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SERMON XLVI.

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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

ISAIAH 46:10. *My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.*

These words assert the complete sovereignty of God. In the context, God is contrasted with the idols of the heathen, who cannot move out of their place; who are unconscious of the worship paid them, and who cannot hear when worshippers cry. On the other hand, Jehovah is represented as carrying his people from the beginning of their national existence, and as "declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things not yet done," saying, "my counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure."

The sovereignty expressed in the text, cannot be confined to the mere external government of nations, the raising up of one, and the casting down of another; the assigning victory to some, and of defeat and ruin to others. It is a Sovereignty, connected with his declaring "the end from the beginning," and comprehends the power of fulfilling the predictions, of the word of God. The unconditional fulfilment of the prophecies, and especially the promises of the Bible, contains undeniable evidence of the most incomprehensible exercise of Divine Sovereignty, the sovereignty which controls all the movements of the human heart. When God promises the extension of his church, this implies the power of converting his enemies into friends, for in no other way can the church be extended; when he promises to bring all nations into the church, and to cover the whole earth with the knowledge of God, this implies the power, of converting all sinners of every description, and of making them obedient to the truth.

This power of governing the human heart, is the most important as well as the most incomprehensible part of Divine Sovereignty; it is the power of governing moral agents as such, without impairing their moral agency. It supposes the man to be left in possession of all that freedom of which the human mind is conscious, and yet to be so overruled in all his actions as to preserve the Divine plans from violation, and make all human conduct subservient to the Divine counsels. The wise man says "the king's heart is in the hands of the Lord, as the rivers of water he turneth it whithersoever he will;" and the same must be true of every human heart, otherwise God could not accomplish his purposes, "and do all his pleasure."

This doctrine of Divine Sovereignty, which consists in the government of the human heart, although certainly connected with all our most comfortable views of religion, has met with great opposition from the world. That wicked men should oppose it, was to be expected, for the root of all wickedness is enmity to God, and no one can take pleasure in the sovereignty of an enemy. But that good men, the true children of God, should oppose this doctrine, is more surprising. But although no exposition of this subject has ever met with the opposition of all christians, yet it has often been asserted, that when the truly pious oppose this doctrine, there must be some mistake or misapprehension as to the terms in which it is stated. And this opinion becomes the more probable from the circumstance that Arminians in prayer, use very much the same language as Calvinists, and always make their supplications with an apparent persuasion, that God is able to grant what they ask. They pray that the wickedness of the wicked may be restrained. This supposes that God can set bounds to the purposes of wicked men, even when under the dominion of sin. They pray for the conversion of particular sinners, and sometimes for that of the worst sinners within the bounds of their acquaintance, without making any proviso, that God would convert them if he could. They appear to offer the supplication in full confidence that God is able to accomplish what they desire. Now certainly the belief that God can restrain sinners as far as he pleases, without converting them; and that he can convert sinners of every description, at his pleasure, contains as much of the doctrine of the Divine sovereignty as is generally contended for. If a faithful transcript could be made of the views and feelings of a pious Arminian, when he is praying as the Holy Ghost teaches him to pray, that transcript would form a creed which few Calvinists would refuse to subscribe. This circumstance furnishes ground of hope that the teaching of the Spirit in the hearts of Christians, has laid a foundation for bringing them nearer together in their doctrinal opinions than they are at present. I do not know that all denominational distinctions will be laid aside even in the Millenium, but certainly if Christians would discuss their differences, with more Christian meekness and charity, they might increase their mutual confidence in each other, and come to act with more harmony and efficiency in the common cause, than they do at present. They could then live as brethren ought to live, and the blessings of the God of peace would be more abundant on their joint efforts in the cause of their common Master.

In the progres of this discussion I shall aim at *conciliation*, rather than *controversy*. I shall attempt to maintain the substance of what our standards teach on this important subject, and to exhibit it in a manner as little liable to objection from the pious as practicable.

