

GOD DIRECTS OUR LIVES



As members of a democratic society rife with individualism, Americans have difficulty understanding God as an absolute ruler. Did we not reject living under a sovereign ruler when the American Colonies revolted against the king of England? Why should we be subject to anyone now? Yes, we Americans love our independence and freedom.

We do pay homage to our superstar heroes, especially in entertainment and sports, but only as long as they produce astonishing performances for us. Other great champions quickly replace them.

With the decline in the belief of absolute truth, we tend to argue and debate our points of view with everyone, even our leaders, to get our beliefs and agendas accepted. Today we negotiate to get our own way, and compromise—even on moral issues—is considered a virtue.

But we cannot argue, debate, or negotiate with God, the King of the universe. If He is truly the Lord of our lives, and we are His true disciples, we say, “Yes, Lord!” Saying “No, Lord” is a contradiction of terms for the true disciple of Jesus Christ.

Please, fellow believers, do not follow the teaching of some

who say that if you have enough faith in God, or if you repeat the name of Jesus, or quote a formula of phrases or Scripture verses, then you will get all your prayers answered. We cannot force God to do things our way. Sometimes in His wisdom and sovereign plan, His answer to our prayers is “no” or “wait.” Our position is to trust, believe, and obey, not to demand.

CHOICE VERSUS OBEDIENCE

Does that mean we have no say with our sovereign God? Of course not! He does not consider us His puppets or slaves. He made us as free moral agents with minds, wills, and emotions. He will not force His love and plans upon us against our wills. Within the context of His master plan, God gives us the freedom to choose. This is a hard concept to grasp. Let me explain with an illustration. A few days ago, I flew to Dallas. I had complete freedom to get up and walk around on that jetliner. I could go get a magazine or talk to my fellow passengers. I could take a nap or make a telephone call. I had complete freedom—within limits. However, I could not alter the plane’s course. That plane was going to Dallas!

Our relationship with God is like that. We are not robots mechanically programmed to follow His decrees. God has a course for us that has been charted before the beginning of time. God assures us in His Word: “My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.”¹ His master plan for history will be accomplished, whether we choose to work with Him or follow our own stubborn way. Although He allows us to choose and suffer the consequences of our choices, He never relinquishes control of the plans to accomplish His purposes. God turns the pages of history; we do not. As you read the following truths about God’s sovereignty, ask God to show you how you can restore His majesty in your life and what He wants you to do to obey Him.

GOD SOVEREIGNLY DIRECTS PEOPLE, CIRCUMSTANCES, AND EVENTS

When you read the newspaper or look at events around you, do

you sometimes wonder who is in control? More and more Christians see themselves as victims of a wicked society. Many feel overwhelmed by circumstances and struggle with hopelessness, defeat, and discouragement. But God has not abandoned them.

I can clearly see how God's sovereignty has been at work throughout my life. When my mother was carrying me, she almost died many times. During that time, she asked God to spare her life. "Lord, if you will just give me time, and allow me to give birth to this little child, I will dedicate him or her to you." Not only did she survive, but she lived to be 93 years old and her godly example and powerful prayers were the greatest influence on my life. She dedicated me to the Lord and faithfully prayed that God's will would be done in my life.

After completing my college degree, I spent one year on the faculty at Oklahoma State University Extension. Then I left Oklahoma to seek my fortune in California. Although my mother was still praying for me, I had no interest in the things of God. I wanted to be a successful businessman, a man of influence and significance. I was a self-made, happy pagan.

The first day I arrived in California, I picked up a hitchhiker who invited me to dinner at his friend's house. I agreed and, as it turned out, his friend was Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators Ministry. After dinner, they said, "We're going to a birthday party. Would you like to come?" That celebration was in the home of America's top radio evangelist, Charles E. Fuller.

I am still awed by the fact that through God's sovereignty, I spent my first night in California in the homes of two of the most famous Christian leaders of the 20th century. That did not just happen by chance. God was orchestrating events in my life—even though I was not a believer—in gracious answer to my saintly mother's prayers.

God is sovereignly involved in directing each of our lives. Proverbs states, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails."² God carefully supervises all that happens. No event escapes His notice. No person is beyond His influence. No circumstance exists outside His control.

