



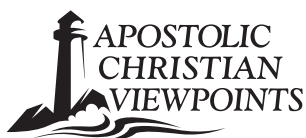
SOVEREIGN  
GOD

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*This booklet is part of the Apostolic Christian Viewpoints series, a collection of writings prepared by a committee of the Elder Council of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean).*

*These booklets are not intended as exhaustive works on their respective subjects. Rather, they are offered as an encouragement to those who currently embrace these views; and to those who do not, a call to consider these topics in the light of scripture ... and the Lord give thee understanding in all things. (2 Tim. 2:7).*



## Editor's Note

This is the second in a series of three booklets addressing aspects of Reformed theology that differ from doctrinal understandings of the Apostolic Christian Church. These booklets are not intended to be a systematic rebuttal of Calvinism, but rather an exploration of God's plan of salvation, in which the distinguishing concepts of Reformed theology are addressed as they arise.

The first booklet, "**Man before God**" addresses Man's spiritual condition before his Creator: spiritually deformed and polluted by sin (depravity) and yet retaining the volition with which God created him. This booklet also contains a glossary of theological terms that are often used when discussing Reformed theology. The second booklet, titled "**Sovereign God**", relates the story of God's love for all; a love that is integral to His holiness and does not jeopardize His sovereignty in any way. The third booklet, "**Grace & Perseverance**", focuses on how salvation is experienced in man: God's enabling grace reaching out to lost mankind is a gift that must be received and cultivated. The third booklet also contains a list of commonly asked questions about salvation.

# Man in the Story of God

The Bible provides us with the amazing story of God. It begins with God creating all things according to His good pleasure, and culminates with the creation of man, a creature made in His own likeness,<sup>1</sup> and for His glory. God has always desired a relationship with His special creation, and the Bible likens this to a wooing and engagement to be married. In this relationship, all are given the opportunity to be part of the elect of God, the bride,<sup>2</sup> betrothed to the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He will one day be united with His bride in a loving union to spend all eternity together.<sup>3</sup> As we explore this story, we will see how our relationship with our Creator is rooted in God's love for us. God, in His foreknowledge and for His glory,<sup>4</sup> sovereignly devised a plan that would account for everything that would happen in His story, including our responsibility to respond to His love by freely choosing to be part of His bride, the elect.<sup>5</sup>

Although we are created beings with limited understanding, God has sufficiently revealed Himself in the Bible so that we know our part in this story. The story begins at the beginning of time, where we find God in His glory. The Bible tells us that God is the I AM,<sup>6</sup> self-existent, infinite,<sup>7</sup> changeless,<sup>8</sup> and a spirit<sup>9</sup> without physical form. The Bible describes God as one being<sup>10</sup> with three distinct persons, the Father,<sup>11</sup> the Son,<sup>12</sup> and the Holy Spirit<sup>13</sup>—together known as the

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 1:27

<sup>2</sup> Eph. 5:25-27

<sup>3</sup> Rev. 19:7-9

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 8:29; 11:2; Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:20, Eph. 1:5, 11

<sup>5</sup> Josh. 24:15; Mark 8:34; John 1:12-13; John 3:16; Rev. 3:20

<sup>6</sup> Exo. 3:14

<sup>7</sup> John 1:1-3; Jer. 23:23-24; Psa. 90:1-2

<sup>8</sup> James 1:17

<sup>9</sup> John 4:24

<sup>10</sup> Deut. 6:4; James 2:19; 1 Cor. 8:4-6; 1 Tim. 2:5-6

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 6:26

<sup>12</sup> John 10:30; Phil. 2:5-9; John 1:1-3, 14; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-4

<sup>13</sup> John 14:16-17; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19

Trinity.<sup>14</sup> The Bible also describes God as being omnipresent,<sup>15</sup> present everywhere in time and space; omniscient,<sup>16</sup> having knowledge of all things; and omnipotent,<sup>17</sup> having all and complete power. As a result, we understand that God is sovereign.<sup>18</sup> All that has and will happen in this story is known by God. Although the triune God exists outside of His creation, outside of time and space, He is also very much involved with His creation. The Bible shows how God's relationship with man offers further insight into His characteristics, which include His holiness,<sup>19</sup> love,<sup>20</sup> righteousness,<sup>21</sup> truthfulness,<sup>22</sup> faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> graciousness,<sup>24</sup> mercy,<sup>25</sup> and justice.<sup>26</sup> This great God, as described in the Bible, should evoke both fear and joy in us: fear, because once we are faced with understanding who God is, He cannot be ignored; and joy, knowing that this great God has an amazing plan available to all, and has our best interest in mind. Having reviewed who God is, we can now begin to understand the story God wants us to know.

