

SOVEREIGNTY AND INCARNATION

INTRODUCTION

Last week, we finished our study in the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24-25. We will pick up Matthew 26 in January.

Over the next seven weeks, we will look at various aspects of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the “Christmas story,” as some would say. We begin today with the sovereignty of God and the incarnation.

To be sure, the idea that God became a man is not a human idea. Islam, the second-largest religion in the world, finds the idea of the incarnation to be ridiculous and offensive. Buddhism and Hinduism, which combined represent a quarter of humanity, are desperate to escape physical reality. Only biblical Christianity recognizes that God did become a man. The Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, took on human flesh and did so permanently to save sinners from the judgment of God.

God exercised His sovereignty in bringing about the incarnation of His Son.

Let’s begin with a brief primer on the sovereignty of God. You have a large number of cross-references in your notes. Because of the amount of ground to cover quickly, I won’t refer to many of them in this sermon. I encourage you to read them carefully later.

A PRIMER ON THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

What does it mean that God is sovereign? It means that Yahweh is in complete control of everything that happens. Nothing happens apart from His specific decree.

The Extent of God’s Sovereignty

The Scriptures tell us that God's sovereignty extends over the creation of all things (Revelation 4:11), governments (Proverbs 21:1), the election of the saints and reprobation of the wicked (Romans 9:15-18), the sufferings of Christ and the actions of His executioners (Acts 4:27-28), the regeneration of sinners (James 1:18), the sanctification of Christians (Philippians 2:13), and all of human life (Isaiah 45:9, James 4:15). God is even sovereign over the deaths of animals and human life (Matthew 10:29-30).

The Practical Outworking of God's Sovereignty

The sovereignty of God is not theoretical but how He does all things. Yahweh acts according to His own pleasure and for no other reason (Psalm 115:3; Proverbs 21:1; Daniel 4:35). He does not answer to anyone for what He does, ever (Job 33:13; Matthew 20:15; Romans 9:19-20). Using a biblical metaphor, God is always the potter, and His creatures are always the clay and never the reverse (Isaiah 29:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 18:1-10; Romans 9:19-24). The combined nations of the earth are no more an obstacle to God's purposes than a fleck of dust (Isaiah 40:15-17). No one can prevent God from doing what He pleases, when He pleases, and to whom He pleases (Job 9:2-13; 11:10; Isaiah 10:15; Daniel 4:35).

The Offense of God's Sovereignty

All of that is well and good, but it collides painfully with us in two particular areas.

First, most of us kick against the sovereignty of God when it comes to His actions toward people. We expect God to follow our desires and be nice to those we like and judge those we don't. But in truth, we have no right to demand that God do or not do anything. He doesn't answer to anyone, you and me included.

And, of course, at some point, we all have a hard time with God being in control of

salvation. Romans 9:18 says,

**18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires,
and He hardens whom He desires.
(Romans 9:18, 2022 LSB)**

I've heard people deny Romans 9:18 out of hand: "That's not true."

We want a reason for God's actions to be found in the person. But He acts always and only because of His good pleasure. Unbelievers believe in Jesus because the Father gives them faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). The wicked repent because God grants them repentance (Second Timothy 2:24-26). What if He doesn't give someone faith? They won't believe. What if He doesn't grant them repentance? They won't repent.

There is more to the issue of God's sovereignty than free will on the one hand and being a mindless puppet on the other. No one can be saved apart from God's sovereign will, but no one is saved against their own will. No one can be saved apart from repentance, but those who repent do so freely.

How can God be wholly sovereign, and yet people make free decisions? I don't know. The Bible doesn't explain it. I only know that no one can come to Christ until the Father draws Him, and yet no one is dragged to Christ against their will. He does something within the elect that guarantees that they will believe and be saved, and yet without making them puppets.

As I said, this is just a primer on the sovereignty of God. There is much more that could be said, but we're going to move on to how the sovereignty of God is worked out in the incarnation of Christ. I think Matthew 2 would be a great place to see the sovereignty of God in action.

SOVEREIGNTY AND THE INCARNATION

This chapter speaks of four prophetic fulfillments.

