

The Tsunami and the Sovereignty of God

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and proclaiming God's sovereignty in all circumstances, including natural disasters, and the need to center our lives on Christ. It challenges believers to boldly affirm God's reign even in the face of tragedies, to trust in His providence, and to share the message of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ with others.

Scripture: Job 1:12, Job 1:19, Daniel 4:17, Mark 1:27, Deuteronomy 32:39, James 4:13, Proverbs 16:9, Luke 13:1

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Proclaiming Faith in Adversity"

Description

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Transcript

Father, I pray that you would help me to be faithful now to your Word. I pray that you would put an anointing upon this moment for deep conviction that you are sovereign. And I pray that you would come and fill our mouths with that truth, and that you would cause our lives to conform to it.

And I pray that the ripple effect of this conference, Lord, and all that is heard in it would be a great awakening in the state convention here and around the nation and the world. And I pray that the hallmark and the banner flying over that great awakening and reformation is the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. So may the majesty of Christ ring in this hour, I pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Let me tell you what my aim is for us together and then try to do it. My aim is to persuade you that when your local radio station calls you or your local newspaper calls you and asks for your Christian response to the tsunami, that you will boldly affirm that God reigns over the Indian Ocean from the top to the bottom and from the east to the west. And that you will say on the telephone that one of His innumerable designs, just and holy designs in this calamity is to summon the whole world to repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

And that you will say to that reporter at the other end of the telephone line, if we try to rescue the love and the justice of God in this calamity by robbing Him of His sovereignty, we will lose His deity and with it all justice and all love and all hope. So that's my aim. This morning I stood here and spoke to the students

and I said to them that in order for your heart to have a durable and authentic centeredness on God and on Christ, you must see God as the most God-centered person in the world, and you must see Christ as the most Christ-centered person in the world.

And I unpacked that biblically from predestination, Ephesians 1.5, He predestined us in love to be His sons unto the praise of His glory. So predestination is for the praise of His glory. And then I unpacked it from creation, Isaiah 43, He created us for His glory.

And then I unpacked it from incarnation. Christ came into the world for the glory of God, which is why the angels sang at the incarnation, glory to God in the highest. And then I unpacked it from propitiation, or the cross, where Romans 3.25 says that God put Christ forward as a propitiation to demonstrate His righteousness because He had passed over sins.

And so the cross is the upholding and the vindicating of God's righteousness. And then I unpacked it from sanctification in Philippians 1.9 to 10, where we pray that we'll be filled with the fruits of righteousness that come through Jesus Christ to the praise and the glory of God. And then I unpacked it from the consummation and the second coming where Paul says that the Lord will come with His angels inflaming fire, bringing vengeance on those who do not believe in order that Christ might be magnified in all those who believe.

And so from beginning to ending, God's motive is God-centered. God's zeal is for the glory of God. But one of the things I did not argue from this morning is the doctrine of providence.

I saved that for you. And so I want to say now that I don't think it is possible to be a consistent, durable, authentic, God-centered human being and reject the biblical doctrine of the providence of God. I don't think it's possible to be God-centered and God-exalting if we follow David Hart and the Wall Street Journal.

For example, written about three days after the tsunami, no Christian is licensed, and I have to really control myself here because I want to say, and you issue licenses? No Christian is licensed to utter odious banalities about God's inscrutable counsels or blasphemous suggestions that all this mysteriously serves God's good ends, close quote. He has a big article in the most recent First Things, and I'm ashamed of First Things, and David Newhouse...I mean John Newhouse, that he published it. On the contrary, on the contrary, David Hart, it is not banal, it is not odious, and it is not blasphemous.

It is biblical to say that this serves the secret counsels of God and that they are good, righteous, holy, and just. God is sovereign over natural disasters. Let's just take a few biblical examples and spread them out and then ask, what do we say to that telephone call? Because I got one of those from NPR, and they interviewed me for 45 minutes and put 15 seconds on the radio, which is typical and why they're not worth your time.

But for that one woman, it might be worth her time, and so go ahead and do it. The Lord said to Satan, Job 112, behold, all that he has is in your power. So Satan gets permission to beat up on Job.

He must get permission. While they were yet speaking, I've jumped down now to verse 18, while they were yet speaking, another said, your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine at their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind. Now, come on pastors, on the telephone, don't whip out on me.

God rules the wind. If the Bible means anything, if God is God, he rules the wind. A wind came and struck the house, and it fell, and your children are all dead.

I alone escaped to tell you. Then Job rose, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshiped. He said, naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return.

The Lord gives, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. And the next sentence written by the inspired writer is, and he did not sin with his lips.

This is not hard to understand. It's just hard to believe God, which is why the world is in the condition it's in. God is sovereign over world rulers.