In entering on this discussion it may be proper to state what the doctrine of the Divine sovereignty *does not* mean. And, in the first place, it does not mean, *nor does it allow us to say, that if a man is born to be saved, he will be saved even if he lives in sin; and if he is born to be lost, he will be lost let him do what he can.* In the day of judgment, when all the finally impenitent shall be sent to their place, there will not be found among them one sinner who did what he could to be saved—not one sinner who at any moment of his life, was willing to be delivered from the power of in-dwelling sin, and to be saved on the terms of the gospel.

In the next place, this doctrine *does not mean that God is the author of*

sin. The only author of sin is the sinner himself. God permits sin. He foresaw when he made man, that he would sin, and did not determine to prevent his sinning, for this would imply that he was defeated in his purposes; but he did not use any influence to incline him to sin. And in the present fallen state of man, God permits sin to a certain extent, and overrules it for the manifestation of his goodness, but he never impels man to sin. He only "makes the wrath of man to praise him, and the remainder of that wrath he restrains."

I will again observe, that Divine sovereignty *does not impair the moral agency of man*. Man acts as much in conformity with the dictates of his own will, in committing sin and in rejecting the offers of Divine grace, as if there was no decree of God in operation. It is true his actions are so overruled; that the wise and holy purposes of God are not frustrated, but still the moral agency of man is not impaired. How it is, that God governs moral agents, and leaves them such freedom of action as makes them justly accountable, is one of the most difficult questions in Theology. Metaphysicians have written volumes to explain the mode of Divine operation in the case, but they have thrown more darkness than light on the subject. But that God can govern moral agents, and still leave their wills free, is a fact fully established by the sacred scripture.

In the first place, it is established by the operation of the text, and by all similar assertions. He does "all his pleasure." "He hath made all things for himself." "He makes the wrath of man to praise him." These, and similar assertions, could not be sustained if God could not regulate the operations of the human mind, notwithstanding its conscious freedom.

But in the next place, we think there are many examples in scripture, which show us the very fact of governing moral agents so as to accomplish the Divine purpose while their wills are left free. The brethren of Joseph, determined on taking his life, if necessary, to prevent the fulfilment of his prophetic dreams. But God had inspired those dreams and determined to fulfil them. Here the purpose of man was in direct opposition to the will of God, and yet God so overruled the event, as to make those very men the agents in accomplishing his purpose and defeating their own. Forty Jews bound themselves by a most determined oath, to take the life of Paul, but their purpose was defeated without destroying their moral agency.

I will observe, again, that the promise of eternal life to the believer, certainly proves that God is able to confirm a moral agent in holiness, which is the most important part of governing the human heart. Whatever controversy may exist as to falling from grace in this world, all Christians believe that the redeemed in heaven are confirmed in holiness, beyond the possibility of falling; and this confirmation is certainly by the power of God, and not by their own power. And I cannot conceive of any difference between the power necessary to confirm a saint in heaven, and that which would have confirmed our first parents in paradise. In both cases, the heart of the creature must be considered as in the hands of God. Divine grace arrested Paul when a persecutor of the church; made him an able minister of the New Testament on earth; and led him to a state of confirmed holiness in heaven, from which he can never fall. Could not the same power, or indeed according to our views, a less power, have preserved Adam in innocence,

had infinite wisdom deemed it proper. From these scriptural views of the subject, I am obliged to conclude, that God possesses the power of governing moral agents in all their freedom of action, so as to fulfil his promises, and preserve the plans of his infinite wisdom. Some writers, in accounting for the introduction of moral evil, say, that it was necessary to make men moral agents, and making them such, they were liable to sin of course? I wonder if any Christian would apply this reasoning to the saints in heaven.

