

God Is God

and I'm not



How God's Sovereignty Matters Every Day

Timothy Z. Witmer

“God is God and I’m Not presents the profound truth of God’s sovereignty with a clear and compelling perspective on its life-transforming practicality. Dr. Witmer draws on his lifetime of ministry as a pastor and a discipler of pastors to lay the biblical foundation of the doctrine that God completely controls everything that happens in his universe and in our lives. He demonstrates that this reality, so humbling to our pride, is marvelously good news. He blends examples of biblical saints and contemporary believers who, amid storms, suffering, sorrow, and injustice, have found comfort, hope, and courage in their sovereign God. With patience and clarity, we are shown why God’s sovereignty, mysterious as it is to our finite minds, does not negate our responsibility or excuse our sin or sluggishness. This book beautifully exemplifies how practical true theology is, amid daily challenges to our faith and endurance.”

—DR. DENNIS E. JOHNSON

Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology,
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, Calif.

“This book is an invitation ‘to join the happy ranks of sovereign-tists,’ to believe that God is God and, as such, He is sovereign over all things. Dr. Witmer so ably shows us, first, that it’s decidedly biblical to be a sovereigntist. Second, it’s overwhelmingly practical, as Dr. Witmer shows us how only a sovereigntist view can help people effectively weather the storms and seasons of life. Count me among the members of the happy ranks, and I hope this book adds many, many more.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

President, Reformation Bible College
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is a tonic when things around us seem haphazard and often hostile. The truth that God holds the universe in the palm of His hands and orders the course of events from beginning to end helps us sleep at night and awake knowing that even when we sleep, He is in absolute control. Let Dr. Witmer reassure you again of God’s sovereignty in all of life’s vicissitudes, and you will be wonderfully blessed. I know no other book that will both inform and challenge you on this important truth, written with such ease and simplicity. I thoroughly commend it to you.”

—DR. DEREK W.H. THOMAS
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries
Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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This book is dedicated, with thanksgiving to God,
to the congregations whom I have had the privilege of serving
on staff positions throughout fifty years of gospel ministry

First Baptist Church
Downingtown, Pa.
Youth Director: 1974–78

Springton Lake (formerly Berith) Presbyterian Church (PCA)
Newtown Square, Pa.
Associate Pastor: 1979–86

Crossroads Community Church (PCA)
Upper Darby, Pa.
Pastor: 1986–2013

St. Stephen Reformed Church (PCA)
New Holland, Pa.
Pastor: 2014–21

Reformed Presbyterian Church (PCA)
Ephrata, Pa.
Interim Pastor: 2023–24

Soli Deo gloria

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Foreword

Later in these pages, you will discover that because God is God and Tim Witmer is not, he did not become the greatest and most famous tuba soloist ever seen on the stages of the great concert halls of the world. But for all I know, he may be the greatest tuba-playing professor of practical theology in the United States, and perhaps in the whole world. But even if he isn't, he is still a skilled musician, and more importantly, he has been an outstanding professor of practical theology, a wonderful pastor, and a great friend to me.

Reading his dedication page of *God is God and I'm Not*, I realize that we have enjoyed no less than forty years of friendship, ever since I made my way through the darkness of a Philadelphia winter's night to preach in Berith Presbyterian Church, where he was serving in the early 1980s. Ever since then, our friendship has grown through conferences shared when he played with the Westminster Brass, preaching in the churches he has pastored, and serving as colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary. And because of that, I have had the opportunity to experience for myself what every reader of this book needs to know about its author: he is "the real deal," "the complete package." I don't mean that he is perfect in the sense of being sin-free. But he is at least in one sense of the word Scripture sometimes uses—he is a mature, well-rounded Christian, and he is an experienced and skilled pastor and pastoral theologian.

All of this you will experience for yourself as you begin to read *God is God and I'm Not*. It will make you want to be what Tim calls a “sovereignist.” That is a new word to me. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells me it has been used to describe a person who believes in Quebec’s right to self government, but I suspect Tim is the first person to make it a *theological* term! But I like it, and mean to start using it. I want to be one. And after reading these pages, I think you will, too.