Maybe the next phone call will be about the assassination of the president. What will you say about that? Daniel 4, 17, the most highest ruler over the realm of mankind, bestows it on whom he wishes, sets over it the lowliest of men. Proverbs 21, 1, the king's heart is a stream of water in the hands of the Lord, and he directs it wherever he wishes.

God is sovereign over Satan and demons. Mark 1, 27, they were all amazed and debated among themselves, what is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.

This is not difficult. This is called Christianity. What is wrong with our pastors on the telephone? I was riding home from a morning prayer meeting last week, and here it comes again.

You've got NPR, actually it's Minnesota Public Radio, interviewing Dean Johnson, who is a Protestant chaplain, and he's also a senator in the Minnesota senate. And three Minnesota boys had just been killed that week in Iraq, and he is being interviewed about how chaplains help families, and she asks him the golden question. Just ask me, ask me this question.

Namely, she said, how do you help the families at a time like this? Not one word about God, not one word about Christ, not one word about prayer. This Protestant chaplain would not say one word. Tonight I'm so eager to hear what you have to say, because here's a question I've got for you right now, Josh.

I'm wondering whether these pastors and chaplains on panels and on telephones are not telling the truth because they just bought into what you said. Namely, there's no use to say it. I don't think so.

I hope not. If that's the way you're interpreting him, don't do it. Tell the truth on the telephone, and then go obey what he says tonight.

I think I know what he's going to say. God is sovereign over life and death. Deuteronomy 32-39.

See now, I am He, and there is no God besides Me. It is I who put to death and give life. I wound and I heal, and there is no one who can deliver out of My hand.

1 Samuel 2-6. The Lord kills and the Lord makes alive. He brings down to Sheol.

He raises up. Or this amazing text in James 4. Come now, come now you who say, today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there and get gain. You do not know about your life.

Your life is a vapor. Rather say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. For as it is, you are arrogant in your presumption.

It is arrogant to say, I'm flying home to Minneapolis tomorrow, if I don't at least think. Unless the Lord takes the plane down. The Lord, that's what it says.

That's what it says. You don't need a Ph.D. to understand the Bible. God is sovereign over life and death.

Say rather, James the inspired spokesman, say rather, if the Lord wills, I will live and do this or that. And if he doesn't, I die. Period.

I die. And if Satan's involved in my death, he's on a leash. And he can't bite me any more deeply than God yanks on him.

And he can kill me. I know he can kill me. It says that in Revelation 2-10.

Satan kills people, but only on the leash. And therefore at the end of the leash, he is my God. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.

Say it on the telephone. Be bold. Be Christian.

Don't be so mealy-mouthed. We need people who tell the truth, even if the truth isn't enough. I'm so tired of wimpy pastors.

I just look anywhere, anywhere. Because here's another truth about young people. They want people who are real.

They want pastors who stand up and tell them the truth. Why in the world does 59-year-old, five-grandchildren John Piper get invited to this school? I don't know. God is sovereign over sickness and disability.

Exodus 4-11. Let Johnny Erickson, let's just bow down and let Johnny Erickson tell the story, right? Let's just praise God for truth-tellers like Johnny Erickson Tata that blow young people out of the water with her unbelievable confession. Praise God for my because I have found such freedom in it.

Because she's read the Bible. She's simply read the Bible. She's read it way better than most pastors have read it evidently.

Exodus 4-11. The Lord said to him, who made man's mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Or take that second story of Job. This gets a little clearer.

Satan goes back to God and says, yeah, right, skin for skin. You don't touch his skin, he'll keep worshipping you. But you touch his skin, then he won't worship you anymore.

So God says, okay, touch his skin. Just don't kill him. I'll lengthen the leash a little farther.

And then it says, Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smoked Job with sores, boils from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. Satan is the subject of that verb. Satan smoked Job with boils from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet.

Job took a potsherd and scraped himself sitting among the ashes. And his wife said to him, do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die. And he said to her, you speak like one of the foolish women.

Shall we indeed accept good from the hand of God and not accept adversity? And in all this, Job did not sin with his lips. And then you get to the end of this book, and you wonder, has Job been a faithful interpreter of the providence of God, or has he been giving some bad theology like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have? And you get a resoundingly clear answer from the inspired writer of this book in chapter 42, verse 11. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him and ate bread with him in his house.

And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him. That's not Job talking. That's the inspired writer.

The Lord brought it all upon him, which is why Job was so right to say along with Matt Redmond's song, which is the other way around, the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Oh, pastors, our people need to know God.

They need to know God in their suffering and in their dealing with others' suffering. God is sovereign over the wind, and sovereign over the waves. Praise the Lord from the earth, sea monsters in all deeps, fire and hail, snow and clouds, stormy wind fulfilling his word.