John Chapter 1 tells us how in the beginning the triune God created all things. In the first chapter of Genesis, we read how God created the heavens and the earth and all that is within them. We read in Psalm 19 how the sheer awesomeness and beauty of creation exemplifies its creator. According to scripture, man was created for the glory of God,<sup>27</sup> a creation that He could love, and that was intended to freely love and glorify Him for all eternity.<sup>28</sup> The time men spent on earth would allow God to shape and guide them to

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<sup>14</sup> 2 Cor. 13:14; Matt. 28:19; 1 John 5:7

<sup>15</sup> Jer. 23:23-24; Psa. 139:7-10; Prov. 15:3

<sup>16</sup> Matt. 10:30; Rom. 11:33-36; Psa. 139:1-4, Matt. 6:8

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 1:1; Matt. 19:26; Rev. 1:8

<sup>18</sup> Isa. 46:10; Dan. 4:35; Psa. 135:6

<sup>19</sup> Lev. 11:44; Isa. 6:3; 1 Pet. 1:15-16

<sup>20</sup> 1 John 4:16; John 3:16

<sup>21</sup> Psa. 71:19

<sup>22</sup> 1 Sam. 15:29

<sup>23</sup> Deut. 7:9

<sup>24</sup> Eph. 2:6-7

<sup>25</sup> Exo. 34:6-7; Luke 6:36

<sup>26</sup> Psa. 89:14

<sup>27</sup> Isa. 43:7; 1 Cor. 10:31; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:11; Rev. 4:11

<sup>28</sup> Deut. 6:5

conform to the image of His Son Jesus Christ. This shaping and guiding takes place as man becomes part of the Church, also known in the Bible as the body of Christ, the elect, and the bride of Christ. The grand finale is the day Christ returns to earth to claim His bride to be together for all eternity.<sup>29</sup> This union of God and man is centered around love.

An integral part of love is choice. We first see love displayed by God himself. The Gospel of John tells us of the love of God the Father for His Son Jesus,<sup>30</sup> and the love of Jesus for the Father.<sup>31</sup> This love is also displayed toward man when Christ came to earth to suffer and become that ultimate sacrifice for sin. Christ loved us while we were still in our sin. What amazing love, far more than mere human emotion and feelings!

The story of God also tells us that we were created in His image so that we could love and glorify Him in return. Our existence includes this ability to choose whether to love and obey God or reject Him.<sup>32</sup> Man is a moral being given responsibility and not a mere robot. God's sovereignty enables men to possess the freedom of choice. God, being true to His character, had already set in motion from the beginning a plan to redeem man from his inevitable separation from God due to sin, a separation caused by man's free choice. Our loving God has no pleasure in seeing His creation eternally separated from Him.<sup>33</sup>

Shortly after creation and already anticipated by God, mankind separated itself from Him. This was shown by our first parents—Adam and Eve—in the book of Genesis. God made man in His own image, good and innocent, and without the shame of sin and guilt. Soon after, Adam and Eve allowed themselves to be deceived by the devil and chose to disobey God and sinned. Their willful rebellion against God's clear commandment to not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil reveals how we were designed to have the freedom

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<sup>29</sup> Eph. 5:22-33

<sup>30</sup> Matt. 3:17; John 3:35; 5:20

<sup>31</sup> John 14:31

<sup>32</sup> Gen. 1:27; 2:16,17

<sup>33</sup> Eze. 33:11; Rom. 5:8

to choose. As a result of this choice to disobey, man was condemned to both physical and spiritual death, which included separation from God. As a result of Adam's sin, all men were born in corruption and destined to both a physical and spiritual death. The end result of men who remain in this state will be eternal separation from God. No person in existence can escape this consequence. By His nature, this great, perfect, and holy God cannot allow sinful creatures to be in His presence.<sup>34</sup> Thankfully, man, even in this sinful degenerated state, is able to have that relationship restored by responding to God's call.<sup>35</sup>

The Bible offers ample evidence that mankind left to itself without God will do evil. We find this already with the children of Adam and Eve, in which one son (Cain) kills his brother Abel. By the sixth chapter of Genesis, mankind has become so evil that God destroys them, saving only a remnant through Noah. As part of God's plan, the redemption of all men would come forth from out of the children of Israel. God made a covenant with them, gave them the law through the Ten Commandments as a guide to follow, and promised to bless them based on their obedience. Due to man's sinful nature, God also instituted a sacrificial system in which man can temporarily be in relationship with Him. The penalty of sin is death, signified by the shedding of blood. In this temporary system, a sacrifice of death and the shed blood of animals were offered as a temporary substitute and reminder of our sin.

