

Constantine and the Sovereignty of God

Review:

- **James, Peter, Paul** (Worthiness of Christ)
- **Polycarp** (Faithfulness of Christ)
- **Perpetua** (Love of God)

Doctrine: The Sovereignty of God

- Definition: God's absolute rule and authority over all things.¹
- Scriptural basis (Isa 46:10; Eph 1:11)²
- Scope:
 - Creation and preservation (Ps 135:6)
 - He makes all things and keeps them.
 - Election and reprobation (Rom 9:15-16, 18; Eph 1:11-12)
 - He calls sinners to himself, making them alive by his mercy and grace; others he leaves in their sin and passes over.
 - Suffering of Christ (Lk 22:42; Acts 2:23, 4:27)
 - Even the suffering of our Lord was within the scope of God's sovereign plan.
 - Regeneration (Jn 1:12-13)
 - It is according to God's sovereign plan that we are born again.
 - Sanctification (Phil 2:13)
 - It is according to God's sovereign plan that we are sanctified.
 - Sufferings of believers (1 Pet 3:17)
 - Our suffering, like Christ's, is under God's sovereign control.
 - Man's life and destiny (Isa 45:9; Jas 4:15)
 - The details and events in our lives are all contained in God's sovereign will.
 - The smallest things (Mt 10:29)
 - Even the tiniest things in our lives are under God's sovereign control.

Pink writes, "Infinitely elevated above the highest creature, He is the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth; subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent. God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him. So His own Word expressly declares: 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose'" (Isa. 46:10 [ESV]).³

- Influence: God's will is sovereignly independent of everything outside himself.⁴ He is utterly uninfluenced.
 - God's sovereignty means that he acts according to his own pleasure—"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Ps 115:3).

¹John F. MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway, 2017), 937.

²MacArthur and Mayhue, 185-186. Information following is adapted from these pages.

³Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Nature of God* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 37. Scripture from ESV.

⁴MacArthur and Mayhue, 186.

- He does not give an account to anyone. He and his actions define what is good and right.
- He is the potter whose hands envelop all things—nothing escapes the grasp of his sovereignty (Isa 29:16).
- Politicians, presidents, kings, dictators, terrorists, and warlords are less than nothing before him (Isa 40:15-17).
- No one can stop God from accomplishing his purpose.
- He shows mercy or hardens solely according to his will (Rom 9:15-18).
- The Holy Spirit divides spiritual gifts as he wills (1 Cor 12:11)

Remember from last week, What was it in you that attracted God to you?

Objection: But what of my free will?

- Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1

“1. God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”

God is sovereign in such a comprehensive and glorious way that he ordains all things that come to pass, yet he is not the author of sin, and he does not impinge on the will of his creatures. Rather “human responsibility is based on divine sovereignty.”⁵

Application: Trust God in Suffering

The knowledge of God’s sovereignty, the sheer scope of his power and control, the independence of his actions, might move our hearts not to admiration but to fear. Perhaps this is because we are accustomed to dealing with human despots—men and women who use their absolute power to oppress and exploit people. We are so used to this evil use of power that we shudder at the thought of it.

That is why we need to constantly be renewing our minds with the truth of God. Our God is good and he is sovereign. If you are a child of his, you may be sure that he wields his sovereign power to work all things together for your good, that you may be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:28-29). We certainly don’t always—or more rightly, we often don’t—understand what God is doing in ordaining the everyday circumstances of our lives.

We may be tempted to doubt his faithfulness to us when life crumbles around us. When our hopes are dashed. When the prognosis is bad. When the money is gone. When our loved one tragically dies. When we can’t catch a break at work. When we’re still single. When our friends and family fail us. When we are so fed up with ourselves. When we pray and pray and pray and that person still is not saved by God.

Even then, and in every circumstance, God is still sovereign and he is ever faithful. We don’t often understand what he is doing but he calls us to trust him because he is still in control—he has never left you—and he is good.

⁵Pink, 40.

