

In Jesus Steps

Disciples for Life

Unit 1: Who Is God?

Learning to know and love God for who He is, His character, attributes, and being.

Lesson 4

God Is Sovereign

Day One

Ruler of All

In *Unit 1, Lesson 3: God Is Love*, we learned that God's love comes from His heart, or being. He deeply cares about you, me, and every person He created. God is interested in us and everything that affects or involves us. He also has the right and authority to direct, change, or influence anyone in heaven and earth. God is sovereign (pronounced sov-run).

Technically, sovereignty is not an attribute of God, but rather an activity of God in relation to His universe. Sovereignty is God's control over His creation, dealing with His governance over it: Sovereignty is God's rule over all reality.¹ The understanding of God's sovereignty is so important in our relationship with God, we are including it in our *Who Is God?* study.

God rules and uses His power in union with all His attributes. Therefore, God governs the universe in love, goodness, and mercy, as we noted in lessons 1–3. God is also incomprehensible (beyond understanding). It is impossible for people to always understand why God allows or brings about events in our world. We need to trust God to work out everything for our good because we love Him and have been called according to His purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:28–29).

Definition: As a noun, the word *sovereign* means a supreme (highest, ultimate) ruler, especially a king. As an adjective, *sovereign* means possessing or having supreme or absolute power.

In terms of the Bible, God's sovereignty is His right and ability to control all things. He is the source of all creation, and all things depend on Him. God is *the* Supreme and Ultimate Ruler of the universe. Being sovereign, God has the ability and authority to do whatever He desires. Nothing, including evil and suffering, can occur without God's permission or authorization.

Read 1 Chronicles 29:11–13 and answer questions 1–5:

Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. ¹²Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. ¹³Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. 1 Chronicles 29:11–13

¹ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, Bethany House, 2003), 536.

1. Is there anything in heaven and earth that does not belong to God (v.11a)? Yes No (Underline One)
2. Who is exalted (praised, honored, glorified) as head over all (v.11b)?
3. Who is the ruler of all things (v.12a)?
4. Who has the power to exalt (raise in rank, power or character) and give strength (v.12b)?

Action Step

5. Give God thanks and praise (admire, honor) for His glorious name (v. 13). Write your praise:

Accountability: Be prepared to share your Action Step #5 with your team at your next meeting.

God is all-powerful (omnipotent). No one has more power than God. There is no one in the physical or spiritual world outside of His control or influence. God is invincible and unconquerable. He is unstoppable and unbeatable. Power is another of God's attributes and one that enables Him to put into effect anything He ordains or commands.

Nothing is impossible with God (Matthew 19:26). He has unlimited power. God can do whatever He pleases. However, He will not act against His character. For example, God cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2).

Definitions: *Universe* defines all of space and everything in it, including stars, planets, and galaxies. A *galaxy* is a system of millions or (in some galaxies) billions of stars held together by gravity. The earth's *galaxy* is known as the Milky Way, and the planets in our system rotate around the sun—itsself a medium-size star among the hundreds of millions of stars in the Milky Way. The Bible phrase “the heavens and the earth” is the same as referring to the entire creation or universe.

6. Read Jeremiah 32:17. How much power do you think it took to make the universe?

“Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” Jeremiah 32:17

7. Read Job 23:13. No one can resist or defeat God. He does whatever He _____.

“But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases.” Job 23:13

8. Read Isaiah 14:27. No one can stop God and His plans. When He decides to do something, no one can turn it _____.

“For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?” Isaiah 14:27 (Thwart means to stop or prevent.)

Joseph (Genesis 37–50) was the first son born to Jacob and Rachel. However, Jacob had ten older sons by other women. Jacob loved Rachel more than his other wife, Leah, but Rachel was barren (unable to conceive). So Rachel gave permission to her attendant, Bilhah, to bear children on her behalf. Later God opened Rachel’s womb for the births of Joseph and Benjamin, Jacob’s final two sons.

Jacob loved Joseph more than his older sons and did not hide his favoritism and affection, even giving him a multicolored robe that made his brothers jealous (Genesis 37:3–4). God gave Joseph a dream that indicated he would be ruling over his brothers one day. When Joseph told his brothers about the dream, their jealousy finally exploded. While they were in the fields tending the flocks, they decided to kill him.

Judah, one of the brothers, convinced the others not to kill Joseph. Instead, he suggested they sell him to the people (Ishmaelites) passing by. After the caravan (group) left with 17-year-old Joseph as their slave, the brothers slaughtered a goat. They took Joseph’s richly ornamented robe that his father had given him and dipped it into the blood. When they reached home that evening, they gave it to their father. Jacob immediately thought a ferocious animal had killed Joseph and mourned for his son many days.