I shall now proceed to state the doctrine of the text more distinctly. When it is asserted that the counsel of God shall stand, and that he does all his pleasure, the assertion may be taken in the most general sense as implying *complete success in all the designs of Deity, whether they relate to the management of particular parts of the system, or to the creation and government of the whole.* That God had a plan in view when he created the world, must be conceded by all who acknowledge his existence. This is the necessary result of his wisdom and intelligence. We believe that no rational agent ever undertook any important work without a plan. And to deny a plan or purpose to the Deity at the creation of the world, would be to deny him common rationality. Now, this plan or purpose is the Divine decree, and the only question is, whether it has or has not been defeated. This, I believe, is the true point at which the Calvinist and Arminian must separate.

The Calvinistic system maintains, that the purpose of God never has been defeated. The two principal points brought into this discussion, relate to *the origin of moral evil, and the limited success of the gospel;* and we do not suppose that the divine purpose has been overruled in either of these cases.

In the first case, as to the origin of moral evil, the only question which can be proposed here, is, did God permit sin, or the existence of sin, contrary to the will of God? This is, no doubt, a difficult question, and on this point many persons have formed their creed from a kind of necessity. We must believe something in the case, and on a fair view of the subject, it is certainly easier to believe that God foresaw and permitted sin, than that his plans were defeated by its introduction. The permission of sin contains the whole difficulty of the Divine decrees in relation to sin. The Westminster Confession in speaking on this subject, resolves the Divine decree into the *permission of sin, and the holy bounding of the sinner.* This holy bounding presents no difficulty to our conception; it is merely the restraining of the sinner; the holding of him back from the perpetration of crimes to which his inclinations might lead; or the preventing of his evil dispositions from taking effect to the injury of his fellow creatures. But that God, who views sin with infinite abhorrence, should permit its existence, is what forms the difficulty. And the only solution we can give of it, is, that the Divine Being had motives worthy of himself, but entirely unknown to us, for that permission. But with this difficulty before me, I find it much easier to believe that God freely permitted sin, than to believe that his purpose was defeated by its introduction. For if the first act of sin defeated the divine purpose, every subsequent act was a new defeat, and upon this ground defeats are so multiplied, that the Divine Being would seem to be almost excluded from the government of the world. It will be kept in view that the bare permission of sin, is only suffering the moral agent to act, and not interfering with his moral agency.

The only other point, at which it could be supposed that the Divine will was successfully counteracted, relates to the limited success of the gospel among men. This is also a point of great difficulty. It comprehends in substance the doctrine of election, and all the mysteries which belong to it. There can be no doubt, that the plan of redemption is a scheme of infinite benevolence towards our guilty world. "God has commended his love," in sending his Son to die for us when we were enemies. But after all this manifestation of love, and this expensive preparation in the death of his Son, why is the success of the gospel so limited? Has the conversion of the world been arrested, because the arm of the Lord is shortened that he cannot save?

It will be remembered here, that there is no controversy about the free-agency of man; nor do we suppose any contrariety between the secret and revealed will of God. We allow the Arminian brother to say, and we go with him in saying, that the grace of the gospel is fully offered to all who hear it, and that all who are willing to receive the gospel shall be saved; but this does not remove the difficulty. When we, or when our brothers of other denominations preach the gospel to sinners, we find a majority of them unwilling to receive it. They turn from it with contemptuous neglect, and often exercise the most malignant feelings against those who press the offer upon them. The sinner's unwillingness to receive the gospel, is what stops every thing; and how is it to be removed? At this point there is only one resource for either Arminian or Calvinist. They must look to God for the removal of this obstacle. When the sinner is once willing to receive the gospel and use the means of grace, the great difficulty is overcome; but it is God, and he alone, who can give him this willingness. A willingness to receive the gospel, is the first step in religion; it is the beginning of conversion, and the bestowment of it, is the work of God. The making of the sinner willing to obey the gospel, is the first step in religion; it is the beginning of conversion, and the bestowment of it, is the work of God. The making of the sinner willing to obey the gospel, is conversion or effectual calling. God gives this to some, but not to all; and his previous determination to give it, is his electing grace. It would be in vain to say here, that God gives to all men sufficient grace. I ask, for what is the grace given sufficient? It is no doubt sufficient to render sinners inexcusable, but it is not sufficient to make them Christians; otherwise all would be Christians. But the manner in which God conducts this work shows that his hand is in it. Under the preaching of the gospel, sometimes the worst sinners in the whole community are taken while others are left. The greatest profligate is moved, his heart is opened to receive the truth, and he repents; whilst a better man than he, sitting in the same seat, and hearing the same message of salvation goes away unaffected, and determines to reject the grace of God. These are facts of every man's observation, and they prove undeniably that conversion is the work of God. Should I be asked here, why God converts some and does not convert all? why he makes some willing and leaves others unwilling? my reply is, that I can give no satisfactory answer. I cannot tell, why God permitted sin at first, when he could have prevented it; neither can I tell why he converts some sinners and does not convert all. My Calvinistic creed, would indeed allow me to say, that if the church would pray more fervently for the event, more sinners would be converted. And I have no doubt that the whole church,

