

Sovereignty of God (Toronto Spiritual Life Convention 1999)

by Eric J. Alexander

Eric J. Alexander's sermon emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the importance of knowing Him deeply through prayer and understanding His nature.

Duration: 56:24

Scripture: Jeremiah 9:23-24, Acts 4:31, Ephesians 1:17

Topics: "Gods Sovereignty", "Knowing God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of understanding and knowing God. He emphasizes that God longs to see his people growing in their knowledge of him. The speaker explores three dominant themes in the Bible related to God's nature and character. He also highlights the sovereign rule of God in the world, including his control over creation and revelation. The sermon concludes with a prayer for a deeper understanding of God and a hymn of worship.

Transcript

Well, now it's a very special pleasure, as I'm sure those of you who know me will know, for me to be back again in Toronto, where there are so many people whose friendship I have cherished over many years and feel wonderfully at home. So I'm deeply grateful to the Council for their invitation to come back again this year and I'm also very grateful for the extent to which they've made preparations to make me feel really at home as a Scotsman with this kind of weather. I was speaking to my wife this morning and she couldn't get the car up the hill to get onto the main road.

The snow was so bad in St. Andrews and St. Andrews is famed for never having snow because of course it's got so many golf courses and you can't play golf terribly easily in the snow. But it is a great providence, I'm sure, that you heard a Scotsman this year when the snow fell so abundantly. Perhaps your Council have just overdone it a little and I am deeply grateful to be here.

And I do want to say how glad we all are to see so many of you who have made your way through the adverse weather to be present this evening. In Britain I can tell you that the first sign of snowflakes, everybody pulls up the drawbridge and stays at home. But you Canadians are made of stronger stuff.

Now, I recollect many years ago when I was just a young theological student. I was taken to a Bible conference, not unlike this, in Glasgow in the old St. Andrews halls, which later were burned to the ground. And there was a conference of this kind that was being held and the speaker was Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones.

Even at that time something of a legend in the Christian Church in Britain. He was there speaking each evening and he began the first evening. I had never had the privilege of being under his ministry before, but I vividly remember that he began, as I discovered he often did, by asking the congregation a number of questions.

If I were to ask you, he said, what was the very essence of Christian salvation, I wonder what you would say. If I were to ask you what God was doing from all eternity in preparing to send his Son into the world to redeem a people, what was he engaged in? If I were to ask you what Christianity is all about, how would you respond to me? And then of course he answered his own question, as was his wont. He made some suggestions, some of you may say, and some of you may say something else, and of course you always knew these were the wrong answers until he came to his own.

And he said, there is only one acceptable and biblical answer to all of my questions. The essence of Christian salvation is to know God. What God was doing in sending his Son from heaven's highest glory, and entering into all the pain and anguish of being our Saviour, was making it possible for us to know God.

And the very essence of Christianity, and everything that makes it distinctive, is that God's purpose in every gracious thing he does, is to bring people to know him. The great tragedy of the world is crystallized for us in the words of Jesus in John 17, O righteous Father, the world has not known you. And the essence of eternal life, this is life eternal in that same great prayer, this is life eternal, that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

When you turn into the epistles, you discover that the Apostle Paul, describing the great ambition of his life, the thing that mastered him above everything else, was that I may know him. When he was praying for the Ephesian believers, he prayed for that enlightenment that would enable them to know the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ better. Over the years, as I have pondered what Dr. Lloyd-Jones, first, I may say, awakened me to think about, I have discovered that it would, in fact, be almost impossible to exaggerate the significance of this whole issue in Holy Scripture.

The one condition in which God longs to see his people is the condition in which they are growing in the knowledge of God. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, or the strong man in his strength, or the rich man in his riches, but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord. And it is this whole theme of the knowledge of God that I want us to be preoccupied with during these three evenings.

And I want us to turn to particular areas, to three of the dominant themes in the Bible, in connection with who God is, his nature and being and character, so that we may be able to pray for one another in the words of the Apostle, as he writes to the Ephesians, I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. We would, of course, have imagined, rightly, that when the Apostle says that he longs to know Christ, that he would have known him already. And there is no question about that.

He writes as someone whose knowledge of God is deeper, perhaps, than that of any of us. But then you see there are gradations of knowing someone, aren't there? You may be asked by somebody, Do you

know so-and-so who is here this evening? And you may be able to say, Oh, yes, I know them intimately, and well, we have been friends for many, many years. But there may be other people, and you would have to say, Well, I know them in a vague kind of way, with a sort of distant relationship.

