

Date: September 2-3, 2023

Title: *What Kind of God #5 - "God is Sovereign"*

Scripture: Daniel 4:34-35

Speaker: Terry Thomas

Happy Labor Day weekend. It's good to be here with you. Also, we want to say a special hi to the folks at the new gathering in Beaver County down in New Brighton by the YMCA. They're meeting for the first time this morning. So, they're having fun out there today. That would be a go if you live in Beaver County, stop down sometimes, and see what it's like.

When I heard I was going to have to talk about the sovereignty of God, I thought to myself, wow, this is a huge topic. And clearly, from the video, a lot of people have no idea what it's about. I wouldn't be surprised if it's one of those kinds of topics that is not only kind of complicated, but it's far-reaching. It involves a lot of different contexts and a lot of different questions that come up. And yesterday morning, when I was in my office at 7:00, trying to figure out what I was going to say in the morning, seven in the morning, and to do it last night, you know, I was thinking to myself, oh, my goodness, this is way too much to try to figure out how to do this. I don't know how I'm going to be able to get all this stuff in.

But anyway, let's talk about sovereignty and context. This topic of sovereignty is about building context. And what I'd like to do today and here's what I do, I'm not going to promise you that I can cover all this stuff and cover it well. But we are going to talk about three things. One is this. We're going to talk about these three questions.

The first question is who's in control of the world or creation? Who's in control of the world? The second question is who's in control of your life? That's the second question. All these things are about the sovereignty of God. The third question is who's in control of the world when things seem like the world is out of control? We're going to look at those three things.

And I want to suggest to you at this point, three really, really good books that if you're interested in looking into these topics more deeply and really understanding them, well, then I say take a look at some of these books. The first one is a book by a guy named Al Wolters. He's a Dutch philosopher, and he wrote a book called *Creation Regained*. He talks about the ins and outs of the biblical picture and worldview of understanding how God is in control of the creation. And it's really good. Maybe the best book of its kind.

The second book is a book by Pennsylvania's own R.C. Sproul. It's a book called *Chosen by God*, and it's a book about how God is in control of the lives of everyone, the individual lives of everyone, particularly. He's interested in how God works in somebody's life to bring them into faith. And that book is about the technical term, what we call predestination. And I know that ruffles some people's feathers when they hear that word for the first time. But anyway, it's about that. It's a great book. R.C. was fantastic on this topic, and it's easy to read, a short little book.

The third one is a book by a guy named Philip Yancey, a very popular Christian writer, and a great speaker. You can see all these guys on YouTube if you're interested in more information. But Philip Yancey wrote *Disappointment with God*. When he wrote the book, the publishers didn't want that to be the title because they told him it sounded too negative. But

what he was trying to do was be realistic. He was trying to say, well, how is it that when people say they think that God is all-powerful and that he's loving, that bad things happened in people's lives? How do you explain that? That's the universal experience of people. And so why not address that question? He asks the question, is God unfair? Is God hidden? Is God silent? He asks these big questions. By the way, these are important questions. These are things that if you delve into them deeply, I think they can change your life in the way that you see things. And I hope that happens for you as well.

So anyway, let's start by saying what is the definition of sovereignty? Well, here's a great definition. It's simple, and it's one that's found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, a very famous and old kind of explanation for Christians of these kinds of things. What is sovereignty? They say this. "God for all eternity did in the most wise and holy council of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.

Do you want to know what the sovereignty of God is? God, with the counsel of His omniscience, which we talked about already, is knowing, all wisdom, and freely not manipulated by any source, He chooses the destiny of all things. He's in control of all things. So, you want to answer the first question, who is in control of the world? God. There's a shocker for you.

Okay, who's in control of the creation? God. Just to make sure, let's have a little show of hands here. Who was on sunrise duty? Who, by the power of your own mind and will brought the sun up from the east? By the way, beautiful job this morning. It was really, really nice. Who kept the world rotating last night? The moon was pretty spectacular too. Oh, you didn't do that, huh? Yeah, of course, you didn't do that. We can stand here for the rest of our lives pointing out things that we didn't do that were out of our control, that happen regularly, that God maintained the nature of moment to moment. Seriously, are you the one keeping your heart beating right now? No, God is doing that. God creates the world.

