

**Here are the questions we're going to tackle...**

THANK YOU to those who have asked questions. I've grouped them together by theme. Hopefully you'll spot your question as we work through...

**(1) God's providence & sovereignty. Does it encourage us to be passive? If God is in control of everything why bother doing anything – e.g. praying, evangelism, etc.**

**(2) What do you do when you simply cannot see the purpose of God in a specific situation?**

**(3) God's sovereignty and human responsibility: "HELP I'm confused"! (Various questions along those lines!). Specifically: is God author of sin?**

**(4) Words: how should we speak about God's relationship to evil?  
Does he permit? ordain? will?**

**(5) Is everything that happens REALLY the will of God?**

**(6) If God is sovereign over everything – including us – doesn't that mean we are turned into robots? Don't we have free will? Doesn't a real loving relationship between God and his creatures require this?**

**(7) Questions about Jesus and God's providence: do we see Jesus teaching or acting in this sort of way? What sort of view of God's providence does Jesus give us? e.g. with respect to suffering?**

**(8) Is it too difficult or even dangerous to talk about God's sovereignty and providence?**

**(9) Some of what has been taught lately at Immanuel has been hard for me to accept. Do church members have to agree? Do our elders?**

**(10) A different sort of question: I find it so hard to remember that the Lord is sovereign. How do I NOT forget about Him day-to-day?**

**God's providence / sovereignty. Does it encourage us to be passive? If God is in control of everything why bother doing anything – e.g. praying, evangelism, etc.**

Evangelism – Acts 18:9-10 – Paul in Philippi – Lord has many people in his city, preaches (Whitefield – why bother preaching? We don't know who are the Lord's chosen people... and so we preach promiscuously").

Remember that this Xmas.

Holiness – Phil 2:12-13 – we “work” (outwork our salvation). How? Why? Because HE works in us to work and to will. Our activity is grounded in the Lord's sovereign work.

Prayer – why pray when Lord has purposed already? -> See the Sermon on the Mount.

Matt 6:32-33, our Father knows that we NEED food and clothing... and will provide these things. But in the Lord's Prayer, Matt 6:11, he says: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

i.e. The Lord gives... AND we are to ASK him to give.

This tells us something VERY imp't about prayer

It's like digging up treasure buried by God (Calvin)

Prayer: more about relationship than it is about getting stuff: a child asks things of their parent (e.g. my daughter asks me for breakfast every day... is there any chance that I had forgotten about her b'fast... or decided not to give her b'fast??? No!!! But it's right and natural for children to ask their father).

Prayer is our adoption breathed out.

**What do you do when you simply cannot see the purpose of God in a specific situation?**

Often the case when pain and suffering comes: cannot see the SPECIFIC good that is being worked in it.

Sometimes you can: it's been wonderful to hear some stories from church members – how the Lord has used extreme suffering to achieve good things that are obvious: others get converted, there's obvious Xn growth.

Sometimes you can't.

Bible encourages lamentation. Prayer to the Father that is simply an honest articulation of grief. Fight of faith in times like that::: it's to believe that God is good.... And that somehow or other he will use this to make me or someone else more like Jesus.

- Encouragement: the Bible and the church contains lamentation... and people who have come out the other side – not to some mythical place where suffering doesn't place... but to a place of contentment despite loss. The Lord can do that. Does that.

Not always possible to trace purpose specifically.

**God's sovereignty and human responsibility: HELP!?! (Various questions along those lines!)**

**Specifically: is God author of sin?**

Helpful quote from D.A. Carson, “How Long O Lord”

(a good book on sovereignty and evil and suffering – I read it when I was a student – so grateful that I was given a deep biblical framework as a young man)...