And what we are about in the evenings of this week is to pray for one another, that we may know him better. Now, the three areas that I want to focus on this evening, tomorrow, and Thursday are these. I want us to consider, first of all, this evening, the theme of the sovereignty of God, summarized in the New International Version translation of the beginning of that prayer, which we read in Acts chapter 4, Sovereign Lord, they said.

Then tomorrow evening, I want to think with you from Isaiah chapter 6 about the holiness of God. And on Thursday evening, from the same book of Isaiah, in chapter 53 about the grace of God. So, this evening, we turn to that central theme as the Bible opens up to us the character and being of God concerning his sovereignty.

You will know that that prayer, which was our Scripture reading, is the first prayer recorded for us in the apostolic church. It happened that the apostles, Peter and John, were threatened in a way that brought great crisis to the early church, that they must be silenced and speak no more in the name of Jesus. So, it was a critical moment in the church's history.

And when they were released, they gathered together with the church and they gave themselves to pray. And you will notice that their prayer begins with an affirmation of God's sovereignty. And it is that that is really the substance of the whole of the prayer, that God is King, that He is the sovereign Lord over the whole universe and that He presides as the great governor over all the affairs of men and nations.

It is the doctrine and truth which Francis Schaeffer used to say answers the question that grumbles under the skin of every thinking man or woman. The question, is there some sovereign hand which is in control of history, of our lives as individuals, of the movement of history catching up nations and peoples in its flow? Is there some overruling power that controls the ultimate madness of the world in which we live? Now, for these Christian believers, this was something of paramount importance at this particular moment. Their very future was threatened.

Many of them undoubtedly experienced the threat to their lives that so many of them ultimately found was realized in the early Christian church. And they were asking, who is in control of this situation in which we live? And of course, the whole of the prayer is really an unpacking of these two words with which it begins, which the NIV translates suitably, sovereign Lord. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God, sovereign Lord, they said.

Now, of course, that doctrine has not only some relevance for the early church and for the church of Jesus Christ in every age and supremely perhaps for our own generation, when we see in so many cases the collapse of leadership in our modern world, east and west, and we are asking, who is in control of the world in which we live? It also has a personal application. Is it really true that all things work together for good to those who love God? Is there a sovereign hand controlling my own life and my personal history? And this part of God's Word opens up to us the answer to these questions. In fact, you discover if you have your Bible before you, you will find it very straightforward to see it here in the passage in Acts 4, but there are five areas in which the apostles, as they pray, touch upon the sovereign rule of God in the world.

The first in verse 24 is that He is the sovereign Lord over creation. Sovereign Lord, they said, You made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. Secondly, you notice in verse 25, He is described as the sovereign Lord of revelation.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our Father David. Thirdly, He is the sovereign Lord of history. In verses 25 and 26, they are quoting from Psalm 2, a psalm in which there is a recollection of a day when the nations of the earth rose up against the Lord and against His anointed.

And the psalm describes the folly of sinful man rising up in rebellion against the Lord. And the psalm speaks of how God is the sovereign Lord who will have the last word in history. Fourthly, He is described as the sovereign Lord of redemption.

You notice in verse 27, Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and your will had decided beforehand should happen. And finally, they address Him as the sovereign Lord over the contemporary scene.

Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. And I hope we may look at each of these a little more closely in the remainder of our time. Here is the picture that the New Testament gives us from the lips of the apostles as they pray of the sovereign rule of God over the whole created order.

And they begin by addressing Him as the sovereign Lord of creation, sovereign Lord, they said. Verse 24, You made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. Now, the reason they come into the presence of God, do you notice incidentally that when they come into God's presence at a moment of great national and personal crisis for them, they do not begin to pour out their need to God.

They do not begin to bring to Him a kind of shopping list of the needs of His people. They begin to address Him and speak to Him about His own character. Now, if you go through the Bible and examine carefully the prayers of men and women of God in the Bible, you will discover that's one of the fundamental marks of it.

They are absorbed and taken up with God. And here the apostles are precisely in that tradition. Sovereign Lord, they say, You made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

Now, they are not addressing God because they imagine He didn't know that. They are coming into God's presence and saying to Him, This is the kind of God You are. And they have come to know Him, you see.

They have come to have this vision and understanding of the glory and majesty and greatness of God. Where did they get it from? They got it by pondering His mighty works in creation. And so they are saying, Here we are in all our weakness and in all the crisis of these moments.