Hey, even a crazy person like Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Daniel finally figured out what was going on. Listen to this definition or explanation of what's happening after he comes back from being crazy. He said, "Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion." Eternal, in other words, this control that we're talking about, it's not just temporary. It's not just, hey, thank goodness he was around for the last couple of days or years or something like that. No, an eternal dominion. "His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He 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?"

We tend not to want to know that he's the one who's really in control anyway. There's a passage here in the book of Romans that talks a little bit about that. It's right in the beginning. It's in Romans chapter one, verse 18. It says this. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness." What truth do you think they might suppress? "since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

Part of the argument there, Paul, is to say all you have got to do is look at the world. All you have got to do is look at your everyday experience of the creation, the way crazy Nebuchadnezzar was able to do it. To recognize that God's in control of things. We're not. Nothing else is. He is.

Oh, well, there is an alternative explanation for why things are the way they are. Listen to this alternative explanation. The reason why things are the way they are is because this is the humanist worldview alternative because of time plus chance plus matter. That's the alternative to God being in control. They say it was just a coincidence. It's luck. It's randomness, chance. Do you buy that? Do you buy that chance is the reason for the way that the world is? Have you not looked at the world? Seriously? It's unbelievably complex and unbelievably, fantastically beautiful.

My wife is kind of a YouTube addict, and she was showing me this thing the other day about people who were color blind since they were born and anybody with varying degrees of color blindness. Some people see things as all black and white. Some people see just some colors and some people multiple colors and so forth. We have a new technology where they made a pair of glasses that now people who are colorblind can put the glasses on and now see the colors the way that they really are. That's amazing. And they have on YouTube these videos of the first-time people getting the glasses and putting them on and they're crying. And so, one guy puts the glasses on, and he takes them off and he goes like this. He says, why is anybody ever unhappy? Well, they saw things that God made, and God's eternal nature is divine. Nature's eternal power is evident from the things that he'd made. And they were so spectacular that it couldn't be denied. It just couldn't be denied.

This is from the book of the Bible, the translation is called *The Message*. Eugene Peterson wrote this. This is his translation of Psalm 33. He says, "For GOD's Word is solid to the core; everything he makes is sound inside and out. He loves it when everything fits, when his world is in plumb-line true. Earth is drenched in GOD's affectionate satisfaction." There's a great line, isn't it? The world is drenched in God's affection and satisfaction. "The skies were made by GOD's command; he breathed the word and the stars popped out. He scooped Sea into his jug, put Ocean in his keg. Earth-creatures, bow before GOD; world-dwellers—down on your knees! Here's why: he spoke and there it was, in place the moment he said so. GOD takes the wind out of Babel pretense, he shoots down the world's power-schemes. God's plan for the world stands up, all his designs are made to last."

Is that spectacular or what?! He doesn't mess around. All the things that he makes, everything that he makes without any little thing skipping his attention. He makes it. He plans it out. It's exactly the way he plans it to be.

In one of the classes I teach, we use a little book called *Delighting in the Trinity*. We've talked a little bit about the Trinity. And in the book, they talk about a word, the word *perambulation*. It means to move around. That's what the two Greek words mean, to move around. And what it refers to often in ancient Christianity is a dance that people used to do, a circle dance. You know, it was a circle dance of worship. It was a liturgical kind of thing where there were certain movements, but because they did it in a circle, you had to make the movements in exactly the right order or else people would be tripping over each other and fall down. You

ever been to one of those dances? Or a wedding dance where you're knocking people over left and right, you know? So, paracletis, is that perfect dance.

