. God is. This is the reason that any of us is saved.

10. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s spiritual bondage.

Satan enslaves people in two ways. One with misery and suffering by making us think there is no good God worth trusting. The other is with pleasure and prosperity making us think we have all we need so that God is irrelevant. To be freed from this bondage we must repent. We must confess that God is good and trustworthy. We must confess that the pleasures and prosperity of life do not compare to the worth of God. But Satan hates this repentance and does all he can to prevent it. That is his bondage.

But when God chooses to overcome our rebellion and Satan's resistance, nothing can stop him. And when God overcomes him and us, we repent and Satan's power is broken. Here it is in 2 Timothy 2:24-26:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps *grant them repentance* leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may *escape from the snare of the devil*, after being captured by him to do his will.

Satan is not sovereign over his captives. God is. When God grants repentance, we are set free from the snare of the devil—and spend our days celebrating our liberation and spreading it to others.

Conclusion

The evil and suffering in this world are greater than any of us can comprehend. But evil and suffering are not ultimate. God is. Satan, the great lover of evil and suffering, is not sovereign. God is.

“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?’”
(Daniel 4:35)

He declares “the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’” (Isaiah 46:10)

“Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?” (Lamentations 3:37-38; see Amos 3:6)

“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.” (Proverbs 19:21; see 16:9)

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” (Proverbs 16:33)

Therefore, “if God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:31-37).

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

¹ David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 4.

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