9. Did God allow Joseph to be rejected and abused by his brothers? Yes No (Underline One)

10. Have you ever been rejected and abused by family? Yes No (Underline One)

God did not intervene or step in right away. He allowed the brothers’ evil act to stand. Joseph was cast off by family members who were supposed to love him and look out for him. But God had not abandoned Joseph; He was with him.

11. Read Psalm 27:10. Who receives you and holds you close, even if others including your mother and father, leave or desert you?

Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. Psalm 27:10
(The Hebrew word translated receive also means to gather, take up, accept, or hold close.)

When Joseph reached Egypt, he was sold to Potiphar, the captain of the guard. The LORD God was with Joseph and gave him success in everything he did. Potiphar saw this and put him in charge of his household and everything he owned.

Potiphar's wife noticed Joseph because he was well-built and handsome. When her husband was not around, she tried to get Joseph into her bed. Joseph refused, saying, "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9)

The woman did not like being rejected, so she lied. She told her husband that Joseph tried to sleep with her. Potiphar burned with anger and put him in prison. Joseph was confined with the king's prisoners.

Again, the Lord was with Joseph and showed him kindness. God granted him favor with the prison warden, who put him in charge of the other prisoners. The Lord continued to give Joseph success in whatever he did.

12. Share a time when God gave *you* success or granted *you* favor?

Accountability: Be prepared to share #12 with your team at your next meeting.

God could have shown Joseph favor earlier. God could have moved or stirred the brothers' hearts so they would not have sold him into slavery. He could have also opened Potiphar's heart to see the evil in his own wife. Or God could have blinded Potiphar's wife to her desires for Joseph.

Similarly, God could have moved in your life in a thousand or more different ways. But God had a plan for Joseph, and He has a plan for you. The means by which God works out His governance or controls everything is His providence. He is faithfully guiding everything He has made toward His purposes.

Joseph was rejected, falsely accused, and forgotten. Yet this man who lived 1,500 years before Christ stayed true to his faith, trusting himself to a caring and mighty God. The Lord was working in Joseph's individual life for the purpose of saving many lives, as we shall see. God had *not* rejected, accused, forgotten, or abandoned Joseph.

Note: God's sovereignty does not mean that humans have no part or responsibility for their actions. The Bible is clear that God has given us a free will. We are answerable and accountable to God for our choices. We will look deeper into this subject later.

Action Step

13. Memorize Psalm 33:11:

But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

Accountability: Be prepared to share your memory verse #13 with your team.

—End Day One—

Day Two

The God Who Wants to be Known

Twelve years had passed since Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery. While he oversaw the prisoners, he met two of the king's officials. They had offended the king of Egypt (Pharaoh) and were put into prison. They each had unusual dreams while held captive and did not know what they meant. God gave Joseph the explanation of the dreams, and he shared it with the two men. Just as Joseph had said, one of the men was hanged and the other restored.

Joseph told the restored official that he did not deserve to be in prison. He asked the man to take his case to the king. But when he returned to the palace, the king's worker forgot Joseph.

Two years later Pharaoh had a disturbing dream, and no one could explain it. Joseph was now thirty years old. The restored official remembered Joseph and told the king about his ability to interpret (explain the meaning of) dreams. So Joseph was called into the presence of the king of Egypt.

God's sovereign plan was about to unfold. It was now 14 years since Joseph had been sold into slavery and then imprisoned. He had not done anything wrong, but he suffered through unfavorable circumstances.

When God's plan is not revealed right away, we get impatient. Unlike Joseph, we can grumble, complain, and accuse God of being unfair. We need to remember: *God is patient and not limited to human timing* (Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8).

14. Do you think being upset with circumstances in your life is the same as being upset with God? Yes No Maybe (Underline One) Explain your answer:

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer #14 with your team at your next meeting.

Joseph entered Pharaoh's presence humbly with one goal. He wanted to make sure God got the glory. He told Pharaoh that only the Lord could give the meaning of the dream. Joseph did not want to take credit in any way.

God wants to be known by the people He created. He desires to be known by individuals and by nations. In this case, God revealed Himself through the favor or blessing He gave to Joseph. He gave Joseph the gift of dream interpretation.

When Joseph stood before Pharaoh, the leader of Egypt described his dream about seven fat cows and seven skinny cows. The seven skinny cows ate up the fat ones. What did this strange, disturbing dream mean?