There was a very famous artist back in the 14th century who made an icon, that is kind of a religious drawing of sorts of the Trinity. The Trinity is called, The Paracletis. The Trinity is shown as the three persons of the Trinity around a table. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And the point of it is to say that as they're sitting, it's like sitting around a table or talking to each other. For all eternity, God has been in relationship inside himself with the persons of the Trinity. He's a relational being. And you know what He is? He's an outgoing relational being. He's like the friendliest guy you ever met, you know? And they noticed on this beautiful icon, the original icon that they found, down on the table in the front, there's a place that looks like there was something there. It's gone. And so, they tested it and they found that there was some kind of sticky stuff there. And they realized it was kind of glue or paste or something like that. And then the hypothesis became this. Do you know what was there that fell off? A mirror. Because when you looked at it, you were supposed to see yourself in the dance with the Trinity. God loves so much inside himself, the Father with the son, the Son with the spirit, He's so much connected and loving that he can't hold it in. He's got to let it out. And so, part of the goodness of the creation is an attempt to try to show that outgoing nature of God, the loving nature of God, to flow over for the benefit of the creation.

Michael Reeves, who wrote the book *Delighting in the Trinity* says this. He says, "You know, the very nature of the Triune God is to be effusive, ebullient, and bountiful. The father rejoices to have another beside him. Christ, the spirit, and he finds is very self in pouring out his love in the Trinity and beyond. Creation is about the spreading, the diffusion, the outward explosion of that love. This God is the very opposite of a greedy, hungry, selfish emptiness. In His self-giving, He naturally pours forth life and goodness. He is then the source of all that's good, and that means he is not the sort of God who would call people to himself away from happiness and good things. Good things and ultimate happiness are to be found in him, not apart from him."

There's another quote later on from another famous theologian who said this. "We often speak of the creation as the work of God. It may be more helpful to think of the creation of the world as the play of God, a kind of free artistic expression whose origin must be sought ultimately in God's good pleasure."

When we hear sovereign God, we think God, King, control of all things. That's kind of some pictures we get of what God's like. Or we get this one. He started the world. He just says, okay, whatever. Go ahead, you know, take care of it. No. He's intimately involved. He invites us into that. And so, as a result, as he makes these various things, he sees to it that they're spectacularly done. When I say spectacularly done, just to let you know, we're not talking about some things. We're talking about all things, the playfulness of God, and the goodness of God overflowing into all things that you have within the creation.

This summer I spent a lot of time in my backyard making a garden. I tried to garden with food before and it didn't work out. So, this time I decided to go with flowers. I had some spectacular ones. I was towards the end of my flowering, getting all ready at Lowe's. They had a little bag of Calla Lily bulbs. And they were like seven for \$3. And I thought to myself, yeah, I'll get those. I never had Calla Lilies. I get them and take them back. I planted one in a

little pot and planted another. I got five left, and I had one big round sort of section with a nice big bush in the middle of it with flowers all around. So, I planted them out in the front of the thing, you know? Well, you know, I was thinking of short Calla Lilies. These were four and a half feet tall. You can't see the bush anymore. And by the way, for some reason, even though I only put five of them in, there are 12 of them that are in the front. God likes that kind of stuff.

I got this other thing before we moved a couple of years ago. At our other house, we had this plant called a passion flower. I don't know if anybody's ever seen a vegetable, but I brought one today from my backyard. Can we get a camera showing this? That's a pretty spectacular looking flower. Do you see that? Unbelievably lacy and so forth. It's a weed, seriously. I mean, I put one on the side of my back yard and this year it's everywhere. I mean, I'm talking all the way on the other end of the yard, a huge thing flowing over into my neighbor's house. I can't see it anymore, you know, just gone. Unbelievable. I went to cut the grass last week, and I counted the little sprouts that were in the grass. 147 of the sprouts. And this is a very huge thing that just grows hundreds of flowers. It smells fantastic. It's so beautiful. And God gives that attention to a weed. Is he good? You bet he is. He's the best.