The title says it all. It may remind you of some of Martin Luther’s sayings. He once told the great Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus that his God was “too man-like”! And, of course, he more than once urged us to “let God be God!”

That is what it means to be a sovereignist. And as Tim explains and applies the biblical teaching on God’s sovereignty, I suspect readers will be helped in a variety of ways.

Some Christians are allergic to talk about God’s sovereignty—for various reasons. Sometimes it is because others have misshaped their thinking. Other times, it is because they fear losing control of their own lives. Still other times, it is simply that they have never really taken in the fact that when the early Christians in Jerusalem prayed in a time of crisis, their first words were “Sovereign Lord” (Acts 4:24). In these pages, Dr. Witmer very graciously helps dissolve some of these personal, spiritual and theological hang-ups. To give you foretaste: occasionally, people object to teaching on God’s sovereignty by using what they think of as a logical “defeater”: “If God is sovereign, why pray?” Tim Witmer’s gentle response? The truth is the reverse: “If God is not sovereign, what point is there in praying to Him?” You will need to read on to let him tell you more.

But this is not just another book arguing for the sovereignty of God. True, it is a work of theology. But it is theology of the best sort. It is biblical theology—the kind that makes a practical difference to our lives. Just glance through the table of contents page and you will see that. The seasons of life that Tim mentions are the very seasons that all of us experience. The challenges that he discusses are the challenges that we face. The questions that he answers are the questions that we ask. And all the way through, it will be clear to you that Tim and Barbara Witmer have “been there, done that, asked that, handled that”—and if not in exactly the same way that we have, it is clear that they have ministered to people just like us. Being present with Tim and Barbara in the churches that he has pastored and with the students whom he has taught is itself a confirmation that people respond to those who love them, care for them, and nourish and nurture them through all the seasons of life.

Tim Witmer’s teaching on being an undershepherd to God’s flock is well known among pastors. In one sense, this book is a natural next step. In it, he is not giving instruction to fellow pastors *about* being a pastor; he is being a pastor himself. I hope that many younger ministers will model themselves after the atmosphere of ministry in this book as well as its teaching. It will help them recalibrate their ministry to the foundational principle that Paul enunciated to Timothy: “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). And I can think of no greater compliment to pay to my friend as a pastor than that he has exemplified this in his own ministry. And if I can develop Paul’s thought a little more broadly, since it is also true that “the aim of Christian friendship is love that issues from a pure heart and a

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good conscience and a sincere faith,” then I can truly say that Timothy Witmer has modeled that to me.

You are in safe hands here. So take your time. Settle down with these pages. Read them thoughtfully (the reflection questions at the end of each chapter will help you do that). And in the process, learn from Tim Witmer’s wise biblical teaching on what it means to be a sovereigntist.

—Sinclair B. Ferguson

Introduction

Some time ago, I was sitting in a waiting room of a well-known teaching hospital with a family, awaiting the results of the biopsy of their three-year-old daughter's newly discovered malignant brain tumor. This was a family who sensed that they had lost control of their lives. Everything had changed when they learned the jarring diagnosis. While they were doing all they could to care for their daughter, their future was filled with uncertainty. How could there be any comfort at all? Where was God in all this?

Many unforeseen circumstances come crashing into our lives. When they do, we lose a sense of control and hope. A truth that is essential to embrace if we are to navigate the storms of life is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Far from being an abstract theological doctrine, belief in God's lordship over all of life can make all the difference in how we live through hardship. And it is also important to embrace this truth in order to appreciate the greatest blessing when things are going well.

My objective is to help you find hope and help in your times of deepest need by anchoring you in the only place where such help can be found: the foundational truth of the sovereignty of God. I want to encourage you to become a *sovereignist* (a word I coined in its theological sense, as far as I know): not simply a believer in this truth but someone who lives life in the light and power of the One who is Lord.

