

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

PSALM cxv. 3.

But our God is in the heavens; He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased.

THE sovereignty of God is a sublime and difficult subject, yet very important and useful. Some of the divine perfections may, perhaps, appear to our selfish minds more amiable and attractive; but there is none in which our obedience and submission to Him are more deeply concerned. Some of His attributes may seem more clearly to invite our confidence, and engage our affection; but as creatures in a state of subjection and trial, we are peculiarly interested in the divine sovereignty. It is necessary that we should be well established in this doctrine, that we may with sincerity pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven;" and that in the hour of adversity we may be able to say—"It is the Lord, let Him do as seemeth Him good."

Sovereignty signifies, in general, Supremacy—the possession of supreme power—a right to govern without the control of another; or, as in our text, a power to act as one pleases. This right is here ascribed to God, and can belong to no other in the same sense or degree. Puny mortals, conquerors, and tyrants, have frequently assumed this right, and have exercised it over a small portion of this globe, and over a few millions of their fellow-mortals. and history has awfully shewn how unfit man is to be entrusted with sovereignty unrestrained; for great men are too often the subjects of an infernal sovereign, and slaves of their own bad passions; they are proud, ambit-

ious, cruel, selfish, and misinformed: therefore the common sense and common interest of mankind have led them to prefer limited monarchies, and to restrain human sovereignty within reasonable bounds: but the great, holy, and blessed God is incapable of any of these evils, and is perfectly qualified to exercise unlimited sovereignty over the whole universe, whatever worlds and beings it may contain, known or unknown to us.

Our present business shall be to establish and improve this great scriptural doctrine, that *the glorious God has a right to exercise dominion over all His creatures, and to do in all respects, as He pleases.*

This right naturally results from His being the *Former* and the *Possessor* of heaven and earth. Who can dispute His right? He made all things; He supports all things; and is it not fit that He should govern all things? "For His pleasure they are, and were created;"—may He then not do with them as He pleases? especially when we consider that:—

He is infinitely wise. He perfectly knows all His creatures, all their actions, and all their tendencies. He is acquainted with the great plan which His own infinite mind projected before the beginning of time, and of which the wisest men know nothing, but that "He hath made all things for Himself, to shew forth His own glory." As little children, however acute, cannot comprehend the movements of a large machine, or the operations of a manufactory, or the affairs of government, so we short-sighted mortals, whatever be our attainments, are unqualified to judge of the management of the universe; but we know that He is wise and should rejoice to think that "the Lord reigneth."

He is also *infinitely righteous.* His sovereign rule is not that of a haughty tyrant; but of a most righteous and holy Governor. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Yes; He cannot do wrong. His ways may be to our apprehension, mysterious: His paths may be "in the sea, and His footsteps in the mighty waters," so that we may not be able to trace Him: "clouds and darkness may be round about Him," so that we may not clearly discern Him; but "justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne." It is the pride of man that arraigns the divine procedure at the bar of his reason, and concludes that this is right, and that is wrong, according as it agrees or disagrees with human notions and practices. God's ways and thoughts may differ widely from ours, but they are all right. "Just and true are all Thy ways, O King of saints."

He is also infinitely good. We may not always be able to discern the goodness of God. In particular instances, His dealings with men may seem severe; but we are bound to believe, from the essential goodness of His nature, that none of His actions are inconsistent with it. In human affairs, the imprisonment or execution of a criminal, may appear to an ignorant spectator a cruel action; but the intelligent observer knows that the general good of society is promoted by the punishment of evildoers. A child can hardly be prevailed upon to swallow a nauseous medicine, however necessary; but an adult person receives it as a benefit, calculated to restore his health and preserve his life; he will even submit to the amputation of a limb for the same purpose. Probably, those things in the course of Providence which seem the most severe, are equally necessary; and the destruction of whole cities or nations may be so, for aught we can tell: at least we may, with great propriety, say of God—

"Good when He gives, supremely, good
Nor less when He denies;
E'en crosses, from His sovereign hand,
Are blessings in disguise."

That the blessed God is not only perfectly qualified to exercise a sovereign rule over the universe, but that He ac-

tually does exercise it, has always done so, and will do so to the end of time, is absolutely certain and undeniable, and is uniformly asserted in the Scriptures of truth. It is unnecessary to stop here, in order to produce formal proof; it will be sufficiently evident while we point out some of the distinct instances of His sovereignty:—In the creation of the world—in the fall of man—in the method appointed for his recovery—in the application of redemption to sinners—and in all the temporal concerns of men, prosperous or adverse.