The point is, is that there's no question about who's in control of the world. And his control is not some kind of greedy, hard-handed, heavy-handed, no fun. He's a loving, playful God who makes the world beautiful and fills it with spectacular things. And he wonders, why would anybody ever be unhappy in this world? Consider all the stuff I've done, you know? Think about how many different kinds of flowers there are. I mean, think about how many different kinds of bugs there are and how cool they look, even if they're messy. Think about how many different kinds of animals there are and how many different kinds of eyes that different kinds of animals have. Have you ever noticed that? There are hundreds of different kinds of eyes. So why not just give them all one kind? It's creativity, it's love, and it's the overflow. It's trying to create the fullness of life.

Okay, here's our second question. Who's in control of your life? Well, take a wild guess. The God who's in control of the universe. The God who's in control of creation. He's actually the one who's in control of your life as well. He's the one who makes you alive to be able to see things. Do you know what Jesus said? He said to Nicodemus in John three, he said, listen, you'll never see the kingdom of God. You'll never go into this life and experience it unless you're born again. Nicodemus had no idea what he was talking about. He was like, can I get back in my mother's womb? What a stupid thing to say. God was like, no, you to be born of the spirit.

Who's in control of your life if you really experience life? God, because he's the one who's taken you from being dead to life. That's what the scriptures say. You were dead in your sins and trespasses and God made you alive in Christ. You weren't just out there in the water floundering around, looking for somebody to throw you a life preserver. You were on the bottom, dead for a long time, and God found you and brought you back to life. If you have any life at all, if you see things the way that they really are, if you're going to understand the way things are, you need to be brought back to life by God. So, who is in control of our lives, us or God?

Well, we like to think we're in control of our lives. Matter of fact, when we are in control of our lives, we don't do such a great job with them. But when we surrender them, we begin to see how God does that. You know, by the way, this is in theological terms. When we talk about God being the one who's in control of your life, God being the one that creates life in you, God being the one that makes you see who He is and draws you into a relationship with Christ, which is a technical, theological term called predestination. And we use that technical, theological term because that's the term the Bible uses. It talks about people being predestined to faith that is before the foundations of the world, what God decides. The same way He decides how many little flowery things are going to be on that little planet. He decides whether you will come to life again or not.

And you might say, well, that's unfair if God doesn't do it for everybody. No, it's not unfair. There's a difference between something that is merciful and something that is just. If God were just, if he was being fair, nobody would come to life. Because after all, even though everybody has the opportunity to be able to understand that God is the one who created the world, to know His divine nature and eternal power, they don't. So, they're without excuse. If God would just leave them to themselves in the freedom that they chose to have, the just thing, the fair thing, would be that they would never experience life the way it was supposed to be, and they would be punished for it. But God chooses for some reason, for some people, and we don't know the reason why, to bring those people to life. But it's not unjust that he doesn't bring everyone else to life. It's fair.

Predestination is about the mercy of God. You know what's great about predestination is that it's undeserved on your part. If God makes you alive, everyone, it's undeserved. It is free. It's a matter of the graciousness of God. You don't need to do anything to earn it or deserve it. And when you get it as a gift from God, by God's grace, this is it. You can't lose it. This is not about you. It's not about what you've done. It's about what Christ has done for you that God planned for all eternity. So, even when you screw it up, you can't lose it. I mean, that's good news. That is the good news that God makes you alive and then he holds you.

I'll tell you right now, and you may think this is kind of crazy, but this is true. God loves me. I'm pretty sure God has a picture of me on his refrigerator. If he's going to go out someplace, He's got a really nice coat. It's kind of a brown thing, so it's got a pocket on the inside. He takes my picture off the refrigerator, puts it in his pocket, and takes it with him everywhere he goes. He's not losing that picture. He loves that guy. That's the way God loves you. He loves you. He loves you as much on your worst day as He does on your best day. That's good news, isn't it? That's having God be in control of your life and your destiny in the best possible way that you could imagine.

This is from Psalm 139. It says, "Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out; you formed me in my mother's womb. I thank you, High God - you're breathtaking! Body and soul, I am marvelously made! I worship in adoration - what a creation! You know me inside and out, you know every bone in my body; You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something. Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you, The days of my life all prepared before I'd even lived one day. Your thoughts—how rare, how beautiful! God, I'll never comprehend them! I couldn't even begin to count them—any more than I could count the sand of the sea."