But we are coming to You, the Sovereign Lord of the universe who formed the stars and made the heavens, who created the mountains and the sea. And these very people who are intent upon silencing us, they owe their breath to You. They are the creatures of Your hand and You are the Sovereign Lord of creation.

Now, this is one of the arguments that in the Bible men and women use as they come to God. It is the argument from the greater to the lesser. If this is the way God is in His being, if this is His nature and

character, then why shall we fear mere mortal men whom God formed and created? And you discover that argument is used in two ways in the Bible.

It is used first of all by men as they pray and speak and plead with God. For example, you find that in the prayer of Jeremiah, in Jeremiah chapter 32, Jeremiah begins his prayer with exactly the words incidentally that the apostles are using. Listen to this.

In Jeremiah 32 verse 17, Our Sovereign Lord, He says, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for You. Now, here is a man, you see, who has come to know God.

This is the characteristic of Jeremiah. He is a man who has come to know God and he comes into His presence and the very first thing He says is, You made the heavens and the earth with Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm and nothing is too hard for You. Do you see what a difference that makes in prayer? The thing that really controls our effectiveness in prayer is not that we have taken a course in it.

It is that we have come to know God in all His majestic glory and we plead with Him as the Creator of the heavens and the earth. But not only does this sovereignty of God in creation appear in the pleadings of men with God, it appears in the arguments of God with men. Have you noticed, for example, in Isaiah chapter 40 how God is actually persuading His people to trust Him.

Isn't it an extraordinary thing? The eternal God having to come to us and persuade us that we would find Him trustworthy. And He asks in Isaiah 40, 25, for example, To whom will you compare Me or who is My equal, says the Holy One? Now how then will you know what I am like? Listen to this. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens.

Who created all these? He who brings the starry host out one by one and calls them each by name. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, My way is hidden from the Lord and My cause is disregarded by My God? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary.

Oh, my dear friends, we need to listen to the rebuke of one of the Puritans who tells us we have a capacity to think great thoughts of men and paltry thoughts of God. And one of the answers to that is that evangelical Christians are strong on the doctrine of redemption but weak on the doctrine of creation. And we need to ponder the glories of the character and being of God who formed the heavens and the earth that we might learn to know Him because this is what He is like.

And the government of the universe rests today upon these shoulders. Now, the apostles go on from there. And they speak to God as the Sovereign Lord not only of creation but of revelation.

You notice the two verbs which follow the words Sovereign Lord. First, Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth. Verse 25, Sovereign Lord, you spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David.

Now, do you see what he is saying? He has pondered this throne of God on which the Creator of the heavens and the earth sits. And he says there is a direct line from the throne of God to the mouth of David. How then do they come into God's presence to pray? They come pleading the words that God Himself has spoken through the mouth of His servant David.

And the Holy Scriptures which are here to lead us to know God, they are the very mouth of God Himself through the lips of David speaking to us. Now, my friends, that's what gives Holy Scripture its authority. And that's what gives Holy Scripture its power.

That's why when we are teaching and preaching the weakest and most ordinary of us, which is all of us, when we are preaching and teaching Holy Scripture, there is a power from God here. Haven't you found it yourself? When you have been sitting under the ministry of the Word of God and sometimes we have said, it's as though somebody has sent a sledgehammer through my soul. And it's because there is a direct line from the throne of God to the mouth of David.

Sovereign Lord, You spoke. Now, it is the sovereignty of God exercised through Holy Scripture that is the most glorious thing. It is for these men the most glorious thing.

Here they are faced with the words of these people who have said to them, Speak no more in this name, they said. And they come to God and say to Him, Sovereign Lord, You spoke. And their minds are being formed by the words of God.

And their hearts are being lifted up in the knowledge that God has spoken a word for this time because He is the Sovereign Lord of Revelation. That's why for Jesus there were two phrases which were totally synonymous. One was Scripture says and the other was God says.

Now when you lift the Word of God and begin to read it, that's how you need to see it. The Sovereign Lord who recognizes that none of us could come to know Him unless He reveals Himself. He has revealed Himself in Holy Scripture to us.

And that is why it is so important to bathe your soul and fill your mind and enter it into the very fiber of your being. Not just because you're keeping up rules to have a quiet time. Please God you will do that because we all need these rules.