1. Observe the sovereignty of God in the creation of the world.

Why was the world made at all? Why made just when it was? Why made *as* it was? Why not made ages before? Why organised as it is? a sun in the centre?—several planets (how many?) revolving about it?—the earth in her present orbit?—the moon attending her?—why other planets nearer the sun,—others more remote? Why was this globe inhabited? and by such a creature as man, so like other beings in some respects, so unlike them in others? A thousand such questions might be asked. One answer suffices for them all—“For Thy pleasure they are and were created.” Other reason we know not, nor is any other necessary.

2. The sovereignty of God may be noticed in the awful event of man's apostacy.

Before the fall, his Maker entered into a covenant with him; not for himself alone, but for all his posterity in, and with him, as their head and representative. If he should fulfil the condition of that covenant, abstaining from the forbidden tree, as the pledge of his obedience, all his posterity would be confirmed in the same state of happiness, and in the divine favour; if he transgressed, all his posterity would be involved in the consequences of that

transgression, and become liable to the same condemnation and misery with himself. Could all the posterity of Adam have been consulted, it is probable that all would readily have consented to this arrangement; but whether they would have approved or not, or whether men now approve or disapprove of this constitution of things, is of no manner of consequence. So God determined; and doubtless He determined rightly. He gave Adam sufficient power to maintain his integrity; but he left him free to fall. So His sovereignty appointed. Left to himself, he who could have stood, did fall, and by that fall

“Brought death into the world, and all our woe!”

3. The sovereignty of God is displayed in the method He has been pleased to appoint for the recovery of fallen man.

There was rebellion in heaven, as well as on earth. Angels rebelled, and were expelled from Heaven—not *all* indeed; and why not all? The sovereign goodness of God preserved the “elect angels” (1 Tim. v. 21) from falling; the rest “are reserved in chains of darkness to the judgment of the great day.” But man, apostate man, became the object of divine compassion; and no sooner did he need a Saviour, than a Saviour was promised—a Saviour who should assume the nature that had sinned, and restore the offender and his (believing) posterity to a better paradise than Adam lost. But why not include angels? They were beings superior to man. Divine sovereignty passed them by; “for verily He (the Redeemer) took not upon Him the nature of angels, but He took on Him the seed of Abraham”—“He took flesh and blood, that He might die, and by dying, make reconciliation for the sins of the people.” Heb. ii. 17, &c

That this method of reconciliation should be fixed upon, we ascribe to the divine sovereignty. That He should save any of the fallen race—that His Son should be the Saviour,

—that in order to His being a Saviour, He should be incarnate—be born of a virgin—be born where and when He was—be a poor man, and a man of sorrows—should speak, and act as never man did, yet be treated as never man was; and that He who was to give life to the world, should Himself die—die a violent death—die on the infamous cross, and that His so dying should be considered and accepted by a holy and just God as a sacrifice, satisfaction, and atonement for sin—that His blood should cleanse from all sin; and that, through faith in His blood, all sinners who believe should be freely, fully, and forever justified, and entitled to everlasting life.—Such was the divine constitution; so God appointed in His sovereign pleasure; and therefore we conclude that this method of salvation is right and good, excellent and glorious, every way worthy of its divine Author, who will be eternally glorified by the whole intelligent universe for adopting it.

4. The sovereignty of God is no less displayed in the application, than in the provision of this great salvation. The glorious gospel, which is “the power of God to salvation, to every one that believeth,” is sent to one place, and not to another. He has indeed authorised His disciples to proclaim His gospel “to every nation”—“to every creature;”—and no small share of blame, it may be feared, attaches to the church, and especially to the ministers of it, that greater efforts have not been made in obedience to that authority: yet we cannot deny the exercise of divine sovereignty, in the unequal distribution of gospel light. In the days of the apostles, Macedonia was preferred to Bithynia: and doubtless the providence of God directed the steps of the first Evangelists and of successive Missionaries. Some nations of the world are far more highly favoured than others. Many populous regions of Asia are destitute of a gleam of light, and others enjoy but a very small por-

tion of it. Almost the whole of Africa lies in midnight darkness; and the vast continent of America knew nothing of the gospel till within a few centuries. Of all countries, Great Britain has the greatest cause for joy and gratitude. Here, surely the sovereign goodness of God will be gladly acknowledged—“He hath not dealt so with every land, praise ye the Lord.”