- First, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.
- Second, the Father would call His Son out of Egypt.
- Third, there would be shattering grief because of the murder of children.
- And fourth, God's Son would be called a Nazarene.

Let's think about them.

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah”

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, **2** “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” **3** And when Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he was inquiring of them where the Christ was to be born. **5** And they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: **6** ‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A LEADER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’”
(Matthew 2:1–6, 2022 LSB)

It was so clearly understood that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem that the chief priests and scribes didn't have to research it; they knew the answer.

But we know something else. We know that Mary was living in Nazareth when the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in her womb. So, how does Mary get from Nazareth to Bethlehem in time for Jesus to be born?

Enter in Caesar Augustus. Luke writes.

1 Now it happened that in those days
a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
for a census to be taken of all the inhabited earth.
2 This was the first census taken
while Quirinius was governor of Syria.
3 And everyone was going to be registered for the census,
each to his own city.
4 And **Joseph** also went up from Galilee,
from the city of **Nazareth**, to Judea,
to **the city of David**, which is called **Bethlehem**,
because he was of the house and family of David,
5 in order to register along with Mary,
who was betrothed to him, **and was with child**.
6 *Now it happened that while they were there,*
the days were fulfilled for her to give birth.
(Luke 2:1–6, 2022 LSB)

Well, what a stroke of luck! The Roman emperor just happens to issue a decree that requires Joseph to take his heavily pregnant wife 90 miles to the south in time for the birth of her Son to fulfill prophecy!

Luck had nothing to do with it. Proverbs 21:1 says,

1 The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of Yahweh;
He turns it wherever He pleases.
(Proverbs 21:1, 2022 LSB)

Did Caesar Augustus *know* that his decree would fulfill a prophecy of Scripture? Of course not. Did God the Father know the disruption this decree would cause millions of people, all to get Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Of course, He did. Nothing will hinder the purposes of God.

“Out of Egypt I called My Son”

Hosea 11:1 says,

1 When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son.
(Hosea 11:1, 2022 LSB)

This was fulfilled in Matthew 2:15. So we have a new problem: how do we get Joseph and the family from Bethlehem to Egypt so that God can call His Son *out* of Egypt?

13 Now when [the Magi] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.”

14 So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and departed for Egypt.

15 And he remained there until the death of Herod, in order that what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled, saying, “**OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.**”

(Matthew 2:13–15, 2022 LSB)

The Magi were supposed to return to Herod the Great and tell him where to find the

new King of Israel. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod but to leave Israel without his knowledge (that angel was busy for a while). More on this in a moment. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus remained in Egypt until Herod died. This would not have taken long. At most, there was a four-year window in which Jesus could be born: between 7 B.C., when Quirinius was governor, and 4 B.C., when Herod died. The Magi didn't visit the night Jesus was born; He could have been two when they arrived. Herod could have died just a few weeks or months after they arrived in Egypt.

“Rachel weeping for her children”

The third fulfilled prophecy in Matthew 2 is directly related to the first two.

16 Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi,
he became very enraged,
and sent and slew all the male children
who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity,
from two years old and under,
according to the time which he had carefully determined from the magi.
(Matthew 2:16, 2022 LSB)

This is not mythology; this is history. It happened. As surely as Jesus was born to Mary, Herod the Great ordered the slaughter of every male child under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. We shouldn't think this was thousands of children; it might not have been a hundred. But even if it was only twenty, it's a horrific event.

That's why it's important to know that even this terrible event was not out of God's control.

Matthew continues,

17 Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled,
 saying, 18 “A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH,
 WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING,
 RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN;
 AND SHE WAS REFUSING TO BE COMFORTED,
 BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE.”
 (Matthew 2:17–18, 2022 LSB)

In Isaiah, Yahweh says,

7 The One forming light and creating darkness,
 Producing peace and creating calamity;
 I am Yahweh who does all these.
 (Isaiah 45:7, 2022 LSB)

We usually think that the events of our lives can be isolated and evaluated as good or bad. We add up the bad experiences and the good experiences and hope that the good outweighs the bad. But the Lord typically uses suffering to change the courses of our lives, to purify us, to sanctify us, to break our grip on the world that is passing away, and to cause us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

The slaughter of the children around Bethlehem was a small part of Yahweh’s plan to reveal His glory to creation. The mothers and fathers whose hearts were broken that day could not see what God was doing. Frankly, *we* can’t see how it fits in with His purposes. But we know from Scripture that it did not take Him by surprise and that He planned it and decreed it so that His glory would be seen in eternity.

