

What Does It Mean That God Is Sovereign?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

What Does It Mean
That God Is Sovereign?

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Chapter One

God's Sovereignty over Nothing

The title of this opening chapter might cause confusion. God's sovereignty over nothing? Doesn't that suggest that there is nothing over which God is sovereign? But surely God's sovereignty extends over everything. To find out what we mean by "God's sovereignty over nothing," we must go back to the beginning, to Genesis 1:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and

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darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. (Gen. 1:1–7)

And so the text of Genesis continues, day by day, segment by segment, expressing the transcendent mystery of all mysteries: the creation of all things by a sovereign God. Augustine of Hippo described this as a work accomplished *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.

It might be easy for us to say that God creates *ex nihilo*, but to conceive of this work of creation is beyond our

intellectual capacity. The first element, the idea of nothing, is beyond our ability to comprehend. What is nothing?

It's nothing. The problem with nothing is that when we say, "There is nothing," we are speaking nonsense because the verb *is* is a form of the verb *to be*, and the one thing that nothingness lacks is "*be*-ness." So, we can't speak of nothingness, and we can't say, "There is nothing" or "There was nothing," because to say that there *is* such a thing as nothing would be to attribute something to it, when *nothing is not*.

When we speak of *nothing*, we are using a word that functions as a type of definition that has a rich history in theological and philosophical investigation: the way of negation. The way of negation is a method of definition by which we define something not by stating positively what it *is* but rather by using negative language to say what it is *not*.

In theology, we use the way of negation all the time. When we say, for example, that God is infinite, what are we saying? He's not finite. When we say that God is immutable, we are saying that He is not given to change and mutation.

When we talk about *nothing*, we are using the way of negation and making a distinction between *something* and

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its negation. And the negation of *something* is *nothing*, or the *absence* of something is what we mean by nothing. The absence of what? If it's an ontological negation, that means that nothing would be the absence or lack of being.

There isn't anything that expresses more dramatically the holiness and majesty of God than the idea that God is sovereign over nothing, because it means that God in His greatness alone has the capacity of being within Himself, in and of Himself eternally, independently, without any assistance from matter, energy, or anything outside Himself.

Try to do what dreaming rocks try to do. Try to think of nothing abstractly. Think that there was a time in the past when nothing existed, absolute nothingness, where all that was (even *was* is a misnomer) was shrouded in darkness. The universe was a pure vacuum, completely empty and void of any reality. There was nothing, absolute nothingness.

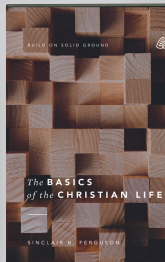
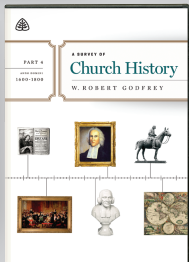
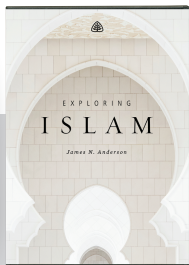
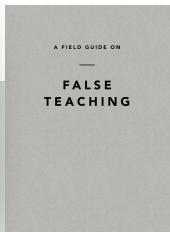
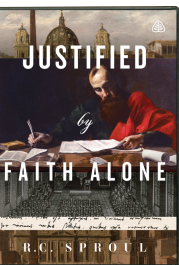
If there ever was such a time where nothing was, absolute nothingness, what would there be today? Nothing. Because the one absolute axiom of logic and of science is the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*—"out of nothing, nothing comes." And if there ever was a time when there was absolutely nothing, then nothingness would reign supreme.

Nothingness would be immutably nothingness, sovereignly nothingness. And there would be no possibility of anything's existing.

I don't believe that we can give just probable evidence for the existence of God. I believe that the existence of God can be demonstrated conclusively and irrefutably on the basis of reason alone. If you grant one thing, that something exists—a piece of chalk, a shoe—then something must *be*. There must be something somewhere, somehow that has the power of being itself, something that you and I don't have. If anything exists, then something, somewhere, somehow must have what Thomas Aquinas called “necessary being,” which means the power of being that is not dependent or derived but is located within oneself. And if it is essential and intrinsic to something to *be*, then that being must be an eternal being.

“In the beginning.” Eternity has no beginning. Genesis begins with a statement about the beginning not of eternity but of time, the beginning not of God but of the created realm. Why? Because there is no beginning to God. There is no beginning to eternity. But suppose there were a beginning to eternity. Suppose there were a beginning to God. What would there have been before God? Nothing.

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Do my choices matter?

From the first page of the Bible, we encounter a God who is sovereign. By His power and authority, He created the world and governs it to accomplish His plans. But is God sovereign over *everything* that happens—even our salvation? And if He is, do our choices even matter?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul demonstrates that the sovereignty of God extends to all things, from creation to redemption. Rather than erasing our responsibility, God's absolute power and complete authority are what enable us to know Him, obey His Word, and tell others about His saving grace.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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