And will not every individual, who has “tasted that the Lord is gracious,” ascribe all the light, the faith, the love, the hope that he enjoys, to the sovereignty of God? That He was pleased to send His gospel to the place of your abode (while others are passed by): that He should so order the circumstances of time and place, that you should be brought to hear the joyful sound; and above all, that the eyes of your understanding should be enlightened, your heart softened and humbled, the Saviour revealed in you the hope of glory, and you enabled, perhaps, in the face of contempt and opposition, to own His cause and follow Him fully: while probably those who heard the same sermons, and were placed in the same circumstances with you, remain in their natural state, and, like “Gallio, care for none of these things,” but despise and hate them, and speak all manner of evil of them and of you.—Now, to what will you ascribe the difference? Who maketh thee to differ from another? Was it your own superior wisdom and goodness? No; you will certainly say, “By the grace of God I am what I am;” that grace was freely bestowed, and might justly have been withheld. Not unto me, O Lord; not unto me, but to Thy name be the praise and glory of the saving change. Such was the language of our adorable Lord when on earth, when the seventy disciples reported to Him the success of their ministry. “In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid

these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes; even so Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight." Luke x. 21.

The sovereignty of God our Saviour is apparent in the constitution and ordinances of His church. He has appointed what officers should dispense His word, and superintend its concerns. He has appointed the first day of the week instead of the seventh, to be the Christian Sabbath, for He is "Lord of the Sabbath." He has ordained the preaching of His word, prayer, and praise, to be the stated branches of public worship. That Christ thus appointed the ordinances of His worship in the church, is a high instance of His sovereignty, and every Christian is in duty and in love bound to submit to all His appointments.

5. The sovereignty of God is obvious in His disposal of the temporal affairs of men, whether as *individuals* or as *nations*.

As individuals.—Our parentage, the circumstances of our birth, the place, the time, are all arranged by the great Ruler. The powers we possess, of body and of mind; the degree of education we receive, and on which, frequently, so much, in after life, depends; the culture or the neglect of the mind; the connexions we form, apparently the result, not so much of choice, as of what we call Accident, are all under the direction of Heaven; and so are all our concerns, whether we enjoy uninterrupted health and good spirits, or whether we drag on heavily, with a sick body and a feeble mind; whether we forsake the land of the living at twenty years of age, or are detained in it to seventy or eighty, depends on the divine pleasure. for Jesus hath "the keys of death and of the invisible world." In like manner, His sovereign pleasure allots the bounds of our habitations; the nature of our employment, in a superior or inferior station; and the degree of prosperity or

failure, that shall crown our labours or disappoint our hopes. Every prudent and laborious tradesman is not always successful; the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong." "Promotion," says the wisest of men, "cometh not from the East, nor from the West, nor from the South." Events, that contradict all probabilities, often take place, to shew man his dependance on a superior power; for sometimes, as we read in Hannah's song (1-Sam. ii. 8.) "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and He hath set the world upon them."

The sovereignty of God should particularly be owned by the afflicted and distressed, who form a large proportion of human beings, man being "born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward." It is of great importance to know and remember, what was wisely observed to patient Job, that "affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground;" that is to say, afflictions are not the effect of chance, they are in the hand of God; and therefore it is added, as a piece of advice to Job,—"I would seek unto God, and unto God I would commit my cause."—"I would submit to His rod, and seek relief from Him. Even those events which seem to us *casual*, and as to the agents concerned in them, undesigned, are under the direction of heaven; so it appears from Exodus xxi. 12, 13, "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death: but if a man lie not in wait, but *God deliver him into his hand*, then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee," that is to the city of Refuge. This proves that nothing comes *by chance*, but the most casual events are under the control of divine sovereignty.

To the wicked, afflictions are intimations of God's holy displeasure against their sins, and solemn warnings to fly from the wrath to come; but to the children of God they are parental chastisements, the effects of tender love, and wisely directed for their good. The sovereign hand of the Almighty should be owned in both.