Beyond that, my friends, as with all our suffering, we must lift our hands and worship: the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord! (Job 1:21).

“He shall be called a Nazarene”

Let's review. When still in Mary's womb, Jesus was in Nazareth but needed to be in Bethlehem for His birth. After His birth, Jesus was in Bethlehem but needed to be in Egypt to be called out of there. The time to leave Egypt came, and Joseph clearly planned to return to Bethlehem. But here's the thing; the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem but would be called a Nazarene. For God it wasn't a problem; it was barely an inconvenience.

21 So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother,
and came into the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea
in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

Then after being warned by God in a dream,
he departed for the district of Galilee,

23 and came and lived in a city called Nazareth,
so that what was spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled:
“He shall be called a Nazarene.”

(Matthew 2:21–23, 2022 LSB)

We see that every event concerning Jesus' incarnation was carefully and precisely orchestrated by God the Father. His glorious purposes came to pass exactly as He wished. He exercised His sovereignty over Mary, Joseph, Caesar Augustus, the Magi, and Herod. Each acted freely. Joseph freely married Mary. Caesar freely ordered that a census be taken. The Magi freely traveled from the East. Herod Archelaus freely acted on the same sort of murderous greed that marked his father.

None were puppets. A person's heart, whether a carpenter or king, is like water in the heart of God; He turns it where He wishes. And yet each person acts according to their own nature and desires.

9 The heart of man plans his way,
But Yahweh directs his steps.

(Proverbs 16:9, 2022 LSB)

Let me rephrase this. Man plans his route, but God determines his destination.

A Repeating Pattern

This same pattern repeats throughout Scripture. Yahweh decreed every last event that will take place in creation. His decree was finalized before anything was made. He does not watch it unfold, as you and I must. And He did not just foresee what would happen; He decreed everything that would happen, from a collapsing star to a hair falling from your eyelash when you blink. Jesus said that even the sparrows don't die apart from the sovereign purposes of God (Matthew 10:29).

BRINGING IT HOME

What do we do with this then?

We must worship our God! We acknowledge Him in all His glory and power and majesty! He alone is God! He is strong and majestic and always victorious! The world's nations are nothing to Him; He counts them as non-existent and worthless (Isaiah 40:17).

We must give thanks! You are not the result of random chance creating life on Earth. You are fearfully and wonderfully made; every moment of your life is under His dominion—all the more reason to trust Him and not rebel against Him.

We must pray! Not because prayer will alter God's eternal plan but because we have no idea what His eternal plan is. Prayer lets us press closely against our God as He works His will in creation. Sometimes, we have learned His will, and we see Him act. Sometimes we have not learned His will, but in His presence, we are comforted.

We must trust our God! He did not send His Son impulsively, hoping that perhaps

He could rescue His people from hell. Jesus is the Lamb slain from before creation; the names of God's people were written in His Book of Life before creation. Before God spoke anything into existence, He had already worked out the details of salvation. So, if you turn from your sins and put your trust in Jesus, you will be saved without question, without a doubt. He knows whether you trust Him now or will trust Him in the future. But as I said earlier, we aren't robots. So what will *you* do?

Beloved, God never *tries* to do anything; He *does* what He pleases, and no one can stop Him. He can promise salvation to those who turn from their sins and call upon Jesus Christ because He decreed their salvation in eternity past and knows them as His precious children in eternity future.

We are locked in time, though. We don't know the past or the future. We only have the present. So what will you do today? If you don't know Him, will you turn to Him today? If you do know Him, will you trust Him today?

This is my testimony; I pray that it is yours:

*My faith has found a resting place, not in device or creed;
I trust the ever-living One, His wounds for me shall plead!
I need no other argument, I need no other plea:
It is enough that Jesus died, and that He died for me!*

Let's pray, and then let's sing that hymn together!