God revealed to Joseph that Egypt would have seven years of great abundance and seven years of famine (shortage of food). Joseph went on to say, *“The matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.”* Genesis 41:32b

15. Name three ways the sovereign hand of God was at work in Joseph’s life from ages 17–31:

God had not only given Joseph the meaning of Pharaoh’s dream, but He also gave him wisdom. Joseph told the king to collect and store up food during the seven good years of harvest. In this way, the nation could use the stored food during the seven years of famine.

The plan seemed good to the king, so he put Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt. All the people were to submit to Joseph’s orders. Only Pharaoh would be greater than Joseph.

When the seven years of famine happened, Egypt was the only country with food. The countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph. When Joseph’s father learned there was grain in Egypt, He sent ten of his sons to buy food.

The brothers bowed down to Joseph with their faces to the ground. They did not recognize Joseph. He was dressed in Egyptian clothes, spoke the native language, and had an Egyptian name. However, Joseph recognized them.

Joseph wanted to see if his brothers’ hearts had changed, so he did not reveal himself right away. He tested them in several ways before he made himself known. God also tests our hearts and although He is present, we may not always be aware of it (Psalm 11:5, 13:1, 26:2; James 1:3).

God wants to be known in the right way. He desires to be known in truth and not through someone’s imagination. Today, the only way to truly know God is through Christ Jesus, His Son.

Like Joseph’s brothers, Jesus’ brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5). He was also rejected by His neighbors (Luke 4:16, 28–29). Like Joseph, Jesus suffered because of other people’s sin. Like Joseph, Jesus suffered without complaining or blaming God. Both remained faithful pointing others to the Lord. Notice also that both were in the sovereign plan and providence of Almighty God.

Of course, there are major differences between Jesus and Joseph. Jesus is the Son of God, fully human and fully divine. Joseph was simply human. Jesus is sinless and Joseph was not. Jesus gives eternal life and Joseph only gave out grain during a famine to preserve physical life.

Read Isaiah 53:10–11 and answer questions 16–18:

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by

his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities (sins).
Isaiah 53:10–11 (parentheses added) Note: This is a prophecy about Jesus. Prophecy is the oral or written message from God through a prophet.

16. Was it the LORD's sovereign plan and will for Jesus to suffer (v. 10a)? Yes No (Underline One)

17. The LORD makes Jesus' life an offering for _____ (v. 10b).

18. What is the result of God's plan in Jesus' suffering (v. 11b)?

God made Himself known through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins. Jesus suffered so we may have everlasting life. Joseph suffered so the people of his time could continue in their earthly life without starving to death. God was also using Joseph to save the Hebrews, His chosen people; they were in danger of starving like everyone else at the time of the famine.

Jacob, Joseph's father, was the grandson of Abraham. God promised Abraham that He would make him into a great nation (Genesis 12:2–3). God told Abraham that *all peoples on earth will be blessed through him*. All people *are* blessed through knowing God through Christ Jesus. Our Savior was born into a Jewish (Hebrew) family, Abraham's descendants (offspring, children).

We become spiritual children of Abraham and heirs to the promise when we trust Jesus as Lord and Savior (Galatians 3:6–9). This was and is the plan of our Supreme Ruler. Our Sovereign chose the Hebrew (Israelites, Jewish) people to make Himself known. Now, God chooses believers, whether they are Jews or Gentiles (non-Jewish), to make His name known.

19. How are you sharing or telling others about Jesus?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer #19 with your team at your next meeting.

We are a blessing to individuals and nations by sharing the truth about Jesus. We share about Jesus in love because everything we do must be in love. It is the second great commandment, exceeded only by God's command to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:36–40). Jesus died on the cross for our sins because of love: His love for His heavenly Father and His love for us.

Our sins were given to Jesus on the cross and in return, His righteousness was given to us. He rose from the dead and lives to intercede for believers (Hebrews 7:25). Interceding for us means that Jesus is actively pleading our case before God. Satan accuses us, but Jesus defends us. In fact, Jesus is the only one who can mediate (go between, intervene, arbitrate) on our behalf (1 Timothy 2:5).

Read Genesis 50:18–20 and answer questions 20–22:

His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said. ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Genesis 50:18–20

20. What did Joseph’s brothers say when they threw themselves down before him (v. 18)?
21. What does Joseph mean when he said, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God?” (v. 18)
22. Write out v. 20 and then share how this verse encourages you:

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer #20–22 with your team at your next meeting.