I came to embrace this truth as a new Christian during my freshman year in college. Reading the Bible was new to me, and I could already see clearly that the pages of Scripture heralded this doctrine. I didn't know that there was a special name for it, let alone a name for those who believed it. Soon I learned that my viewpoint was often referred to as *Calvinism* and that I was therefore a Calvinist, named for John Calvin, a sixteenth-century pastor and theologian who, along with many of the other Reformers, embraced this doctrine. Because of its connection with the Protestant Reformation, this perspective has also been called *Reformed theology*. Yet this doctrine did not originate with the Reformers but was revived alongside other truths with the return to the Scriptures. If that's what people who believed this scriptural doctrine were called, that was fine with me.

Michael Horton has noted that “both his [Calvin's] views and his impact are often exaggerated by friend and foe alike. For example, he is celebrated or vilified for his doctrine of predestination, despite the fact that he didn't have such a ‘doctrine’—at least in terms of a unique view or emphasis. There's nothing in Calvin's teaching on predestination that isn't also found in the great stream of Augustinian teaching.”¹ As you will see, its origin is in the Scriptures, and it has been carried to us through the centuries by those who have embraced the authority of the Bible, including John Calvin. Though Calvin is the name that is most often associated with this doctrine, those of us who embrace the scriptural truth of the reign and rule of God over all things should rightly be called *sovereignists* and not *Calvinists*. Many

1 Michael Horton, “What's So Special about John Calvin?,” Crossway.org, March 21, 2014, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/whats-so-special-about-john-calvin/>.

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have famously observed that Calvin wrote more extensively on prayer and the Holy Spirit than predestination. J.A. Medders noted that

Calvin taught much more than Calvinism. In his day, he would have scoffed at the idea of an “-ism” being tethered to his name. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—his major work of theology—you’ll find more pages devoted to prayer, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper than to election.²

Concerning this book, my hope is that it will help you stand unshaken (or less shaken) when the inevitable waves of trouble come crashing down so that you will be able to sincerely say, “God is God and I’m not!”

Now for a few words about the structure of the book. Chapters 1 and 2 constitute part 1, “Firm Foundations.” Though this is not largely a theological work, chapter 1 will introduce you to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and some important terminology that is commonly used but often confusing and misunderstood. Chapter 2 will introduce you to the foundational promise found in Romans 8:28, a comprehensive promise that could not be true if God were not sovereign. Part 2 is called “Seasons of Life under God’s Sovereign Care,” in which we see how the truth of God’s sovereignty helps in the different seasons and circumstances of life, including the good times and the bad times. The last two parts comprise chapters that address challenges and questions that come to mind. Each chapter includes a “Mark” that should characterize sovereigntists. Finally, every chapter will end with a few reflection questions.

2 J.A. Medders, *Humble Calvinism* (n.p.: Good Book, 2019), 33–34.

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Within these chapters, you will find real-life vignettes or biblical illustrations that demonstrate how belief in the sovereignty of God can make all the difference between despair and hope. I pray that this little book will help you walk through the seasons of life trusting in our great sovereign God and that you will find the kind of comfort and encouragement in this great truth that Charles Hodge describes:

The sovereignty of God is the ground of peace and confidence to all his people. They rejoice that the Lord God omnipotent reigneth; that neither necessity, nor chance, nor the folly of man, nor the malice of Satan controls the sequence of events and all their issues. Infinite wisdom, love, and power, belong to Him, our great God and Savior, into whose hands all power in heaven and earth has been committed.³

John Calvin's favorite verse was Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." There are indeed many secret things and mysteries to us about God's plan, but His Word reveals more than enough to direct and comfort us until we meet Him face-to-face.

3 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 441.

Part One

FIRM FOUNDATIONS

“God Is God and I’m Not”

Introduction to the Doctrine of the Sovereignty of God

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”

(Ps. 115:3)

Sure, it’s easy to *say*, “God is God and I’m not,” acknowledging the absolute reign of God, but what does the statement really mean? If you are going to be a committed sovereigntist, you need to know what it means to say that God is sovereign. Rather than a comprehensive survey of the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God, this chapter is intended to be an introduction that will lay the groundwork on which we can build the practical implications of His reign in our lives.