THERE IS NO ROOM FOR LUCK IN GOD'S SOVEREIGN PLANS

“Good luck,” I heard a man recently say. What about luck? Anyone who understands the Bible and God’s revelation of Himself knows that there is no such thing as luck or chance, which implies a capriciousness of nature and the universe. When we use the word “luck,” we express our unbelief or a lack of knowledge of God’s attributes. With God in control, luck does not exist.

As believers, we live by faith in God and His Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit, not by luck or superstition. He also wants us to consciously acknowledge His sovereign control in the affairs of our lives. This means making our life’s plans—from our simplest decisions to our career choices or our retirement plans—follow God’s will. James explains the attitudes that please or displease God:

Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.³

God has a much greater agenda than ours. As we make plans through the power of His Holy Spirit, we must allow God to change those plans at a moment’s notice. We must seriously seek the will of God rather than our own will—and trust all our circumstances to His control.

GOD USES BAD THINGS FOR GOOD PURPOSES

You may have wondered, *If God is in complete control of everything, why does He allow (or cause) birth defects, famines, and war? Why does He permit sin, evil, and suffering?* God’s very nature opposes these things. It was not His plan for Adam and Eve, the first humans, to sin and bring sickness, disease, and death upon mankind.⁴ God created a perfect world, but man chose to sin, and the

penalty for sin was death—physical and spiritual. This curse of death has affected all of creation, not just humans, and all the bad things that exist are due to living in a world under judgment, a fallen world. Part of Adam and Eve’s punishment was pain and suffering in childbirth, fighting against nature for food, and struggling to make a living before finally dying.⁵

God does not initiate, cause, or authorize sin, or tempt anyone to sin. Yet He tolerates evil for a season to fulfill His righteous plans for people to respond by their own free will to His love.

Pastor Charles Stanley explains that God allows troubles, accidents, adversity, and similar problems to come into our lives for a purpose. Some of these purposes are:

- To get our attention
- To draw us to himself
- To help us get to know Him
- To see Him as He is
- To taste of His goodness
- To have an intimate, close relationship with Him
- To prevent distance from and avoidance of God⁶

GOD IS MORE
CONCERNED
ABOUT OUR
ETERNAL FUTURE
THAN OUR PRESENT
COMFORT.



Our disappointments are often God’s appointments. He is far more concerned about the quality of our eternal future than He is about our present comfort. In fact, difficulties and suffering are tools with which He shapes us into the image of Jesus Christ. It is never fun to be enrolled in the academy of adversity, but unless God takes us through the curriculum of trials, we will never become the quality person He wants us to be. Adversity is the touchstone of character.

Romans 8 promises, “God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.”⁷ God uses even the most disastrous situations for our good.

In the summer of 1976, thirty-five female Campus Crusade staff

leaders—including my wife, Vonette—gathered in Colorado for a retreat. That night, they were trapped in the Big Thompson Canyon flood.

At about 1:30 in the morning, I was awakened and informed of the flood and of the rescue of one of the women, who was now in the hospital. About an hour later, another staff member was brought to the hospital by helicopter. By this time, we had good reason to believe that several of the women had drowned.

I did not know if Vonette was safe, struggling for her life in the floodwaters, or dead. But I had incredible peace because I knew that God is sovereign and ever-present. So even though I had no idea where Vonette was and could not help her, I knew God was with her and the other women. Because He is all-powerful, God could save all the women whose lives were in danger. But God is also all-knowing. If it was best for Vonette to be taken home to heaven, I could completely trust my loving Father to do the right thing.

Soon I sadly learned that seven of our staff women perished during the flood. I knew that each of these women was rejoicing in the presence of her Savior. I also learned that Vonette and twenty-seven other staff women had escaped the raging water.