God allows, and may even cause, suffering (Lamentations 3:31–33; Isaiah 53:10; Amos 3:6). He has a holy purpose and everything He does is right. Jesus and Joseph are prime examples of suffering that accomplished the saving of many lives.

Read Daniel 4:35 and answer questions 23–24:

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?” Daniel 4:35

23. God does as He pleases with the _____ of _____ and the _____ of the _____.
24. Does anyone have a right to question how God runs the world? Yes No (Underline One)

Action Step

25. **Meditate (think deeply) about God being sovereign.** How does this activity of God affect (shape, influence) your relationship with Him?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer #25 with your team at your next meeting.

—End Day Two—

Day Three

Blessing and Judgment

Experiencing pain, illness, injury, or anything unpleasant is extremely difficult. Most people do not like to suffer and avoid it at all costs. However, we should not be surprised when we are called to suffer. It *is* part of our earthly existence.

Take Job for example. He suffered through many hardships and heartaches. While on earth, Job never learned God was testing him through Satan, although God eventually would speak to him—though not about Satan’s challenge (Job 38-42). In the end, God’s silence about the why of Job’s suffering did not matter. Through his emotional and physical suffering, Job came to see the true majesty of God.

26. Read Job 42:1–2. Can any plan of God’s be thwarted (stopped)? Yes No (Underline One)

Then Job replied to the LORD: ²“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” Job 42:1–2

Read Job 42:3–6 and answer questions 27–29:

“You (God) asked, ‘Who is this that obscures (hides, conceals) my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I (Job) spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ⁴“You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ ⁵My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. ⁶Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” Job 42:3–6 (parentheses added)

27. God wants to know who would dare question His plans with such limited understanding. How did Job answer (v. 3b)?

28. God then told Job to listen while He spoke. God would question Job, and he was to answer. How did Job respond (v. 5)?

Note: Job says, “but now my eyes have seen you.” We are not exactly sure how Job saw God, but we do know he did *not* see God’s face. No one can see God’s face and live (Exodus 33:20, 23). Job may have seen a form of God or the pre-incarnate Christ. *Pre-incarnate* means before Christ was born on earth. *Incarnate* means in the flesh or in human form.

Job’s words about seeing God may also be in the symbolic sense of knowing God better. Job comes to know God through his suffering. His faith becomes real through his experiences, and he will now trust God in His supreme plan, even if it means suffering.

Definitions: *Repent* means to turn from sins to God. Turning to God means to follow and obey Him. *Repentance* also includes being truly sorry for wrongdoing. *Dust and ashes* were placed on one's head as a sign of sorrow, mourning, and humility.

29. Why did Job despise himself and repent in dust and ashes (v. 6)?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer to questions #27–29 with your team at your next meeting.

The account of Job is especially helpful for people going through challenging times. We can read about Job in the Bible and know our suffering is not in vain. Our patient suffering brings glory to God and thwarts (prevents) the plans of Satan.

Job was *not* being judged and punished for wrongdoing. Recall Jesus' teaching about the man who was born blind. Read John 9:1–12 from a Bible. His disciples wanted to know who had sinned, the man or his parents. They felt someone was to blame for the blindness.

30. Read John 9:3. How were the works of God displayed in the blind man?

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” John 9:3

Joseph, Job, and the blind man were not being punished for wrongdoing. However, God can, and has made Himself known through punishment. God will judge and punish evildoers to make His name known.

31. Read Ezekiel 39:21. How is God displaying His glory?

“I will display my glory among the nations, and all the nations will see the punishment I inflict and the hand I lay on them.” Ezekiel 39:21

The nation of Israel knew God through blessing and judgment. In Ezekiel 39:21 the LORD is talking to the Israelites. They were unfaithful to Him, and He handed them over to their enemies.

God makes Himself known through blessings or favor. We are told that God blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first. He was given wealth, sons, and daughters and lived to be 140 years old (Job 42:12–17). Joseph was also given wealth and a powerful position in Egypt. And the blind man was blessed with a miraculous cure by the Son of God.

32. How did God make Himself known through the blessings He gave to Job, Joseph, and the blind man?

The story of Joseph and his father Jacob (later renamed Israel) displays God's sovereignty in His rule, authority, providence, and power. After the brothers told their father that Joseph was alive, God spoke to Jacob in a vision at night. He told him *not* to be afraid to go to Egypt because:

"I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again" (Genesis 46:3–4).

As God promised, the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly. But after Joseph and his generation died, the new ruler (Pharaoh) of Egypt became concerned about the Israelites. He was afraid they would become even more numerous and turn against the Egyptians. He enslaved them and gave them over to hard labor. Just as God had raised up Joseph, He raised up Moses to deliver His people.