“God stands behind good and evil asymmetrically. To put it bluntly, God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents... On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents. In other words, if I sin, I cannot possibly do so outside the bounds of God’s sovereignty... but I alone am responsible for that sin... But if I do good, it is God working in me both to will and to act according to his good pleasure... If this sounds just a bit too convenient for God my initial response (though there is more to be said) is that according to the Bible this is the only God there is. There is no other.”  
D.A. Carson, “How Long O Lord,” p213

There are puzzles.

It is hard to hold together sovereignty and responsibility.

But the Bible does – so we do too.

Question is HOW...

Some questions surround that...

**Language: how should we speak about God’s relationship to evil?**

**Does he permit? Ordain? Will?**

Plainly the Bible talks about God’s “permission” – see that clearly. E.g.

- Romans 1: God “gives over” to consequence of sin.
- Job 1: permission granted to Satan

But don’t forget this: the Lord is sovereign... and he is well able NOT grant permission if he so desire... but he does. His permission is not helpless or powerless. It is a “powerful permission.”

- Job understands that at end of ch1: Satan has been at work... but what is his lament: “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.”
- Westminster Confession of Faith wisely clarifies with respect to the Fall: it happens “not by a bare permission.”

And at other points in the Bible Scripture is even more direct in speaking of God’s sovereignty over evil. We can’t airbrush out those parts of God’s word.

- E.g. Hardening Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus.

And so it’s appropriate to talk about God “ordaining” all things that come to pass.

Yet: he is not the author of sin.

Secondary causes are always morally responsible for sin.

**Is everything that happens REALLY the will of God?**

Simple answer: “it depends what you mean.”

Because the Bible teaches that God has two ways of willing.

One place in scripture where this is clearly implied = Acts 4:27-28, READ.

Did God will for this Son to be crucified?

Answer = yes and no

- No: it was evil – and he was put to death by Herod, Pilate etc.
- Yes: it was the everlasting plan of God.

This has led to an ancient distinction in the church:::

Summed up as God's MORAL will... and God's SOVEREIGN will.

Put it another way:

If God is 100% sovereign over everything (and he is!), and if things happen in God's universe which he doesn't like (and they do!), then it necessarily follows that we must speak of God willing in two ways.

Helps us understand those bits of the Bible like 2 Peter 3:9 where we read that God wants everyone to come to repentance... AND those bits of the Bible that show him judging some, and only choosing some.

It's NOT that God is somehow thwarted by human sin.

You cannot read the Bible and believe that.

It's a bit more complex:

- He loves the lost... he grieves over sin.
- He will always give life to anyone who asks
- But he doesn't choose everyone... he has greater purposes that include judgement... and which somehow bring greater glory to Jesus.
- Do I understand all that? No. And I'm so glad that the judge of all the earth always does what's right.

**If God is sovereign over everything – including us – doesn't that mean we are turned into robots? Don't we have free will? Doesn't a real loving relationship between God and his creatures require free will?**

It's sometimes said that God is all powerful – and that he has chosen to create a world in which he does not exercise his power in particular ways – and leaves human beings total free will. Without that, we are robots and there can't be a loving relationship between the Lord and us.

Those bits of the Christian church that take a high view of God's sov have ALWAYS had to face that accusation. Not a new question.

- Here's the heart of Calvinism versus Arminianism.
- But this tussle has gone on ever since the days of Augustine and Pelagius in the early centuries of the Christian church.
- Some of the questions I've been asked have to do with church history, and different groups in it. Come to that later.

How does the Bible speak to that?

First: the Bible does teach that God is all sovereign. Over everything. And sometimes it's hard to work out how to talk about his sovereignty.

- Have to talk about things like secondary causation; distinguish 2 ways of willing. Tricky!

But the bottom line – the big picture = Eph 1:11, “all things.”

Scripture is so clear – defines what the word “all” means.

Exhaustive. Those are the scriptures I went over in the first two sermons in our recent preaching series. Not going to repeat now.

Second: we need to let the Bible define “free will.” So VERY VERY important.

We are not entirely un-caused or un-influenced.