Oh Lord of the hosts, who is mighty as you are, oh Lord, with your faithfulness all around you, you rule the raging sea. When its waves rise, you still them. Master, master, we are perishing.

And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a great calm. And he can do it any day he wants, anywhere in the world. One word from Lord King Jesus and the sea goes flat, or we have no Christ.

There's not a plant or flower below but makes thy glories known, and clouds arise and tempests blow by order from thy throne. There are so many summary statements in the Bible to this effect. I don't know how the devil gets away with what he gets away with in our churches.

Lamentations, who is there who speaks and it comes to pass unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the most high that both good and ill go forth? Amos 3, if a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people tremble if calamity happens in a city? Is it not the Lord who has done it? Ecclesiastes 7.14, in the day of prosperity be happy. In the day of adversity consider God has made the one as well as the other so that man cannot discover anything after him. Genesis 50.20, you meant it for evil, God meant it for good.

It does not say God used it for good. So many people weasel with that. God is always playing catch-up ball with somebody else's mistake.

He said, oops, I'll fix that. Oops, I'll fix that. Oops, I'll fix that.

No way. That is not the biblical picture. You meant it for evil, God, same word, designed it for good.

You had a meaning, He had a meaning. Satan has a meaning, God has a meaning. In everything, in everything, don't buy into Satan's meaning.

Buy into God's meaning. Help your people not buy into Satan's meaning of all the events bad and good in their lives. Satan wants to ruin faith with pleasure and he wants to ruin faith with pain.

And you have read your Bibles, you know the answer to these things. And people love to have answers. They get help.

Even young people love answers. Thousands and thousands of them love to get answers for hard problems and questions. Proverbs 16.9, the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.

Proverbs 16.33, the lot in Las Vegas is cast in the lap, but every decision is from the Lord. I play Scrabble with my wife on our day off. Now you know, I wish there were a game that had absolutely no luck in it, since I don't believe in luck.

In other words, God decides which letters I pull out of the bag, which prompts me to pray. But I'm married, and I love my wife, and she can pray, and we don't want to put God in that position. And so I used words like, as my hand goes into the bag and I need a U, I need a U. Because I've got a Q. I say, not, Lord give me a U, but rather, for the family and for the kingdom.

And if it's helpful for me to lose today for the marriage, I'll lose. I'll be glad. You're a sovereign.

My point is simply, the Bible says the lot is cast in the lap, and every decision is from the Lord. I don't know how you can believe in God, and not believe that. How tortured the mind becomes to try to say we have some kind of God in heaven, and He is on a vacation 99% of the time.

We're deists. Proverbs 19.21, Many are the plans of a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand. So when I got that call, I said, are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from my Father? Jesus couldn't pull rank on His hearers and say, molecules, atoms, neutrons.

And like R.C. Sproul says, there is no maverick molecule in the world. Jesus didn't... He couldn't do that. He had to talk about the most insignificant thing He could think of.

Two birds in some jungle in Africa, and they just die. They just fall off a limb and become compost. They just die.

And He says, that does not happen apart from my Father. And we just blabber all around about tsunamis. We won't say anything.

We're just so scared of what? Telling the truth about our God. You know what the saddest thing was? The most clear and resounding testimony to the sovereignty of God in the five people this one interviewed was a Muslim. You know one of the reasons I'm preaching like I'm preaching here is because the Bible has a vision of God that really can win Muslims to Jesus, but it won't be the mealy-mouthed American evangelical God trying to fly that in the United Arab Emirates.

Give me a break. They have such a massive view of the sovereignty of God, and almost everything else is wrong. They've got no Christ.

They've got no cross. They've got no Redeemer. They've got no substitution.

They've got no grace. They've got no song. But oh, they have seen the sovereignty of God.

Could that be a bridge? Could that be an evangelistic bridge to out-sovereignty the Muslims with the biblical God? Instead of letting them tell the truth about the tsunami, we tell the truth about the tsunami. So here's my concluding three answers to what you might say. Here's what I would urge you to say.

Number one, you will say, ma'am the first thing I want to say about the 400,000 people who've been swept away and the massive devastation that will be there for decades is that God clothed Himself in His Son with our pain. It's the first thing I want you to hear. I want you to hear Jesus, ma'am.

You hear me? I'm talking about Jesus Christ. I'm not just a theist. I'm a Christian.

God Almighty has a Son. He is God. He sent Him.

He clothed Himself with flesh, and mainly He wore pain. Mainly He clothed Himself with tsunamis. God has tasted it.

God has worn it. God has entered into it to make a way into it and through it. Many of the afflictions of the righteous, but with Him, the Lord delivers Him out of them all.

And therefore, we may take heart that we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. Nobody has ever been hurt so bad. God cannot empathize with them because He entered into it.