Arminian as well as Calvinistic, when it does pray most efficiently, feels the conviction, that all converting grace is in the hand of God; that God is able to move the hardest hearts; and of course they feel, that sinners by rejecting the gospel, cannot diminish the sovereignty of God, nor frustrate his holy purposes. The supposition that God can convert all sinners, while he only converts some, must establish the doctrine of election. Indeed the whole doctrine of the sovereign purpose of God as to sin and its consequences, may be comprised in the following summary. It contains God's determination to create the world; to sustain moral agents in existence; to permit sin in certain cases; and to convert some sinners to eternal life, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The non-conversion of other sinners is the same as the continued permission of sin.

On the other hand, the Arminian system, or any system which differs from that just stated, must suppose that the divine purpose has often been defeated. Perhaps few men would be willing to assert this, in so many words; but the whole reasoning of the case leads to this result. There can be but one question on this subject; Does God "do all his pleasure?" or can the moral agency of the creature defeat the purpose of God? Now let a man carry this question with him, in reading on the Arminian controversy, and ask himself at every turn of the argument, does this suppose a defeat of the divine purpose? and he will find the whole scheme predicated on the supposition, that the will of God has been overruled in numberless instances. And here I would request the Arminian brother, to pause and consider. Would it not be better for us to believe that we are in darkness as to many things in the management of the divine government; and that God may do many things which are holy, just and good, of which we cannot understand the propriety, than to suppose that the sovereign purpose of God has ever been overthrown?

The grand difficulty which separated Christians on this subject, lies in the supposition, that a holy God could have consented to the existence of sin. This difficulty has thrown its perplexities over the reasonings of the whole world. It led many heathen philosophers to the conclusion, that there must have existed from eternity an evil as well as a good principle, and that they were employed in the counteraction of each other. Others supposed that there was an inherent evil in matter, so untractable and ungovernable, that God could not regulate things according to his own will, in any material system. These whims have long since been exploded in christendom. The independent evil principle is gone, but his ghost is not laid yet. Many pious divines think they see in moral agency, that untractable and ungovernable something, which leads to moral evil contrary to the will of God. A very respectable writer has lately asserted, that sin may be necessarily incident to the best system of moral agency. This sentiment is essentially Arminian, and to me, if I believed it, would be very uncomfortable. Sin necessarily incident to the best system of moral agency! I would ask if the redeemed in heaven are not in the best state of moral agency? Can there be any holy obedience to God from creatures who are not moral agents? And are we then to suppose, that contrary to all the promises of eternal life in the word of God, and contrary to all the gracious purposes of God himself, sin may be necessarily incident to the state of the redeemed in heaven? May actually enter heaven contrary to the will of God, and destroy the happiness of the just made perfect? These are serious questions. If we could believe, that