This reminds me of that precious screen from C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when Susan is having a discussion with Mr. Beaver about Aslan, the prince from Over the Sea, the great lion. Mr. Beaver begins by saying,

"Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."⁶

In a similar way, God is good but he is not safe. That is, he values our redemption and sanctification more than he does our comfort, temporary happiness, or security. God has his eye out for our eternal joy not our fleeting pleasure. He will always do what is best for us—even when we don't understand how that can be so. We are called to trust his sovereign plan and his goodness to the very end. Even holding them in tension if necessary.

We certainly saw this sort of hope and trust in God in the lives of the martyrs that we have studied so far. James, Peter, Paul, Polycarp, and Perpetua trusted that God was good even in their martyrdom. Imagine praising the sovereign God while you're being roasted alive. So, you see, God's gracious, merciful, loving, sovereign care for us may not look like what we anticipate. It may look like our being thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, being crucified upside down, or being made a public spectacle and then being stabbed to death.

[Passage from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 21]

We are reminded that our brother Paul wrote, "*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him*" (Rom 8:16-17). We must cling to the fact that God is sovereign and that he is good.

One aspect of God's sovereignty that I didn't mention earlier but that I will mention earlier by way of transition is his control over government. As we transition from the third to the fourth century, this facet of God's sovereign control is highlighted.

- Government (Prov 21:1)

History—Constantine: A Christian Emperor (?)

- Wild Times for the Roman Empire; Good times for the church

In principle, power in the Roman monarchy was to be passed from father to son. This was in some way the case for the first five emperors—or at least they kept it in the family. However, the emperor's position was always unstable and assassinations were commonplace. The result is that there were often unanticipated power shifts and policy changes in the empire. The result was that there was a time of flourishing for the church in the 200s, particularly from

⁶C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

211 to 250. During this time Christianity grew tremendously. Eusebius even suspected the emperor Philip the Arabian, whom Eusebius the church historian thought was a Christian.⁷

- Rough Times under Diocletian (c. 242-311 [284-305])

In 303, the emperor Diocletian was persuaded to start an empire-wide persecution against the Christians. It was thought that they were responsible for several arsons and a cessation of oracles from the prophets of Apollo. These persecutions were serious and essentially barred Christians from all aspects of public life.

“The “Great Persecution” began in 303 at the instigation of Galerius, but with support from Diocletian. Four successive edicts were issued:

1. Christian buildings were to be leveled, Scriptures were burned, and anyone appearing in a court of law had to sacrifice (thus debarring Christians from the judicial system), as did anyone when challenged to do so (thus removing those who would not sacrifice from high office).
2. Governors were ordered to arrest and imprison bishops.
3. Bishops could be released if they sacrificed.
4. Sacrifice to the gods was made obligatory on everyone.”⁸

- Tetrarchs

This period of intense persecution lasted until 311, when an edict of toleration was issued by then emperor Galerius. It was during this period of time that the emperor Diocletian did something unthinkable, he divided the empire into four sections and divided the rule between four rulers: two augusti and two Caesars who were to assist them. The persecution was the fiercest in the East and was almost nonexistent in the West.

- Constantine's Early Life

When the emperor of the Western part of the Roman Empire Constantius Chlorus died in 306 AD, his troops proclaimed his son to be emperor. His son's name was Constantine.⁹ This Constantine will be the subject of our investigation for the rest of today.

Constantine was born in Illyria, a region in the Balkans in the present-day country of Serbia.¹⁰ His father, Constantius, was a Roman official on the rise. His mother Helena was the daughter of an innkeeper. Constantine's father Constantius was a Neoplatonist who was tolerant of Christianity. His mother Helena on the other hand, was a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The family, strained by the social and labor demands of being in service to the emperor, moved to Nicomedia in present-day Turkey to serve emperor Diocletian at his court.

In fact, Constantine was in the presence of the emperor when he gave the edict that the Christians should be persecuted. The newly built meeting house for the Christians in Nicomedia was torn down and the saints who inhabited it were persecuted.