We do NOT have what is sometimes called “libertarian free will.”

Look at John 8:34, 44

Non-converted person:

Slave to sin = sin necessarily

Will and desire to sin = sin voluntarily

We have “liberty of desire”.

We always do what we want.

And in THAT freedom we are held responsible.

An example of getting this wrong:

Listened to a talk by John Lennox few months back. Really wonderful Christian scientist. So good in combatting Richard Dawkins’ lies. But he’s an Arminian – said one thing that shocked me: talking about human beings he said “the most precious thing about us is that we choose”

Have to say, respectfully: you’ve defined freedom unbiblically. AND you have made “choice” far too central and prominent (in a way that the Bible actually does not). E.g.

God’s Son cannot choose to disobey the Father. Is his relationship with the Father diminished? God forbid!!

In the new creation: WE will have no possibility of sinning. And we won’t find that an infringement on our liberties.

This type of freedom is just not intrinsic to being human.

**Some questions about Jesus and God’s providence: do we see Jesus teaching or acting in this sort of way? What sort of view of God’s providence does Jesus give us? E.g. with respect to suffering?**

Skim through the Gospels: Jesus...

- Proclaims good news.
- Promises rest.
- Loves the unlovely.
- Loves the hard hearted – Mark 10:21 – rich man – “loved him”

He also...

- Commands repentance and belief.
- Warns: Says that if you don’t build your life on him and on his words you’ll be destroyed.
- Curses the unrepentant: places a declaration of eternal judgement on people – e.g. Matt 23
- Tells us that he’ll come suddenly – to judge the living and the dead.

- Speaks about hell more than anyone else in the Bible.

He says...

- that not one sparrow falls from the heavens apart from the will of the Father. Matt 10
- that the Father is pleased both to hide and reveal truth. Matt 11:25
- Says the same to Peter – Matt 16 – blessed are you... Father has revealed Jesus' identification to Peter = gift of regeneration / new birth.

So, in Jesus life and teaching we see:

- Perfect humanity
- Perfect deity – God's goodness, God's wisdom, AND God's power.

Preaching through Matthew's gospel recently: so striking how beautiful Jesus is – AND how unfluffy Jesus is.

(Reinforced to me with a dear friend – not a believer – engaging with Bible long time. They have no problem with "God" – or at least think that they don't. But DO have a huge problem with Jesus – and some of what he says).

### **Is it too difficult or even dangerous to talk about this sort of thing?**

Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter 3.8 has this wise statement re: predestination (which is one aspect of God's sovereignty / providence): it should be "handled with special prudence and care" – take that on board.

At same time we want to listen to the whole counsel of God.

Don't run away from the plain teaching of scripture.

Ask the Lord for understanding / light – look at 2 Timothy 2:7 – we are called to THINK... and to pray too with the confidence that the LORD GRANTS UNDERSTANDING.

Encouragement not to shy away from the God-ness of God:

Example of Jesus – in Matt 11:25-30 he's speaking publicly and evangelistically (see verse 7) – yet has no problem in speaking of God's sovereignty AND issuing an invitation to "come." I've never preached like that in an evangelistic talk!!

Remember: God's sovereignty in the Bible ALWAYS should move us PRAISE:

e.g. Ephesians 1:3ff.

Theology should lead to DOXOLOGY.

### **Some of what has been taught lately at Immanuel has been hard for me to accept. Do you have to agree?**

Such a good question – grateful to address that head on.

Whenever a church teaches on the sovereignty of God there will be some church members who find it hard. Don't panic. Twas ever thus.

Why is it hard?

- Because of our experiences of life.
- Because of your own studying of the Bible and reading books.

- Because of the church traditions in which you grew up.

Our church membership covenant is extremely minimal.

- I'm a sinner... Jesus has saved me... I want to live for Jesus... Immanuel is my church. That's basically it.

No of course you don't have to be a signed up Calvinist to be a church member!