Now, apparently, the people of the University of Hawaii have nothing better to do than do experiments like this. So, they tried to determine how many grains of sand there were in the sea, and they came up with 7.5 quadrillion, which is 7.5 times ten to the 18th power. Then they estimated how long it would take to count those many grains of sand, and they estimated it would take 4 million years to count that many grains of sand. I don't know if that's 4 million years of eight-hour days or what. But do you hear what that says? God is in control. He loves you so much that in advance he's made you so spectacular, and he has so many good thoughts for you and about you. You think I'm kidding? But God said, I love that Terry. And He does. He says so many good thoughts about you that if you took the next 4 million years, you couldn't count the good thoughts that he's had about you.

And finally, the last thing, what about when things don't go well? What about when they fall apart? Well, it doesn't happen any better in the Bible than with Job. Job gets a lot of ideas from his friends about why things happened. They're not very good friends. They have all kinds of wacky ideas. And finally, Job just goes to God and he says to him, what's the deal, God? And God says to him, I'll tell you what, I'll answer that question, but you answer me this question first. You know what he does? He starts to take him for a little trip around creation. He says, hey, by the way, where were you when I set out the pattern for the oceans and so forth? When I figured out how birds fly. Were you helping me? Are you the one to control creation or am I? And he goes on for quite a while, and eventually, Job gets the point. Job says, yeah, I should have shut up. I didn't know what I was talking about. Clearly, your ways are more spectacular than my ways.

You know the question of why is it that bad things happen, especially to people we think of as good people, in spite of the fact that God is all-powerful, in control, and good? Do you know the answer? Well, I don't. I have no idea. I don't know the answer to that. As a matter of fact, I don't know any theologian who suggested any really reasonable answer to that question. And so, you know what I do? I go with what I know and not with what I don't know. And I know that God is good. I know he's all-powerful, and I know he's loving and gracious and playful. I know he loves me. I know he's in control of the world. He's in control of my life. He is in control of my life from the past into the future. That's good news. So, I trust what I do know, not what I don't know.

I had a friend who died last week, and I went up to Grand Rapids, Michigan to his memorial service. And we were reminiscing about stuff. We used to sing a lot of songs together, and we did ministry together. And I was reminded of a song. I sent the song to him before he died to remind him of it. And it's a song that sort of speaks to this question right now and it's sort of a challenge to us.

It's one by a guy named James Ward, and it's called *Consider the Lilies*. It goes like this. "Consider the lilies, how they grow. Your heavenly father takes control." There it is. Sovereignty. "Are you not much more important than they? What can your worrying do anyway? Seek first the kingdom. Keep the righteousness of God in view. Seek first the kingdom and all of these things will be added to you." You go with what you know, not with what you don't know. "Your father remembers the sparrow that falls and the hairs on your head. He knows them all, no matter what time or the place I might be. Wings of protection are covering me." I can't fall out of his hands. He's the one who controls. He's God. "Unless

the Lord builds my house, vain is my labor. Unless the Lord keeps my town, vainly they watch it. The bread of toil and the day will spoil but he gives his loved ones rest. Consider the children, a gift from the Lord. The fruit of your womb is his reward. Happy is he who remembers his ways. Goodness and mercy will follow him all of his days. So, seek first the kingdom and keep the righteousness of God in view. Seek first the kingdom. He said all of these things will be added to you. My covenant children. I will not forsake, a better commandment I will make. Love one another as I've loved you. Even a cup of cold water will do. You've got to seek first the kingdom and keep the righteousness of God in view. Seek first the kingdom, then all these things will be added to you."

Let's pray, Lord, thanks for this day. Thanks for these words. Thank you for loving us. Thank you for being the one that's in control and not us. You are the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, not only of the creation of our lives, we surrender to you. We pray this in Jesus' name. And for His kingdom said, Amen.