

The Sovereign – Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

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This past Monday, the world bid farewell to Queen Elizabeth II. There may never be another monarch like her. She ascended to the throne at the age of 25 and died at 96.

Her seventy-year reign was extraordinary. She always seemed to be a stoic, steady, and graceful presence over the seven decades in which she ruled as queen. Despite the many ways the world changed, and the various scandals she endured even within her own family, she was always the constant— constantly calm, humble, wise, and dignified.

One of the many terms attributed to the British monarch is that of “the sovereign.”

It can be used interchangeably with the label “monarch.” It means an autonomous head of state. While the British monarch doesn’t have governing power, he or she can act autonomously or independently without his or her power being threatened.

The word sovereign can also, of course, be attributed to God. It’s a difficult word, somewhat, to understand. Because if we say that God is autonomous or independent, that triggers questions about God’s relationship to us.

Yet, delving into this label we attribute to God can bring us closer to God and make for a clearer connection.

First, let me give you some definitions of what a sovereign God isn’t. Because our God is one in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we believe God is a God of loving relationships, a God who doesn’t want to be alone. And because of this steadfast and hearty belief, we don’t subscribe to the definitions of God that we might very well have grown up with or had ascribed to God from other sources.

By and large, we don’t believe in a great heavenly Granddaddy god—the god who is there “to answer all our questions, solve all our

problems, protect us from the hurts and hard knocks of life, make our lives warm and safe and comfortable, save us from all trouble (including the trouble we bring on ourselves).” We don’t believe in the god “who makes no demands of us but is there to do everything for us and give us everything we want.”

No, that’s not what we believe a sovereign God is.

Nor do we believe in the great heavenly Tyrant, the god who is arbitrarily cruel and sometimes kind, loving some people and hating or simply ignoring others, according to the whim of the moment. The god who sneaks around spying on us, trying to catch us doing something so bad so he can get us. The god whose will it’s easy to know because it’s always *against* everything that’s fun and pleasant, and always demands of us just what we don’t like and don’t want to do.

No, that’s also not the sovereign God we worship.

Finally, we don’t believe in a god who’s only a great heavenly idea, “the god thought of in terms of abstract concepts like Wisdom, Power, Justice, Goodness, and Truth.” That would be a god who’s not living and not personal.

So if these are not the gods we worship, who is the sovereign God we worship?

“The Bible tells us two things about the living and true God. On the one hand, this God is in fact infinite, almighty, omnipresent, omniscient, beyond the greatest and highest we can imagine—autonomous, sovereign. On the other hand, this god is also a God who draws near to us in an intimate way as a loving parent to a child or as one who wants to be our friend and companion.” That’s evident in God coming to be one of us in Jesus Christ.

“God is neither heavenly Tyrant nor heavenly Grandparent, nor a combination of both. But God is in fact far above us yet with us, distant yet near, mysterious yet familiar, powerful yet loving, loving yet powerful—both at the same time.”

When we say that God is sovereign, we’re acknowledging that God is free to act however God chooses. And yet, the Bible reveals to

us how God tends to act in that freedom. Both from a distance and up close, God acts out of sovereign love.

These words from Psalm 91 today reveal God's majestic and sovereign nature. The psalmist describes God as a deliverer from danger, a protector from whom we can find refuge, a shield from dangerous forces, an answerer to our cries of distress, and a rescuer from trouble.

In this description, our image of God is one of strength and power—one who is able to summon great force. Words like shield, deliverer, and rescuer reflect a sovereign being—one that has the freedom to act with decisiveness and force.

But the psalmist also reminds us that this sovereign power is combined with a great love for all those who love this God. Power is wielded in ways that preserve and protect a humanity that God created. It isn't used to arbitrarily destroy or otherwise ignore the needs of God's people.

While God is indeed all-powerful and able to do whatever God chooses, God's loving nature means that all power is directed toward preserving and embracing a people that isn't always worthy of being loved.

Every parent knows what it means to have authority over a child. With authority comes power—the power to act however that parent chooses. And yet, because of the great love that parent has for a child, a loving mom or dad uses that power and authority to enhance the relationship he or she has with the son or daughter. The parent often gets angry, the parent often disciplines in ways that a child does not like or understand; but the ultimate loving mother or father wields his or her authority purely for the sake of protecting and preserving a child's life. A parent is sovereign over her child.

We all know that bad things happen to us. There are times when the words of Psalm 91 don't resonate with us. Because we're in distress or hurting or threatened, we wonder why God's sovereign power isn't working on our behalf.

A Sunday school teacher was asking her students some questions after a series of lessons on God's omnipotence. She asked, "Is there anything God can't do?"

All was silent. Finally, one boy held up his hand.

The teacher, on seeing this, was disappointed that they had missed the point of the lesson. She sighed and asked, "Well, what is it you think God can't do?"

The boy replied, "He can't please everybody."

To believe in the sovereignty of God doesn't mean we have all the answers to why events happen in our lives that we wish would not, and it doesn't mean all of us are pleased with God all the time.

And yet, if anyone can come to our aid, it is the God of Jesus Christ—who died and rose again for us—who can act in power on our behalf because of how much he loves us.

A widow of one of the victims of 9/11, that occurred now 21 years ago, reflected on her pain and the purpose behind the tragedies of that day. She said, "God's sovereignty has been made clear to me. When I am tempted to become angry and ask 'What if?' and, 'Why us?' God says, 'I knew on September 10, and I could have stopped it, but I have a plan for greater good than you can ever imagine.' I don't know God's plan, and honestly, right now I don't like it very much. But I trust that he is true to his promise in Romans 8:28: 'We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.' My only responsibility is to love God. He'll work out the rest."

This woman made a claim that many of us have a problem with. She believes God could've stopped the tragedy of 9/11. We hate to acknowledge that because it implies that God would let something so awful happen. And how does that square with God's immense love for us? Yet, God's sovereignty—God's independence and autonomy—means that God is up to something we don't often understand. And indeed, it does allow for the possibility that God is working through horrible events like that to bring some sense of goodness from them.

Elizabeth II, the British sovereign, seemed to have found the right touch over 70 years. Despite the decadence, the pomp and circumstance of royalty, she seemed to use her power, her independence, for good. For the sake of her subjects.

Ultimately, the sovereignty of God acts in power for us, not against us. God is free to act however God chooses, and in those moments when we don't understand, we trust that this powerful, yet loving, God will ultimately make things right.

Let us pray. God, you act with the freedom to act however you choose. At times we don't understand. But we also know that you are a God of great love. And so we trust that you ultimately act with authority and power in ways that preserve and protect the people who love you. You are our refuge and our fortress, and we give you thanks. Amen.