after having entered heaven, we could lose our happiness after millions of ages, or after millions of millions of ages; it might still have been good for us, not to have been born. This opinion is at war with all proper notions of the sovereignty of God. It destroys the sentiment which the Christian feels, when he says with the Psalmist, "The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice." In the prerogative of God, we need more than protection from external enemies; we need a power which can save us from ourselves. When we subscribe the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints, we believe that God will save us from ourselves; and notwithstanding our weakness and sinfulness, conduct us to heaven. And even the Arminian, who does not, in form, subscribe that doctrine, believes that the grace of God will uphold him, so long as he looks to him for that grace. This is another point at which pious feeling brings Arminians and Calvinists very near together. They all expect to stand by the power of God, and repose on his promises. But they are all wrong, and the whole foundation of their confidence is broken up, if sin be necessarily incident to the best system of moral agency, notwithstanding all that God has willed to the contrary. I suppose indeed, that the respectable writer alluded to, did not intend to apply his reasoning to this subject, and he would probably admit, that God is able to confirm moral agents in holiness in some cases, though not in all. But for my part, I think the promise of eternal life to the believer, gives us the assurance that God is able to confirm moral agents in holiness, whenever his infinite wisdom sees proper to do so. I can see no difference between the power necessary to confirm in one case, and that which would be necessary in another; especially as the Divine Being has the forming of all moral agents in his hands, and could, if he please, create them with all the principles most favorable to such a confirmation in holiness; besides, I think, the conversion of some depraved sinners, and the leading of them to confirmed holiness in heaven, implies at least as much power as would have been necessary to have confirmed our first parents in Paradise.

The view which I have here exhibited of divine sovereignty, as it does not suppose the moral agency of man impaired, presents no greater difficulty to the understanding, *than the doctrine of divine foreknowledge*. Foreknowledge undoubtedly supposes the certainty or fixedness of events. If God foreknows that a thing will take place, that thing must take place; and all the difficulty lies in reconciling the certainty or fixedness of events with the moral agency of man. To avoid this difficulty, however, Mr. Wesley and others have told us that foreknowledge does not properly belong to God; that indeed the knowledge of God is infinite, comprehending all events; but then he does not view things in succession, as past or future, but as continually and eternally present; that with God, all times are an eternal NOW. Whether this notion of the eternal presence of events to the divine mind be correct, we shall not stop here to enquire. But certainly this doctrine accomplishes nothing in the present argument. For according to this doctrine the Divine Being, viewing all things as present at all times, must at this moment view as a present event, the condemnation of every sinner who will be condemned at the day of judgment, although many of those sinners are not yet born.

Dr. Adam Clark has marked out for his followers a different course. He denies the infinite knowledge of God altogether. He believes that God could have foreknown every thing if he had chosen, but that he determined

not to know certain things, and that this determination afforded the occasion for the introduction of sin and misery into the world. To say that Dr. Clarke's scheme is unsatisfactory, is to say too little; for it imputes more than weakness or ignorance to the Deity. It supposes that God imposed a voluntary ignorance upon himself in the management of his affairs as universal Governor, which has resulted in the infinite misery of many of his creatures. Now according to all our notions of governments, voluntary ignorance or neglect in a governor is a crime, the guilt of which must be measured by the consequences resulting from it. But I will not press this subject. I am persuaded Dr. Clarke was not aware of these consequences, and would not have defended them. Still, however, the consequences naturally arise from the scheme, and to avoid them we must reject the Doctor's scheme itself.

My observations on this subject have been directed to *two* points, both of which are necessary to be kept in view, for the understanding of the subject. The first of these points is moral agency, or the freedom of the human will. There is no truth of which the mind is more conscious, than of the freedom of its own actions, and any scheme of divine sovereignty that would contravene that truth is inadmissible. And it is also to be understood, that whilst we maintain the moral agency of man, we maintain the use of human means. Some appear to think, that if all future events are certainly fixed, the use of means has no place in the system. In answer to this I would remark, that the objection, if it applies at all, is as applicable to our temporal as to our spiritual affairs. Now I have never met with any man who did not admit, that divine foreknowledge comprehended all our temporal concerns; and what God foreknows, will certainly come to pass. God foresaw from eternity, in what circumstances we would come into this world, and in what condition we would go out of it. But does the certainty of his knowledge, make our efforts unnecessary? At the beginning of every year God foreknows to a single grain, what will be the produce of our fields, and the amount of our harvest for that year; but does this certainty of events make it unnecessary for us to plough and sow? If not, neither does the certainty of events, make the use of means unnecessary in the spiritual world. In religious matters, means are as necessary as in our temporal concerns, and they are even more certain of attaining their end, because, more manifestly accompanied by a divine promise.