Through Moses, God performed many miracles, including parting the Red Sea. The enslaved Israelites walked on solid ground between two walls of water to safety. When the Egyptians followed on their horses and chariots, the giant sea walls collapsed over them, and they died.

Action Step

33. Think about Joseph, Job, and the blind man we wrote about in this lesson. Pray and ask God to use *you* to make His name known. Share any impressions (ideas, feelings) *you* have about God's answer:

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer #33 with your team at your next meeting.

34. Read Ezekiel 20:9. God acts to protect His identity and as well as His _____.

But for the sake of my name, I brought them out of Egypt. I did it to keep my name from being profaned in the eyes of the nations among whom they lived and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites. Ezekiel 20:9 (Profane in this context is disrespecting or ridiculing God.)

The LORD wants to be known correctly. He wants people to know He is good, merciful, loving, righteous, just, and holy. Therefore, the LORD makes Himself known through blessings and judgments. Both reveal His essence and character. Both reveal His power and sovereignty.

Sixty-five times in the book of Ezekiel, God says in some form or variation, *"Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD"* (37:13). His people will experience His punishment and favor and realize everything comes from God's hand. Then they will submit (yield, be subject) to their sovereign King.

God did not create us to ignore, disrespect, or rebel against Him. He created us for a love relationship. But our relationship with God is on His terms. It is based on His character, and He will do whatever is necessary to bring us into this truth.

After the Israelites were miraculously delivered from slavery, they rejoiced and praised God. Three months later, God called Moses to meet Him on Mount Sinai. God wanted to make sure His people had His laws and rules for living. This is the time *God gave Moses the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God* (Exodus 31:18). We know the tablets of Testimony as the Ten Commandments.

Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, and the people grew restless. They decided to make a god for themselves. So, they took the gold jewelry they had received from the Egyptians and cast it into the shape of a calf. *Then they said, "These are your gods O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."* (Exodus 32:4)

God told Moses exactly what the people were doing. They were worshipping and sacrificing to a golden idol. In addition, they were engaging in immoral activities. God was angry and wanted to destroy them. He told Moses that He would make him into a great nation. God was saying that He would take Abraham's blessing (Genesis 12:1–3) and give it to Moses.

Instead of accepting the offer, Moses humbly sought God's favor. He spoke to God about the situation. This is the same when we go to the Lord in prayer. Yes, God is sovereign, but He still wants us to pray, and He wants to answer.

35. Read Exodus 32:13. In asking God *not* to be angry with the Israelites, who does Moses want God to remember (v. 13a)?

"Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Exodus 32:13

Moses reminded God of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Jacob). Moses was praying according to God's will. When praying, use God's Word (the Bible) to remind Him of certain promises in Christ Jesus, our Lord. This does not mean that God has forgotten, but that *you* know and believe. It also does not mean there is a magical formula. God will answer as He decides what is best.

God showed Moses favor by answering his request. That is, God decided not to destroy the Israelites (Exodus 32:14). He relented. Read Amos 7:1–6 for another time that God relented because of prayer or intercession. Intercessory prayer is the act of speaking to God on behalf of others.

Definition: The Hebrew word *niham* (נִחַם), is translated *relent* in the English NIV Bible (Exodus 32:14; Amos 7:3). *Niham* is a verb that means to allow oneself to be sorry, regret, suffer grief, and *relent*. *Relent* means to soften in one's intention, feeling, temper, or determination. Thus, God allowed Himself to soften in His intention to bring judgment on the Israelites at particular times and circumstances.

If God is sovereign and answers according to His will, why pray? We pray because intercessory prayer can change things. We do not change God or things that He has ordained or predestined, but God may change circumstances and situations. There are many conditions, details, and features surrounding God's plans that He may be longing to adjust, if only we would pray.

Prayer is one of the methods God uses in communicating with us. It also is a way He builds a relationship with us. When we pray, we get to know God through His many attributes.

Through answered prayer, we come to know God in His goodness, mercy, love, and righteousness. Righteousness means God is pure and will *not* answer in any way that compromises His holiness or ours. This leads to a significant question: if God does *not* answer your request in the way you wanted, will you still love and serve Him? Think about this and answer for yourself.

Both Jesus and Joseph continued to love God through all kinds of adverse situations. They did not love God for what He would give them or how He would answer their prayers. They simply loved God and accepted whatever came into their lives as part of His sovereign will.