In the weeks that followed, we mourned for those dear friends we had lost. But we also felt led by God to make their last moments on earth a tribute to our sovereign God. With full approval of the grieving families, friends of Campus Crusade ministry placed full-page ads in most newspapers across the country featuring pictures of the seven women who died. The headline read, “These seven women lost their lives in the Colorado flood, but they are alive and they have a message for you.” The advertisement gave readers an opportunity to read the gospel and receive Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Approximately 150 million people read those ads. The response was phenomenal. Only God knows the full extent of what happened, but many thousands wrote to say that they had received Christ that week as a result of the tragic deaths of those seven women. A foreign ambassador told us that his life was

changed by the ad, and later helped open the door for ministry in his country, which had previously been closed to the gospel.

We can give all our worries and cares to God, knowing that He cares about what happens to us.⁸ When tragedy strikes, take comfort in the fact that no difficulty will ever come into your life without God's permission. Knowing this truth does not make adversity pleasant, but it gives us hope that the result will be worth whatever pain we endure.

GOD OVERRULES THE EVIL INTENTIONS OF PEOPLE

What about the intentions of evil people? Is God's hand present when they devise evil against us? Throughout the Bible we see incidents of God intervening to thwart the evil intents of humans.

Sometimes it seems as if following God's will makes us more vulnerable to the evil intentions of others. That simply is not true. Yes, since Lucifer rebelled against God, and Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, wars have existed between God and Satan, good and evil, light and darkness. God still has His plan, and He will execute it. We just do not always see His working at the beginning, in the middle of the warfare, or even at the end.

As a 19-year-old, Bruce Olsson went into the jungles on the border of Colombia and Venezuela to bring the gospel to the Bari people. God protected him from these aboriginal people who had never let a white man into their territory, and as they came to love him and his Lord, they affectionately called him *bruchko*. Then in 1988 Bruce was captured by Colombian guerrillas and held secretly in the jungle. It looked as if his ministry had been disrupted and maybe even ended.

Once the Colombian armed forces realized that the guerrillas had kidnapped Bruce, they tried to enlist the Baris, once a fierce, warlike tribe, to help rescue their beloved *bruchko*. The Baris refused, saying, "Violence only engenders violence."

Meanwhile, things were happening in the jungle. After five months in captivity, Bruce had so gained the confidence of the

guerrillas that they gave him a Bible. Eventually he was able to hold Bible studies with his captors. During nine months of captivity, including one firing squad escape, Bruce led about half the guerrillas assigned to him to faith in Christ. He was so successful that the guerrilla leaders finally released him.

As the years passed after the kidnapping, these Christian guerrillas won others to faith in Christ. Finally, the entire Christian group broke away from the larger guerrilla group and surrendered themselves to the Colombian government. On April 6, 1994, Bruce Olsson wrote in a letter to his prayer and financial supporters:

Resurrection Sunday also meant “conversion” to a great many members of the former guerrilla forces. In their camps [during my captivity] I witnessed more than a hundred break before the Lord in repentant tears, attentive to His Word and surrender their lives to the lordship of Jesus Christ. This action is prelude to the celebration of the 9th of April [when] ...descendants from the “Armed Forces for National Liberation” (ELN) and “Armed Forces for Colombian Revolution” (FARC), representing about half of the violent revolutionary forces in Colombia, will reincorporate themselves into national life at the surrendering of their arms and signature of the negotiated “Peace Plan.”

DURING NINE
MONTHS OF
CAPTIVITY, BRUCE
LED HALF HIS
CAPTORS TO
FAITH IN CHRIST.



God in His sovereignty protected Bruce despite the evil intentions of guerrilla leaders—and turned the whole incident into a great victory for Jesus Christ. God in His sovereignty protected Bruce despite the evil intentions of guerrilla leaders—and turned the whole incident into a great victory for Jesus Christ. Bruce writes, “The Bari had no doubt in God’s sovereignty and trusted in His intervention in the lives and affairs of His creation. The relinquishing of arms [by the guerrillas] in the presence of Bari leaders was significant. It was vindication of the Bari’s endurance and persuasion.” God was sovereign through the actions of Bruce, the Bari, *and* the guerrillas! Does that give you hope in a situation you may face right now? God will sovereignly use you,

too, as you follow His will.