To Say That “God Is God” Is to Say That God Is Sovereign

To be *sovereign* is to exercise “supreme rank, power, or authority.”¹ Of course, there are earthly sovereigns, kings, queens, presidents, and

1 Dictionary.com, s.v. “sovereign,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sovereign?s=t>.

prime ministers, but their reigns cannot compare with the reign of the Lord. Louis Berkhof provides this summary:

He is clothed with absolute authority over the hosts of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. He upholds all things with His almighty power, and determines the end to which they are destined to serve. He rules as King in the most absolute sense of the word, and all things are dependent on Him and subservient to Him.²

This concept is beautifully expressed in these words of David: “Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all” (1 Chron. 29:11–12). Arthur Pink authored a classic work on the sovereignty of God, and in it he explains:

The Sovereignty of God. What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the godhood of God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him what doest Thou? (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in Heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will (Psa. 115:3). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is “The Governor among the nations”

2 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 76.

(Psa. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the “Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords.” (1 Tim. 6:15)³

That is quite a statement, so let’s take a moment to unpack the comprehensiveness of God’s reign.

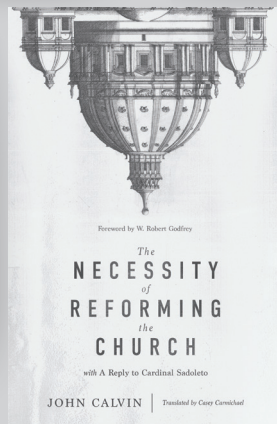
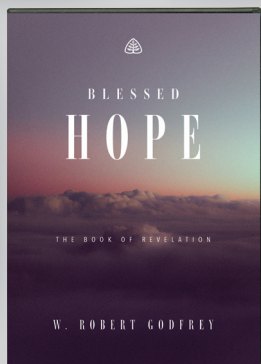
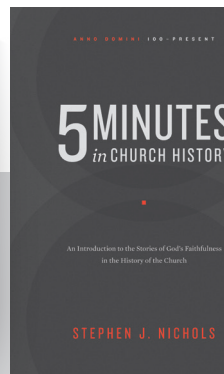
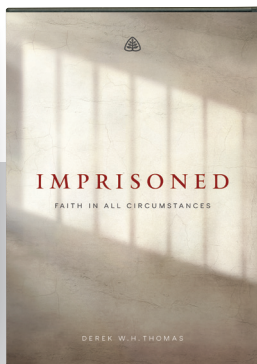
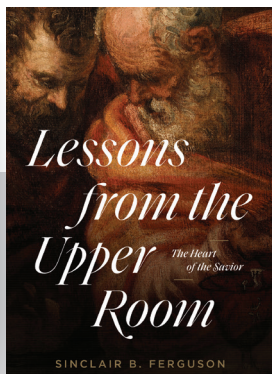
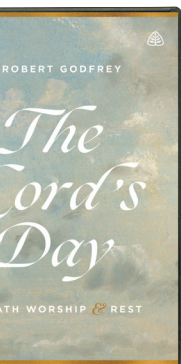
He Reigns Everywhere

We begin by acknowledging that there would be no “everywhere” apart from the fact that God created the heavens and the earth. This truth is proclaimed from Genesis to Revelation. The Scriptures open with these words: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). In the last book of the Bible, the same theme is sounded by the assembly in heaven: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

At one time, it could be said that “the sun never set” on the British Empire because of its presence on every inhabited continent. That was quite a vast empire indeed. Yet the Lord reigns *everywhere*, not only on this planet but over the entire universe! “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, and let them say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns!’” (1 Chron. 16:31). There is no place over which He does not reign: “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). D.A. Carson writes, “His sovereignty extends over the mighty movements of the

3 Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 20.

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