But it is because in Holy Scripture the Sovereign Lord of the Universe speaks. But you notice from the psalm which they quote that the Sovereign Lord is not only the Sovereign Lord of Creation and of Revelation. He is also the Sovereign Lord of History.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant our father David and then there comes from halfway through verse 25 the quotation from Psalm 2. Now Psalm 2 as you may remember is a description of a particular period in history where God has been raising up one of His servants and the enemies of God set themselves against Him. The kings of the earth rose up against the Lord and against His anointed and they began to seek to undo the work of God and to challenge the purpose of God. That was a very appropriate scripture for them to be recalling at this particular time of course was it not? And that psalm as someone has written bears witness to a God who is present and active in world history and who knows how to make himself respected by those who do not want to give heed to Him and who accomplishes His purpose even though men and women rebel against Him.

Now the psalmist sees this rebellion as a rebellion against the Lord. It falls forth from the psalmist the cry the Lord shall have them in derision. He who sits in the heaven shall laugh.

Now what it is really saying is if you are ever doubtful about who has the ultimate word in history the answer is it is God. And that's why we ought to read our newspaper with the truths that are here in a passage like this teaching us to tremble at the times in which we live. This whole awareness of the

sovereignty of God in history is something that is likewise used both by men and by God in the Bible in pleading with each other.

Do you notice how this is used for example in the way people who are at prayer in the Bible plead with God they begin to quote history to Him. There are masses of these examples for example in 2 Chronicles chapter 20 King Jehoshaphat finds the enemy coming upon him and he is tempted to go of course and number his own resources but instead of that he comes into the presence of God and begins to plead with Him and in 2 Chronicles 20 you discover that what Jehoshaphat is doing he is pleading with God on the basis of what God has done in the past. Lord he says are you not the God who drove out these people from this land? Are you not the God who gave it to your own people? Are you not the God who gained this victory and that victory? He is looking over history you see and he is saying you have done it in the past.

Now it is not because they are just interested in history it is because they are saying this is the kind of God you have done doing mighty works overcoming our enemies and they say do it again Lord in our generation do it again but you know you discover God doing exactly the same thing when he is addressing his people this is why he introduces himself of course to them and says I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob I am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and from the house of bondage I am the God who brought you across the Red Sea I am the God who did this and this Now it is not again that God is giving them lessons in history but he is saying if I did that in generations past I have not changed and I am able to do for you far more than your imagination can think of.

Now this is why of course you get so much history in the Bible that is the point of all the historical records of the Old Testament they are here for one purpose and that is to show us what God is like in his sovereign control over history Now we need to learn that in our generation my dear friends we live in a generation when as Christian people we can so often be apologetic and fearful we can so often be negative in our way of looking at the world and its prospects and so on and at the church of Jesus Christ in our day and there are two ways you see of looking at history one way, the wrong way is to look back at history and say oh that we lived in these great days oh that the great days were upon us again and the other is to recognize that we don't live in the 16th, 17th, 18th or 19th

century we shall soon be living in the 21st and to say blessed be God the answer to that question where is the Lord God of Elijah is not that he is in history past but that he is here the same God today and we need to learn it and say to him sovereign Lord do it again that's the great value of reading of God's mighty works in the past it is that we might take heart and plead with him for the present knowing that he is not the great I was but the great I am he is the sovereign Lord of creation he is the sovereign Lord of revelation he is the sovereign Lord of history and do you notice in verse 27 and 28 he is the sovereign Lord of redemption now the apostles clearly saw this psalm as messianic that is it was speaking not just about an anointed king but about the anointed king it was

speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ and the great watershed of history of course came at this moment when God sent his beloved son into the world and that not only was the watershed of history it brought the darkest hour of history when even the sun was blotted out and the whole life of these men and women who gathered around Jesus began to sink into utter despair and it appeared that history's ultimate nadir had been reached but the apostles say we have begun to recognize what was actually happening in these days notice how they put it in verse 27 indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed now here are all these great and powerful human figures Herod, Pontius Pilate, the