⁷Ferguson, 160.

⁸Ferguson, 179-180.

⁹Ferguson, 180.

¹⁰Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, “Constantine”. And so details from this paragraph.

In 305 Constantine's Father was sent by the emperor to fight against the Picts in what is present-day Scotland. Constantine, having acquired battlefield experience in Persia, accompanied his father to the British Isles. After leading a successful campaign his father suddenly fell ill and died at the age of 56. After his father's death in Eboracum—what is now York, England—Constantine was hailed as emperor by his soldiers. Their acclamation had enough sway that it was recognized by the emperor Galerius in the East. It was the year 306 and Constantine was now emperor of the Western Roman Empire. He controlled Britain, Gaul, and Hispania—Britain, France, and Spain nowadays. Constantine followed the policy of his father and was not a persecutor of the church. In fact, he put a formal end to the persecutions and returned seized property back to the Christians.

In 310, as one of his last dying acts, the previous persecutor of the church Galerius issued his final edict: a stay on all persecution of Christians and a resumption of religious toleration.

Upon his death shortly thereafter, Maxentius challenged Constantine's rule of the West. Now Maxentius hated Constantine because he had "murdered" his father. That is, his father had rebelled against Constantine, lost to Constantine, and had been encouraged to commit suicide by Constantine. As a result, Maxentius declared war on Constantine in 311 and a civil war ensued.

- Milvian Bridge

It wasn't until the following spring in 312 that any battle took place. Constantine's advisors cautioned him against taking any inciting actions because the omens derived from their pagan religion were inconclusive. But Constantine, propelled by an unshakable confidence, crossed the alps with 40,000 of his soldiers looking for a fight.

Constantine swept through Italy and arrived near Rome to face the man who had declared war on him. "Maxentius turned to pagan oracles, finding a prophecy that the 'enemy of the Romans' would perish" that very day. Bolstered by this omen, Maxentius left the city to meet his foe. Meanwhile, Constantine saw a vision in the afternoon sky: a bright cross with the words 'by this sign conquer.' As the story goes, Christ himself told Constantine in a dream to take the cross into battle as his standard. Though accounts vary, Constantine apparently believed the omen to be a word from God. When he awoke the next morning, the young commander obeyed the message and ordered his soldiers to mark their shields with the famous Chi-Rho.¹¹

On the 28th of October, 312 the battle began. Constantine was outnumbered by Maxentius 2-to-1. Maxentius had hastily arrayed his army in one long line with their backs to the Tiber river just outside the walls of Rome. Despite the odds, Constantine, emboldened by the supposed vision, charged into his enemy and overwhelmed them. Maxentius' army turned to run away and many were drowned in the river. Maxentius himself was riding his horse across the bridge and was forced off of it by the mad surge of his men in full retreat. He fell into the river and the weight of his armor drowned him. Truly, the enemy of the Roman people had died that day.

"Constantine entered Rome the undisputed ruler of the West, the first Roman emperor with a cross in his diadem."¹²

¹¹Galli and Olsen, 307.

¹²Galli and Olsen, 307.

- Constantine and Licinius—The Edict of Milan

One of his first acts as emperor in the West, Constantine met Licinius, the ruler of the Eastern portion of the empire. Together they issued the Edict of Milan which “gave Christians freedom of worship and directed the governors to restore all the property seized during the severe Diocletian persecution.”¹³

Eusebius, a bishop in the church of Caesarea, records his reaction, “The whole human race was freed from the oppression of the tyrants. We especially, who had fixed our hopes upon the Christ of God, had gladness unspeakable.”¹⁴

Now, Constantine was not a model for the Christian life. He did not seem to definitively separate himself from the paganism of the empire. Rather, he took a middle road and sought to be religiously inoffensive both to Christian and to pagan alike. However, it does appear that there is a genuine understanding of his sin and God’s grace. In 314, he sent a message to a council of bishops in the city of Arles, writing about “how God does not allow people ‘to wander in the shadows’ but reveals to them salvation: ‘I have experienced this in others and in myself, for I walked not in the way of righteousness... But the Almighty God, who sits in the court of heaven, granted what I did not deserve.’”¹⁵ With that sentiment I think we can say a hearty, amen!