36. Read James 4:2–3 and fill in the blanks. You do not _____ because you do not _____ God (v. 2c). When you do ask, you do not _____, because you ask with _____ motives, (reason for doing something), that you may spend what you get on your _____ (v. 3).

You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James 4:2–3 (compare Matthew 7:7–12)

Prayer helps us recognize our dependence on God. We rely on Him alone for our every breath. All that we have and do is a result of God. By praying, we place our trust in God's divine sovereignty. We accept His answer and go forward as the Holy Spirit leads. Furthermore, God may withhold blessings until we seek Him in prayer and acknowledge our dependence on Him.

Of course, we may not always understand God's ways. Moses did not *really* understand God's anger at the Israelites (Exodus 32:7–12). However, when Moses went down from Mount Sinai and saw the evil firsthand, then *he* burned with anger. Moses was so angry he threw the two tablets of the law of the covenant (Ten Commandments) engraved by God and they broke into many pieces. Then he took the golden calf the people had made and burned it in fire. Afterward he ground it into a fine dust and scattered it on the water.

Moses stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." (Exodus 32:26) Those who were for the Lord strapped a sword to their side and went through the

camp killing those determined to be against God. All these instructions were from the Lord and ones Moses willingly carried out.

Today those who are determined to be against God will be punished after they die. Our job is to pray and tell people about Jesus so they may repent of their rebellion and have their sins forgiven. In evangelism (giving the message about Jesus), we also depend on God, for only He can draw someone to Himself (John 6:44).

Sadly, the next generation of Israelites continued to turn their back on God. Even after they were living in the Promised Land, they worshiped idols, disobeyed God's commands, and mistreated people. They even sacrificed their children to idols (Ezekiel 16:20–21). They were wicked and they alone were responsible for their evil. Still, God was merciful and sent prophets to warn them.

Definitions: In the Old Testament, a *prophet* was a person who received and gave a message from God. In the New Testament, a *prophet* speaks for God or Christ. In both cases the prophet may speak through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. *Prophecy* is to speak the words the Lord has given. *Prophecy* also means to foretell or predict the future. It is speaking with assurance based on what God has said.

37. Read Ezekiel 14:21. What are four judgments that the LORD may send?

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals!” Ezekiel 14:21

38. Read Ezekiel 14:23. The Sovereign Lord does nothing without _____.

“You will be consoled when you see their conduct and their actions, for you will know that I have done nothing in it without cause, declares the Sovereign LORD.” Ezekiel 14:23

(Note: *You* is plural and refers to the exiled Israelites in Babylon)

The Sovereign Lord does not judge without cause. Man is sinful and deserves punishment. But in His great mercy, God sent His Son to die for sins. Those who belong to Christ will *not* appear before the great white throne of God for final judgment and afterwards thrown into hell (Revelation 20:11–15). Believers *will* appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of their lives (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Read Ezekiel 33:11 and answer questions 39–40:

Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’ Ezekiel 33:11 (compare Lamentations 3:32–33, where the prophet Jeremiah reminds God's people that God also shows compassion).

39. Does God take any pleasure in the death of the wicked (11a)? Yes No (Underline One)

40. What does God want for the wicked (11b)?

Read Ezekiel 36:33–36 and answer questions 41–42:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. ³⁴The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. ³⁵They will say, “This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.” ³⁶Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.” Ezekiel 36:33–36

41. Will God resettle the destroyed towns and desolate land (vs. 33–34)? Yes No (Underline One)

42. With God’s blessings on Israel’s towns and land, what will the nations know (v. 36)?

—End Day Three—

Day Four

Responsibility for Thoughts and Actions

The word of the Lord came to the prophet Jeremiah. The Lord told him to go down to the potter's house where He would give Jeremiah a message. The potter was in his shop making a pot out of clay. However, the pot was marred (spoiled, flawed). So, he "formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him" (See Jeremiah 18:1–4).

A potter would begin his work by preparing the clay. He had to work the bubbles (or air pockets) out of the clay so the piece would not collapse later. He would bang the clay on a table or knead it like dough. After the bubbles were removed, the potter would place the clay on a spinning wheel to shape it into the form he desired. Potters could form clay into bowls, plates, and cups.

Today, we have many options to buy dishes, but that was not the case in the time of Jeremiah (626–586 BC). The potter was a necessary part of life for these items. Pottery-making was a well-known and familiar craft. God was giving Jeremiah a visual representation of His message so all the people could understand and remember it.

People are still making pottery and have been since 3129 BC (Before Christ). In fact, there is a community of potters in Seagrove, North Carolina, a town of less than 500. My family and I have driven there and visited various shops. Although still functional, many of their pieces are unique works of art. We have soup bowls we use regularly and decorative vases we display in our home.