Gentiles, the people of Israel but notice what they say in verse 28 they did what your power and your will had decided beforehand should happen who was it then ultimately who was at work in even the darkest hour of Calvary it was not these figures who imagined they held such power and authority it was the sovereign Lord who was fulfilling all his own purposes mysteriously through this anguish and agony which his well beloved son was entering but it was to do what your power and your will had decided beforehand should happen you will remember how Jesus taught Pilate that lesson do you? when Pilate said to him when Jesus was unwilling to speak with him do you remember? he said do not speak to me do not know who I am for such a minor and jumped up official as Pilate it must have been very

insulting that he wasn't being recognized you know you get this kind of thing today too do not know who I am he said do you not realize that I have the power to crucify you and the power to release you and Jesus I imagine he almost shook his head and said you have no power to do anything unless it were given you by God what is our Lord Jesus saying? he is saying I know God whom you do not know and I know that ultimate power rests with him and what is happening here today is happening by his authority by his sovereign decision and not by yours who was it asks Octavius Winslow who was it that delivered up Jesus to be crucified? not the Jews for envy not Pilate for weakness not Judas for greed but the Father for love and so they come to God and say you were the sovereign Lord in that darkest

moment of the world's history from which you brought out our redemption and you are able to bring something glorious out of this situation in which we now are you see it was because they had come to know God in that measure that they were able to believe as they did my dear friends faith needs truth to feed upon faith does not grow in a vacuum it grows as it feeds on the knowledge of the glory of the character of God and so they address him sovereign Lord of creation sovereign Lord of revelation sovereign Lord of history sovereign Lord of redemption but above all he is the sovereign Lord over the contemporary scene now Lord verse 29 my dear friends Christian believers Christian apostles people like these who knew God they are not antiquarians they are contemporary servants of the living

God and they call upon the riches of all that Holy Scripture and the revelation of God in it has brought them to understand and they say now Lord here they are after all that they have already brought in prayer to God here they are at the contemporary situation one of our problems is that we begin with the contemporary situation and we have lost the riches of the knowledge of God which these men knew now Lord they said consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with boldness and their prayer was answered in verse 31 after they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God boldly but you see it was because they had evidently grown in the knowledge of God that they had such a vision

and such a view of Him and that's probably the greatest need of the Christian church in our generation that we might grow to have this same vision and understanding of the greatness and glory of our God my favorite Old Testament story which I am forever urging and encouraging people to read is the story of the old prophet Elisha when he is down in the town of Dothan from which I think the Dothan in Alabama probably got its name and the king of Assyria Ben-Hadad has been finding that all his attempts to smother and destroy Israel have failed because it seems as if there are traitors within his own court and they are telling the enemy the secrets of where the king is where he is going to travel how his plans can be foiled and Ben-Hadad one day comes to the end of his tether and turns to his

courtiers and says who amongst us is for Israel and who is for the king and they say to him my lord nobody has betrayed you the problem is that the little prophet of the Israelites Elisha down in Dothan he

appears to know the plans that my lord makes even in his own bed chamber and it is he who tells the Israelites where my lord's armies are to be defeated Ben-Hadad says send the cavalry and the infantry and all the army down to Dothan that we may capture this prophet and finish him off and out from the palace there went this great company of the army of Ben-Hadad if somebody had stopped them and said to them where is this vast artillery and cavalry and infantry marching to what great battle are you going to they would have said well we are actually going down to capture the little old

prophet Elisha down in Dothan and down they went and Elisha's young servant when it came time for the armies of Assyria to surround them he went out and looked and as he looked up he saw the whole of the area was surrounded by the horses and chariots of Ben-Hadad and he trembled and ran into Elisha and said to him my lord the chariots of the enemy and their horsemen and Elisha didn't even go out to the door he said to him don't worry don't worry he said more are they that be for us than they that be for them and you can imagine how the young man went back out and looked and saw the army and the horses and chariots and thought to himself well now that's the problem with some of these old chaps who remain on and don't retire they should have put him aside he is not facing the facts but you

know the truth was it was the old man who saw the facts and saw the situation as it was and perhaps a little wearily he cried to God and said Lord open the young man's eyes and God opened the young man's eyes and he saw the valley was full of the horses and chariots of Jehovah and the enemy was routed that day what had he discovered? he had discovered that the Lord God omnipotent reigns he had discovered what John the apostle tells us in chapter 4 of his first epistle greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world blessed be God that we have a God who sits on the throne this evening and will not abdicate it let us pray our great God and our heavenly father how majestic are your ways in all the earth how full of glory you are oh open the eyes of our understanding that we may come

to know you better and to glory in you and to be transformed in our lives by you through Jesus Christ exalted to your right hand as a prince and saviour and in his name we pray Amen now we are going to sing together as our closing hymn number 24 hymn number 24 oh worship the king all glorious above worship the king all glorious above oh grateful is keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy

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