BUT: you do if you're an elder of the church.

Sane churches have a doctrinal basis – ours is the WCF.

The only people required to assent to it are the church's elders.

But all church members ought to have a growing understanding of that church confession.

- We believe that it is faithful and truly represents the doctrine of scripture.

And remember:

- When we as elders preach publicly and teach privately we do so out of the worldview and framework of the WCF.

This is nothing new for Immanuel:

It's the framework from which we've always operated – or tried to.

Like it or not – all churches and all Christians belong in a tradition.

Even those ones that say “we've no tradition but the Bible” have just located themselves in a very clear historical tradition.

Speaking personally for a moment:

I don't just teach of God's sovereignty I this way because I've PROMISED to do so (though I have). But because I'm persuaded to the bottom of my boots that:::

\*\* the Reformed view of God is far and away the most biblical”

(Reformed = Calvinistic... Augustine, Luther, the Puritans... Westminster Confession).

Obviously, other bits of Christian history and church tradition take a different view on God's providence and God's sovereignty.

- Arminianism: e.g. Wesley (God doesn't choose people; Christians can lose salvation; he simply knows in advance what we will choose, entirely freely)
- Open Theism: e.g. Clark Pinnock (further than Arminianism: God essentially powerless in many/most areas of human life – presented deceitfully and persuasively as a good thing. Wicked).

You've hopefully clocked that I'm a student of church history.

I'm not unaware of the story of the church – and the controversies within it.

A question and a challenge: In the life of a church... in the business of making disciples and maturing as followers of Jesus...

- When are different views OK?
- When are different views NOT ok?

Quite a hard question:

- some dear friends at Immanuel know what it's like when ZERO difference is tolerated on anything.
- The opposite = the spirit of our age: anything goes... unless it involves drawing lines and making judgements.

It's our practice at Immanuel to hold church ELDERS (and to a lesser extent anyone involved in teaching the Bible) to a MUCH higher standard of doctrinal uniformity. We don't require that of church members. But we would say of an issue like God's sovereignty:::

- Understand the way we understand scripture
- Take it seriously: we think it's not just "right" but "good." Come and have lots of cups of tea with us... search the scriptures... wrestle with it
- Our hope and prayer is that, over time, the Lord will grow disciples in that reformed worldview.
- And in the meanwhile we'd simply say: please don't be evangelist for the opposite view.

Sometimes – for some people – it will feel like your toes are being stepped on. I'm genuinely sorry for the pain I cause when I do that.

We must teach negatives because Jesus did ("no one comes to the Father"). We'll say things like "this is true about God's sovereignty... AND this is false."

- That's part of the job of a pastor-teacher.
  - o 2 Tim 2:15, unashamed worker.
  - o Sometimes have to correct, to refute.
- In a sermon a few weeks back I described the reformed tradition as the good guys and the rest as bad guys. I know that caused offence to some. I'm sorry for the offence. My words were clumsy, though they were carefully chosen. Probably I just chose the wrong words. Better would be to say something like this...
  - o Before God, I'm convinced that I have to warn the flock that the Arminianism taught by many dear brothers in Christ is an error. It is not biblical.
  - o Further: teachings on God's sovereignty which are the next logical stepping place beyond Arminianism – e.g. Open Theism – they are outright heresy. People who teach this are false teachers. People who believe it imperil their souls.

There are plenty of issues in a church that are not as big as this.

(Eschatology. Israel. As elders we have views. But different opinions on those sorts of matters are less consequential than stuff to do with the sov of God.

[Elders constantly have to do what you might call "theological triage":

Q: How serious is the error?

Q: Who is believing the error? (A new disciple... or a teacher)]

When you feel like your toes are stepped on by me or another elder:::

Pls talk to us. Come round. Have a chat. We are a family.

**Different sort of question:**

**I find it so hard to remember that the Lord is sovereign. How do I NOT forget about Him?**

*Discuss together and pray.*