That sovereign hand is, perhaps, more visible in the affairs of nations; they rise and fall, flourish and decay, and the connexion between natural causes and effects may sometimes be plainly discerned; yet that the Ruler of the world directs them is sufficiently evident, for in His hand are both the causes and the effects. This might be fully illustrated from the history of Israel, and other nations connected with them, from their first rise in the family of Abraham, to their dispersion: a great part of the Old Testament might be adduced for this purpose, but time forbids. God was pleased Himself to illustrate this before the eyes of Jeremiah, by the emblem of the potter, who, with the utmost ease, formed a vessel of the yielding clay, and as easily broke it, and formed it again into another vessel, "as seemed good to the potter to make it." "Cannot I do with you, O house of Israel, said the Lord, as this potter"—destroy a nation or erect an empire? Jer. 18. The craft, the envy, the revenge, the ambition of men are often the occasions of wars, and fightings, and revolutions: the agents may be wicked men, but frequently they are the mere instruments of a holy and just God, in punishing an individual or a nation, ripe for ruin. The agent may be wicked, but God is righteous. "With Him," said the wise and pious Job, "with Him is strength and wisdom: the deceiver and the deceived are His. He leadeth counsellors away spoiled, and maketh the judges fools. He looseth the bands of kings, or girdeth their loins with a girdle. He increaseth the nation and destroyeth them." &c. Job xii. 16, &c. In this manner God displays, in every age, His

sovereign dominion over the nations.—His management of the children of men, crossing their purposes, overruling their counsels, overpowering their efforts, and overcoming their opposition; and proving, to their confusion, that "in the thing wherein they dealt proudly, He was above them." Exod. xviii. 11. And in nothing is this, His sovereign power, more conspicuous, than in producing great and good results from the evil actions of His creatures, as in the case of Joseph, whose glory in Egypt was the result of the envy and cruelty of his brethren, and of the lewdness and lies of Potiphar's wife. Their actions and intentions were bad, "but God meant them for good." The Sabeans and the Chaldeans pillaged Job, but the glory of God, as well as Job's greater prosperity, was ultimately promoted. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, was a tyrannical oppressor of the children of Israel, who could proudly say, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him?" but to him God says, "In very deed, for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee My power; and that My name may be declared throughout all the earth." Exod. ix. 16. In a word, the greatest and most glorious event that ever took place in our world, the atoning death of Immanuel, was effected by instruments the most base and vile. It was by the "wicked hands" of the Jews, that Jesus "was crucified and slain;" but we are assured by the Apostle Peter that even this was according to "the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God." The holy God is not the author, or abettor of the sins of men; it is impossible that He can concur in the moral evil of any human action; but we see that, in the exercise of His sovereign rule, He not only permits wicked men to perform bad actions, but by His infinite wisdom and power brings good out of evil. The sinner is condemned, but God is righteous.

The doctrine of God's sovereignty shews us, that *ready obedience to all His precepts* is our reasonable service. Is God the rightful Governor of the world? are we His natural subjects? has He made known His holy will to us?—and shall we not cheerfully obey Him? As our *Creator*, we ought to obey Him;—as our *Preserver*, we ought to obey Him. and especially as our *Redeemer*, we ought to obey Him. "I am the Lord thy God, who have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, and out of the house of bondage," said Jehovah to Israel; and then He proceeds to lay down His law for their conduct—"Thou shalt have no other gods before Me," &c. Exod. xx. 2,3. In like manner He speaks to us in the gospel, not from Sinai, but from Zion, "Because I am the Lord, and your God, and Redeemer, therefore are ye bound to keep all My commandments."

The great lesson enforced by this doctrine is, *Humble submission to all His righteous pleasure*. Is God the Sovereign of the world, infinitely wise, righteous, and good? Has He an undoubted right to do as He will with all His creatures? Then surely He has a right to do as He pleases with *me*. He is too wise to err; too good to be unkind. I welcome all His sovereign will, for all that will is love. He says to me, in this painful, or in that bereaving providence, "Be still, and know that I am God;" and my submissive temper shall yield obedience. I will adopt the praiseworthy language of the most patient of men, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." He will permit His suffering child to plead, as His only-begotten Son once did in His agony, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me?" but I hope He will strengthen me to add, with profound submission, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt."

Amen.