The other point which we attempted to establish in consistency with the freedom of the human will, is that the scheme and purposes of God are not overthrown. This we consider as the main pillar of divinity. "The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice." If any wicked beings or principles in existence, can overthrow the purpose of God; the hopes of the Christian are lost; the purchase of redemption is lost; and the government of the world and of all worlds has passed into the hands of the enemies of God.

We shall now conclude this subject by a few practical observations. And in the first place, the doctrine of the divine sovereignty, rightly understood, furnishes the mind with agreeable contemplations, in surveying the past events of the church. The church has experienced many changes and perils; we have sometimes seen her at the brink of ruin, but an invisible Lord has raised her up. The whole world has sometimes combined for her destruction, and there seemed to be nothing, so far as human eyes could see, to prevent the accomplishment of the purpose; but an invisible hand came to her deliverance. When she passed through the deep waters, they did not overflow her; and when she passed through the fire, the sparks did not kin-

de upon her. The church has often been more endangered by her own negligence and unfaithfulness, than by all her external enemies; and from these dangers she has been delivered by means apparently the most incompetent. Early in the last century, when every thing seemed to be languishing and freezing, throughout almost the whole of Christendom, a small number of obscure young men formed a society in one of the British Universities. The most prominent characters that came from that society were Wesley, Whitfield and Hervey. And these few men, under the blessing of God, kindled up a sacred spark, which extended its light and heat through many of the European and American churches, and which, we trust, will extend its light and heat onward to the latter day glory of the church on earth. To this society we are much indebted for the benevolent efforts of the present day. But how inadequate the means to the end! Surely nothing but the power of God has effected this work. And we now rely on the same God to go forth with our missionaries for the conversion of the world. When we look at the work before us, every man's heart would fail, if we did not trust to an Almighty arm. All our means and preparation are like a drop to the ocean considered in themselves; but when we remember that we go forward at the command of Him who declares the end from the beginning—saying "my counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure," we know that our labor is not in vain. That God who shook the length and breadth of the Roman Empire when apostles preached; who made the blood of the martyrs the seed of the church in former times, can make the ashes of our missionaries the seed of the churches in foreign lands. All this we believe, because the counsel of God shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure.

In the next place, the belief of divine sovereignty, lays the only foundation or encouragement in prayer. We have already seen that all Christians, and even those who appear to be most opposed to this doctrine on other occasions, believe it when they pray. Indeed, to pray to God for what we did not believe he could accomplish or give, would be a most egregious trifling with our duty. How could we pray to God for the conversion of sinners, if we did not believe that he could convert them? How should we pray for the conversion of the world, without believing that he can convert all sinners? And how could we pray for the sanctification of the church, without believing that he can sustain his people in holiness? We may admit that those who have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, or those who by perseverance in sin, are given up by the Divine Spirit, are placed beyond the mercy of God, though not beyond his converting power, and if we knew the persons to whom these cases applied, we ought not to pray for them, but with these exceptions, it is our duty to pray for all men, and to pray in the faith that God is able to convert them all.

But again this doctrine furnishes our only hope, when we look forward to the immortal interests of man. A duration beyond the grave and beyond the judgment, which millions and millions of ages will not bring nearer to a close, is a startling subject of contemplation. "Through what varieties of untried being," through what wonderful scenes of enjoyment or misery must we pass, and how immense the interests which such duration must involve! And to whose hands shall we confide those interests? Shall we trust to our own rectitude to sustain our holiness and happiness through eternity, or shall we commit our concerns, to the tender mercies and faithful keeping of our God?