

God Over All

When life feels out of control, it can be comforting to remember that we're never out of the sight of our Creator—and he never loses control. Be encouraged by the following Scriptures about God's sovereignty with commentary from the ESV Study Bible and rest knowing he rules over all.

Ephesians 1:11

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will . . .

Making those who believe in him heirs with Christ was not an ad hoc event; God had planned it from all eternity. By definition God is sovereign, directing all things freely according to his royal counsel. This is in sharp contrast with the pagan gods of the time, who were understood to be often fickle or bound by an inscrutable and arbitrary fate. God's predestination gives his people tremendous comfort, for they know that all who come to Christ do so through God's enabling grace and appointment (Eph. 2:8–10). Who works all things according to the counsel of his will is best understood to mean that every single event that occurs is in some sense predestined by God. At the same time, Paul emphasizes the importance of human responsibility, as is evident in all of the moral commands later in Ephesians 4–6 and in all of Paul's letters. As Paul demonstrated in all of his remarkable efforts in spreading the gospel (Acts 13–28; cf. 2 Cor. 11:23–28), he believed that doing personal evangelism and making conscious choices to obey God are also absolutely essential in fulfilling God's plan. God uses human means to fulfill what he has ordained. With regard to tragedies and evil, Paul and the other biblical writers never blame God for them (cf. Rom. 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14; also Job 1:21–22). Rather, they see the doctrine of God's sovereignty as a means of comfort and assurance (cf. Rom. 8:28–30), confident that evil will not triumph, and that God's good plans for his people will be fulfilled. How God's sovereignty and human responsibility work together in the world is a mystery no one can fully understand.



Romans 8:28

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

God weaves everything together for good for his children. The “good” in this context does not refer to earthly comfort but conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:29), closer fellowship with God, bearing good fruit for the kingdom, and final glorification (Rom. 8:30). Christ can be assured that all things work together for good: God has always been doing good for them, starting before creation (the distant past), continuing in their conversion (the recent past), and then on to the day of Christ's return (the future).

Matthew 10:29–31

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Sparrows were customarily thought of as the smallest of creatures, and the penny was one of the least valuable Roman coins (cf. 5:26). apart from your Father. God is sovereign over even the most insignificant events. Fear not, therefore. Since the heavenly Father gives constant sovereign supervision even to seemingly insignificant creatures, surely he will also care for his disciples in their mission to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. more value.

Colossians 1:16–17

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Christ is Lord of creation. Jesus is the Lord, the maker and upholder of all things in the universe. Jesus did not come into existence when he was born of the virgin Mary. He was the agent of creation through whom God made heaven and earth (John 1:3 and note; 1 Cor. 8:6). Jesus cannot be the first thing created (as the ancient Arian heresy claimed) since “all things” without exception were created by him. Paul is using the current Jewish terms for various rankings of angels (although he doesn’t explain their relative ranks). His emphasis here may be on the evil angels, since they play a significant part in this letter (Col. 2:8, 10, 15, 20). This would not mean, however, that Jesus created evil angels; all spiritual powers were created by Jesus, but some later chose to rebel against God and so to become evil. Jesus is not only the agent of creation but is also the goal of creation, for everything was created by him and for him, that is, for his honor and praise. Since Jesus is in this sense the goal of creation, he must be fully God. Christ continually sustains his creation, preventing it from falling into chaos or disintegrating (cf. Heb. 1:3).

Isaiah 45:7–9

I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things. “Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the LORD have created it. Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles’?”

The Lord’s creative will and wise purposes stand behind everything. Therefore, his people should not be discouraged when the appearances of history seem contrary to his promises. Far from a problem to cope with, God’s sovereignty over all things is the only hope for the flowering of salvation and righteousness in this world. Isaiah warns against challenging God’s right to do his will in his own way. Putting God under suspicious scrutiny is a serious offense. Created beings may not demand explanations from him (cf. Rom. 9:19–21).

Proverbs 16:33

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

“Casting lots” involves the random selection or distribution of objects in order to make a choice uncontrolled and unbiased by the participants. In Israel it was typically performed “before the Lord” (see Josh. 18:8) in order to receive his direction. Not only the careful plans of the heart (Prov. 16:1, 9) but also the apparently random practice of casting lots falls under God’s providential governance.

Job 42:2

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”

In his second speech, the Lord asks Job particularly about power in relation to himself and other creatures he has made (40:6–41:34). Job, directly aware of God as never before, responds by humbly submitting to God’s sovereignty and penitently despising himself for his earlier wild words (42:1–6). While Job had rightly defended himself against his friends’ accusations of sin and had defined his circumstances as being governed by God, he had drawn conclusions about what his affliction meant that did not account sufficiently for what was hidden in the knowledge and purposes of God.

Lamentations 3:37–39

Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?

Just as in creation (cf. Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:9), God sovereignly speaks and commands in history and things happen, including Jerusalem’s destruction (Lam. 1:5, 12–16; 2:1–10). As experienced by human beings (cf. Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6). The God who sent judgment can also send renewal. When people suffer for their sins, they suffer because of what they have done, not because God enjoys punishing them (cf. v. 33).

Acts 4:27–28

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

In their prayer, reported with approval by Luke, the believers affirm both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. Whatever includes all of the evil rejection, false accusation, miscarriage of justice, wrongful beatings, mockery, and crucifixion that both Jews and Gentiles poured out against Jesus. These things were predestined by God, yet the human beings who did them were morally “lawless” (see 2:23, 36); they were responsible for their evil deeds (see 3:13–15); and they needed to “repent” (see 2:38; 3:19). This prayer reflects both a deep acknowledgment of human responsibility and a deep trust in God’s wisdom in his sovereign direction of the detailed events of history.

Ephesians 1:4

Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

He chose us in him means that the Father chose Christians in the Son (Christ), and this took place in eternity past, before the foundation of the world. This indicates that for all eternity the Father has had the role of leading and directing among the persons of the Trinity, even though Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in deity and attributes. God’s initiative in redeeming the believer from sin and death was not an arbitrary or whimsical decision but something God had planned all along “in Christ.” Since God chose his people in his love, they can take no credit for their salvation. God was determined to have them as his own (see note on 2:8). holy. God chose them with the goal that they be holy and blameless before him. This goal is not optional for Christians—it is the purpose of election. Holiness here expresses moral purity, while blamelessness expresses freedom from the guilt of trespasses and sins in which the Christian formerly walked (1:7; 2:1, 5).

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