OUR REDEMPTION AND GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

The entire gospel is a declaration of God's sovereign pleasure concerning Christ. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul explained:

God's secret plan has now been revealed to us; it is a plan centered on Christ, designed long ago according to His good pleasure. And this is His plan: At the right time He will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.⁹

Satan plotted to defeat God's purpose by arranging circumstances so that the Son of God would be crucified. His plots were successful—at first sight. Consider all the evil intentions of men that God used to bring about our redemption:

- The religious leaders plotted to kill Jesus. They succeeded in their malicious intent.
- The court crowd asked Pilate to release Barabbas rather than Jesus. Pilate agreed to their hate-filled request.
- The soldiers beat Jesus and crowned Him with a crown of thorns. They were following the evil orders of their superiors.
- The rabble in front of the cross ridiculed Jesus as He was dying. Their purpose was to make Him look weak and insignificant. And they surely did.
- The government assigned soldiers to guard Jesus' tomb to thwart any claims that He had risen from the dead. They were successful for two days.

Today we know that all these evil intents were integral parts of God's plan. Jesus was just one man standing against the evil intentions of His physical world, and the spiritual world too, but His power was greater than anything anyone could throw at Him. We have available to us that same power, because as believers, the Holy Spirit lives within us. He will comfort us during times of trial, give us wisdom to accomplish God's will, and help us glorify God through every situation.

Do you feel as privileged as I do to be part of God's eternal plan, knowing that God has revealed to us His sovereign will for the grand scale of history? In fact, our sovereign God will ensure that grand finale! Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who seemed to be the "victim" of evil intentions, will reign supreme forever and ever. One more passage from John's Revelation gives us the panorama of the grand finale that will take place in the City of God:

All the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city. Nothing evil will be allowed to enter—no one who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

And the angel showed me a pure river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing down from the throne of God and of the Lamb, coursing down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

No longer will anything be cursed. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and His servants will worship Him. And they will see His face, and His name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.¹⁰

When we choose to submit to God's majesty and sovereignty, we are on the winning side. We will reign with the only One who is worthy of worship and who will be our comfort, guide, and friend throughout eternity! What a Savior! I can hardly wait for that moment!

I urge you to allow God to direct your life by surrendering your decisions, trials, hurts, and pain to Him. Give Him your joys, your accomplishments, your treasures. After all, if Indian princes chose to honor the king of England with their most precious and costly possessions, how much more should we honor God with every part of our lives! Unlike an earthly king, God will take what we give to Him and multiply blessings in our lives. We do not give up anything but pride, sin, and temporal possessions; He gives us

back eternal life, joy, spiritual riches, and an eternal reign with Him! What a good God!

Now that we have some insight into the limitless abilities of God, we can turn our attention to His moral attributes. They are the basis of our laws, our justice system, and our ideas of fair treatment. In Part II, we will be examining God's high moral character: His ability to judge fairly, truthfully, righteously, and with perfect justice. We will discover why He acts as He does and how that affects our relationship with Him. We will answer questions like: Can I trust God to be fair? How will He judge events when it seems like everything is stacked against me? What does He do when His people commit wrong acts? Is He swayed by those who are more "spiritual" or who hold power in the church?

For a person who has a wrong view of God or who does not know Him intimately, the answers to these questions are unsettling. But as we learn more about God's moral attributes, we will be increasingly confident that we can put complete faith in our Perfect Judge and let Him preside over the courtroom of our lives!

LIFE APPLICATION



WRITE IT ON YOUR HEART—Commit the following statement and verses to memory. Then as you encounter situations during this week where you need to remember that God is in control, claim these promises by faith.

- Because God is sovereign, I will submit to His will.
- Jeremiah 10:23—“I know, LORD, that a person’s life is not his own. No one is able to plan his own course.”
- Romans 8:28—“God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.”

COUNT ON GOD—Does the fact that God is sovereign scare you? When God is in control, that means you and I are not. That may invoke fear, but it should bring comfort. How much better that our all-powerful, all-knowing God controls every circumstance rather than we who are imperfect and limited. Trust God today by placing your current situation into the hands of your capable and loving heavenly Father.

OBEY GOD—Our sovereign God controls every breath and heartbeat in your life. How foolish it is for us not to obey Him. Ephesians 2:10 states, “We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things He planned for us long ago.” You will realize your own full potential by obeying Him. Pursue the “good things” He has for you to do—today.