I want to say something about Jesus first, right? We just get Jesus on the picture here. Say that to Him first. And then you might toss in, if it were true, we put Doug Oyen on a plane within days in St. Andrews, Sri Lanka.

And we said, Doug, take with you two big massive water purifying systems which you can get on eBay, which we did, and do a 10-day research project. Come back and tell us what the long-term implications are for our church in mercy. Say that on the radio if you can.

Second, say this, if we lose the sovereignty of God, we lose the means by which He can fulfill Romans 8.28. People don't think this through, and when you help them think this through, they breathe a sense of relief because they wonder, can't we just let it go? Can't we just let the sovereignty of God go, and talk about His love, and talk about His justice, and not talk about His control? I mean, wouldn't that be better? Wouldn't that feel good and warm and relational? And the answer is no, it wouldn't. It'd feel damning, because if you pull the plug on God's power over the world, how's He going to turn all your mess for good? How's He going to take the impossible situations of your life and bring hope and joy out of them? And when you say that to people, they say, oh, I wouldn't want to lose that. I want to take the impossibilities of my life, my cancer, my wayward kid, my broken marriage, my lost job.

I want God to be sovereign over that. But you can't have it both ways. You can't throw it away with your right hand and take it back with your left.

You better stay there all the way. This God is God. Oh, I only have a minute or two left, and I have two things I want to say, but I got stacks of illustrations here.

Maybe I'll give you one. You heard of Nate Saint, the Alka-Speared missionary in 1956, killed in Ecuador. He has a son named Steve.

Steve's about my age now. He was, I think, about six when that happened. That wouldn't compute.

He must be four years younger than me. I'm 59. So he's almost my age, and he wrote an article about his research into his father's murder.

It's right there in Christianity Today, and he has a sentence in here that was so absolutely unbelievable, I emailed him and said, is that a misprint? Here's what he said. He had gone back, as you know, he's still extensively ministering, making movies in fact, among the Huarani, which is what we ought to call them, not the Alkas, and he discovered that there was intrigue in the tribe behind this fluke murder. There was no plan going on here.

They didn't plan to kill these guys. There was somebody eloping, and there was, read the story. This is an amazing story.

I don't have the date here for you. September 16, 1996, I got this article. As they described their recollections, people he was interviewing, it occurred to me how incredibly unlikely it was that the Palm Beach killings, that's Palm Beach, that's a river in Ecuador, that the Palm Beach killing took place at all.

It is an anomaly that I cannot explain outside of divine intervention. I read that, I said, misprint, misprint, they left out a negative. I'll read it again.

The killing was inexplicable. It was an anomaly that I cannot explain outside of divine intervention. You want to hear my horrible paraphrase of that? God killed my dad, and that's what he said.

I asked him, I said, is that what you're saying? God took your dad? He said, yes. Now, some people like Steve Saint are massively helped. Do you like willy-nilly irrational accidents as the bottom line of your reality? Or would you rather have an all-wise, all-just, all-good God running the details of the world? And I have so many stories from right off of the pages of my newspaper, but I close with this word.

The third thing you should say, so first thing you're going to get Jesus involved and talk about how he wore the pain. Second thing you're going to say, if you lose sovereignty, you lose God, and you lose hope, and you lose the ability to work, to make Romans 8:28 work. And the third thing you say is, I only know of one situation where Jesus got a phone call like this, and it was in Luke 13, and they called him up and said, Jesus, have you heard about the tower of Siloam? It just fell over and crushed 18 people.

What do you have to say about that, you and your father? To which Jesus said, and this is what they quoted, this is my 15 seconds I got, and I'm glad this is the 15 seconds I got. Jesus said, do you think, he's talking to this innocent person, he just showed up, ask a question, do you think that all of the inhabitants of Jerusalem are any worse sinners than they? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you also will perish. What? That's not what I asked.

I don't want you to talk about me and my need for Christ. Get your reporter involved in this. Say to the reporter on the telephone, are you right with God? Because Jesus says, the reason there was a tsunami is so that you, ma'am, would repent.

That's what he said, ma'am. Ma'am, are you repenting right now? Don't play games like, oh, this is some objective little panel thing, and you're going to drop your pebble in beside the Buddhist and the Hindu and the Muslim. No, no, you are there in the name of Jesus.

I beseech you in the name of God, be reconciled to God, ma'am. This happened in the Indian Ocean because this conversation right now is designed to call you to repentance. So, brothers, I close.

Would you please, I just beg of you, if you don't believe this, would you go back to your Bibles, and if you do believe it, would you, when the telephone comes, be broken-hearted because the Bible says, weep with those who weep. Get your person on the plane and plan your mercy, and then tell the truth. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, oh, make us fully biblically bold in our defense of your sovereignty and our display of your sovereignty in our mercy towards the world. That's the way Jesus was. He is a merciful high priest.

In Jesus' name, I pray.

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