Some of the potters were working with the clay when we arrived at their shop. It was fun to watch them spinning the clay and forming it into a vessel or container. Although it may look easy, it takes a lot of skill and patience. One potter was especially patient and kind. Our children, John and Christine, were young at the time and crowded around his wheel. They asked a "zillion" questions, which he answered patiently.

Before we left, he gave the children a small piece of pottery he had made previously. It had already been through the firing process. In other words, it had been placed in a kiln (oven) to harden. They were thrilled with the whole encounter!

Like the potter, God is patient and kind. He invites our questions and answers on our level of understanding. Like the potter, God also has the right to give gifts as He chooses. And like the potter, God has the right to shape His clay (us) into whatever He desires.

The marred or spoiled pot described in Jeremiah 18:4 illustrated sin in the life of the Israelites. The pot was not useable in its current condition. Neither were the Israelites pleasing or useful to God in their sinful condition. As the potter makes a choice about the flawed pot, so God decides about the sin of the Israelites. This is the lesson God wanted Jeremiah to give to His people.

Because of their sin, God was preparing disaster for Israel (Jeremiah 18:11). But, as we will see, He was also giving them an opportunity to turn from their evil ways (repent). God alone has the right to destroy or remold nations and individuals as He chooses. This is still true today.

Read Jeremiah 18:5–6 and answer questions 43–45:

Then the word of the LORD came to me (Jeremiah). ⁶He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.” Jeremiah 18:5–6 (parentheses added)

43. Who did God call to declare or proclaim His message (v. 5)?

44. God compares Himself to a _____ and Israel to _____ (v. 6)?

45. How do these words of God (potter) speak to *you* (clay) today?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer #45 with your team at your next meeting.

Read Jeremiah 18:7–10 and answer questions 46–47:

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. Jeremiah 18:7–10

46. Name one reason God will change His mind about sending *disaster* He has planned (vs.7–8).

47. What is one reason God will reconsider the *good* He had intended or planned (vv. 9–10)?

God is the Supreme Ruler. He has absolute control over every person, place, or thing. Therefore, in His sovereignty, He has chosen to respond to people. He has given humans free will. We can choose God, or we can choose evil. If we have chosen evil, we can repent and choose God.

God has set up conditions for pardon and restoration based on our actions. The little word *if* alerts us to God’s conditions. Here are two examples in the New Testament:

If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9 (Emphasis and underlining added)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (Confess means to agree with God and admit our wrongdoing)

In Romans 9, the apostle Paul tells the story of Israel. He clearly talks about God's choice and purpose for people. He gives the example of God choosing or electing Jacob over his twin brother, Esau, before they were even born. Jacob was chosen before he or his brother had done anything good or bad.

Definition: In *election*, God determines to bring about His will by His plans and choices. The word *election* means to choose for oneself. The objects of divine selection are the *elect* ones.

God's overarching plan is to bring salvation to His people and His world (Ephesians 1:4–14). Paul goes on to ask the question, "Is God unjust?" He exclaims, "Not at all!" God has the right to have mercy and compassion on whomever He chooses (Romans 9:14–18).

The Bible is clear. God is sovereign, but we are responsible for our actions. God chooses to show mercy to some and not to others. Sometimes it seems that God's election and human responsibility are in conflict. They do not seem to go together.

Nevertheless, both concepts (ideas, thoughts) are in the Bible. It is best to live with the tension (uncertainty, strain) and understand that God has it worked out. The problem arises when we try to build a case for one or the other. If we just want to believe that we are elected to salvation, then we will ignore all the Bible verses that clearly state the responsibility we have for our actions. If we choose to believe everything is up to us, then we will ignore the Scripture on election or predestination (God's foreknowledge and ordering events).

—End Day Four—

Day Five

The God who Is Always Right

Read Romans 9:19–21 and answer questions 48–49:

One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?” ²⁰*But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”* ²¹*Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?*
Romans 9:19–21

48. Do we have the right to talk back to God and accuse Him (vs. 20–21)? Yes No (Underline One)?

49. Does God have the right to make people in any way He chooses (v. 21)? Yes No (Underline One)

God has the right to form or use us in any way He chooses. We may have an honorable job in work for His kingdom or one that is disrespected or even maligned (criticized). If we are not obedient to do the work God has called us to, He may get someone else to do it. God will have His way.