Constantine also had the wisdom to not enforce Christianity as the state religion. A mistake that the Roman Catholics would blunder into in the middle-ages, especially in the Spanish Inquisition. He wrote, “The struggle for deathlessness... must be free.”¹⁶

- Constantine as Sole Emperor

In 323, after an initial beef began in 316, Constantine declared war on his co-emperor Licinius and defeated him. In this way the rule of Rome went from one man, to four, to two, and then back to one. Constantine moved the seat of his government from Milan to Byzantium, which he renamed New Rome—everyone else called it Constantinople though.

- Mediating Role

During the last 14 years of his reign, Constantine openly declared himself to be a Christian. “He proceeded to create the conditions we call ‘state-church’ and bequeathed the ideal to Christians for over a thousand years.”¹⁷ That is, until the fall of that great city in 1453.

Thus, it was only three years later that Constantine assembled the Council of Nicea—a group of 318 elders from primarily the Eastern part of the Empire—to settle the theological debate over the deity of Jesus Christ. Constantine presided over the meeting himself.

Imagine this, the assembled elders at this meeting are still bearing in their bodies the marks of persecution. Some whose backs have been gnarled and twisted by Roman whips; some whose faces are marred because of beatings; whose skins have been burned severely;

¹³Galli and Olsen, 307.

¹⁴Galli and Olsen, 307.

¹⁵Galli and Olsen, 307.

¹⁶Galli and Olsen, 307.

¹⁷Galli and Olsen, 307.

elders whose churches had had members killed for their faith in Christ. Now they were being served by the emperor himself. Now the emperor was building meeting places for the church instead of tearing them down. Now the emperor was the one who blessed instead of the one who persecuted.

And the council produced what we call the Nicene Creed—something we occasionally recite as part of our gathering. Now there's a direct connection you have to Constantine.

Remember the Proverb? "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov 21:1). In God's sovereignty, he turned the heart of Constantine, whatever the true circumstances of his visions may have been, to himself. Just as he had done with Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. God is in control of everything, nothing is too great for him to achieve. Nothing is outside of his control. He was working even this for his glory and our good.

Constantine died in 337, shortly after receiving baptism.

- Results for the church
 - Good
 - The period of peace that ensued has been called the "Golden Age of Patristic Literature" because of the quantity and quality of literature that the church produced.¹⁸
 - Persecution was at an end—peace at last!
 - Bad
 - Produced laxity in the church. Now that Christianity was condoned by the emperor at some level, it became even more popular. This did not mean that all its adherents were truly converted, however.
 - The intermingling of the church and the state eventually produced a state-religion that greatly departed from the Scriptures.

Application:

- Our security is in God's sovereignty. Despite appearances, he is working all things together for our good and for his glory.
- Let us trust God:
 - knowing his worthiness as James, Peter, and Paul did;
 - trusting his faithfulness to his children as Polycarp did;
 - resting in his unchanging, unfading love for us in Christ as Perpetua did;
 - and entrusting ourselves to his sovereign, good will for all things as the church throughout the ages has.

Conclusion:

Verse 1:

Who has held the oceans in his hands?
Who has numbered every grain of sand?

¹⁸Ferguson, 212.

Kings and nations tremble at his voice
All creation rises to rejoice

Verse 2:

Who has given counsel to the Lord?
Who can question any of his words?
Who can teach, the one who knows all things?
Who can fathom all his wondrous deeds?

Verse 3:

Who has felt the nails upon his hands?
Bearing all the guilt of sinful man
God eternal, humbled to the grave
Jesus, Savior, risen now to reign

Chorus:

Behold our God, seated on his throne
Come, let us adore him
Behold our king, nothing can compare
Come, let us adore him