Whether a special job or a common job, our lives will have challenges. Sometimes we may even feel like the clay being beaten and banged on the table. It is during these tough times that we may question God’s plan and purposes. These are the times we need to cry out to God to increase our faith—“*Keep us faithful, O Lord Jesus.*”

50. Write below any difficulty or challenge you are going through now

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer #50 and share how your team can with you and for you.

It is during these tough times that we must remember three truths: 1. *God is good.* 2. *God is mercy.* 3. *God is love.* God does nothing without cause or reason. He judges and punishes justly.

When God had decided to free His people from slavery, He chose Moses for the job. Certainly, God would have received glory if the most powerful king at the time had simply released all his slaves when Moses asked. The children of Israel who lived in Egypt numbered over one million people. Everyone would have been talking about it!

But Pharaoh chose *not* to release the Hebrews. God sent Moses to tell the king to let His people go. But Pharaoh said to Moses, “*Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.*” Exodus 5:2

Pharaoh had several choices. He could have been open to hearing and learning about the LORD. He could have studied the issue and sought wise counsel. And he could have obeyed the LORD and released the Hebrews. Instead of these choices, he increased the workload of the Hebrews and would not let them go.

Read Exodus 6:1 and answer questions 51–52:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.” Exodus 6:1

51. What three words does God use twice in this verse to describe His sovereign power?

52. How did Pharaoh’s choice *not* to release the Hebrews affect God’s plan to free His people?

Pharaoh’s action in this case is an example of human choice and God’s sovereign power. This king had the responsibility to obey God. At the very least, he should have gathered information about the God of the Israelites. But Pharaoh was proud and arrogant. He thought he had control over the situation. However, God’s plans will never be thwarted.

The Lord told Moses that He would use His mighty power and supreme rule to release His people. We know the outcome because it is recorded in the book of Exodus. The Lord performed great miracles, signs, and wonders throughout the land of Egypt to free His people. He even parted the Red Sea.

Read Exodus 7:3–5 and answer questions 53–55:

“But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, ⁴he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites.⁵ And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.” Exodus 7:3–5

Definition: In biblical language, the *heart* is the center of one’s mind and personality. A soft *heart* is open to God. A hard *heart* is not. It lacks faith and godly wisdom. Sin and especially unrepentant (being unwilling to change) sin causes *hearts* to harden.

53. What does God say He will do to Pharaoh’s heart (v.3)?

54. After the Lord hardens Pharaoh’s heart, will he listen to Moses (v. 4)? (Yes No Underline One)

55. Through the judgments God brings upon Egypt, what will they come to know (v. 5)?

This account of Pharaoh is also an example of God having the right to have mercy and compassion on whomever He chooses (Romans 9:14–18). Pharaoh initially chose to harden his heart by not even considering the Lord and His instructions. Therefore, God hardened his heart further so that even when Pharaoh saw the miracles, signs, and wonders, he would still *not* believe.

This is a good lesson for us. God may give some people excessive amounts of mercy or opportunities to know and follow Christ. Or He may give some people only one opportunity. We should not bank our eternal life on God's mercy for us and our hard heart. If God has called, we need to answer. It is not wise to think, "I can live my way and follow Jesus later." Neither you nor I, nor anyone else, may have another opportunity. Pharaoh did not.

Nevertheless, God *is* patient, and He does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). Therefore, we should continue to pray for the lost; we have no idea who will be saved and when. Only our sovereign God knows who will trust in Jesus, even perhaps with their last dying breath.

Read Deuteronomy 30:19 and Joshua 24:15 and answer questions 56–58:

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.

Deuteronomy 30:19

"But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Joshua 24:15

56. Write the meaning of these verses in your own words:

57. Did the Israelites have the choice to choose who they would serve? Yes No (Underline One)

58. Do you have a choice who you will serve? Yes No (Underline One)

God is sovereign over individuals and sovereign over nations. Jesus, the Son of God, is also "our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 4). They are one. We know from Scripture that no one knows God the Father except through Jesus (Matthew 11:27; John 14:6).

God rules in men and women's hearts to affect one or many individuals. But we still have responsibility for our actions. We are responsible for choosing to follow God (John 3:36). On the other hand, He enables us to choose, believe, and follow (Philippians 2:13).

59. How will understanding personally that God is sovereign and yet *you* are still responsible for *your* choices and actions influence your life?

Action Step

60. Memorize Habakkuk 3:19 and write or recite it for your team.

The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. Habakkuk 3:19

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer to #59 and your memory verse from #60 with your team.

—End Day Five and Lesson 4—

Next—Unit 1: Who Is God, Lesson 5: God Is Holy

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