The Old Testament describes the story of God and His interaction with His chosen people, the nation of Israel. The love and sovereignty of God is apparent in its correct context when viewing His relationship with the children of Israel. God spoke to them through appointed leaders and through many prophets. God in His love, mercy, and longsuffering, continually reached out to be in communion with them. God offered His goodness and love with the expectation of a relationship through their obedience.<sup>36</sup> However, patterns emerged as the Israelites repeatedly rejected God. God in

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<sup>34</sup> Isa. 59:2

<sup>35</sup> Rom. 10:13; 2 Thess 1:11; 2 Pet. 1:10

<sup>36</sup> Exo. 19:5-6; Deut. 28:1; Deut. 30:19, Josh. 23:11-13; 1 Sam. 15:22



love and patience pleaded with them,<sup>37</sup> and was even angry with them,<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, God allowed them, of their own volition, to either repent or turn away from Him. The lack of repentance invariably led to punishment for their disobedience. After the inevitable suffering, they turned back to God and God restored them back to His favor. This interaction between God and His chosen people clearly indicates how we have control over our choices and how God holds us responsible for those choices.

The Bible tells us that this covenant with the Israelites was a temporary solution intended to point to the ultimate solution that we find in the New Testament, one that involved God himself through His Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup> Due to the Holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, there was no way for man to restore himself to God. Being true to His character of love and mercy, a salvation plan was already instituted in which man could find his way back to God.<sup>40</sup> This love of God was for, and is extended to, all.<sup>41</sup> God desires all of mankind to be saved,<sup>42</sup> and that none would be separated from Him and perish.<sup>43</sup> In this plan, Jesus Christ would come to earth to be the ultimate sacrifice for sin, and die in our place, to be an atonement for all.<sup>44</sup> God incarnate through Jesus Christ, the creator of all, would come to earth, clothe Himself with flesh, walk among us, experience what we experience, be an example for us to follow, and then ultimately suffer, shed His blood and die on the cruel cross of Calvary. Christ willingly died for our sins so that we would not have to, and became a ransom for all of mankind. Scripture tells us that in Adam, all men were doomed but through the sacrifice of Christ, all have the opportunity to live forever with Him.<sup>45</sup> Because of the work of Christ, all human creation, everyone, has the opportunity to find

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<sup>37</sup> Isa. 65:2; Eze. 33:11; 2 Kings 22:19; Exo. 32:9-14, Jer. 2:1-8

<sup>38</sup> Deut. 9:8

<sup>39</sup> John 4:42; Heb. 1:3; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Tit. 2:11-12

<sup>40</sup> 1 Pet. 1:18-20

<sup>41</sup> John 3:16-18; 7:37; 10:9; Rev. 22:17

<sup>42</sup> 1 Tim. 2:4

<sup>43</sup> 2 Pet. 3:9

<sup>44</sup> 1 John 2:2; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 4:10; 1 Pet. 1:18-20

<sup>45</sup> Rom. 5:12-19

redemption and return to God.<sup>46</sup> No one can say that this love does not extend to them.<sup>47</sup> As wonderful and glorious and majestic the Bible describes God, nothing reveals the true nature and character of God better than the sacrificial love shown by Christ dying on the cross for sinful man. This act on our behalf is a full expression of true love and consistent with His character.<sup>48</sup>

This amazing story continues where we find Jesus Christ risen from the grave three days after His crucifixion. After remaining a short time on earth to encourage His followers, Christ ascended to Heaven to be at the right hand of God the father, where He is even now. Upon His ascension to heaven, Jesus promised us that the Holy Spirit would come to earth to continue to do the work of God for the redemption of man and to make His bride—the church—ready for marriage to the Bridegroom.

Man, in his sinful state, is unable to come to God. In His love and great mercy, the grace of God reaches out to us through the working of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Word of God to draw all men to Him.<sup>49</sup> Although we are spiritually dead and separated from God, all men have been endowed with the ability to choose to either accept or reject the free gift of salvation.<sup>50</sup> To receive this, however, we need to respond in faith. Our faith<sup>51</sup> is a response to the grace of God.<sup>52</sup> It is not only an intellectual belief or mental assent to His offer of salvation, but is a firm trust in God that results in surrender to His will. Not all men have the same measure of faith; however, God in His mercy and compassion, promises that even a small amount of faith can move mountains and that it is possible for our faith to increase.<sup>53</sup> When we respond to God in faith, His goodness will lead us to repentance. Repentance is recognition and sorrow for our sin

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<sup>46</sup> Tit. 2:11

<sup>47</sup> 1 John 2:2; Rom. 3:22-23

<sup>48</sup> Isa. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 19; 1 John 4:9

<sup>49</sup> John 6:44,65; Rom. 10:17

<sup>50</sup> Luke 13:3; John 1:11-12; Rom. 10:9

<sup>51</sup> Mark 9:23; 1 John 3:23; Acts 16:31; John 3:16; John 5:38

<sup>52</sup> Acts 16:30-31; Rom. 5:1-2; Eph. 2:8

<sup>53</sup> Luke 17:5; Mark 9:22-24; John 20:27-31

and a commitment, with God's help, to turn from sin and now serve only God. The resulting repentance<sup>54</sup> brings forth fruits of repentance and a reconciliation that includes the forgiveness of sin, a regenerated heart, and restoration with God Himself. This is the work of God in cooperation with us. The acceptance of this gift of salvation on our part does not in any way allude to us earning or deserving this gift.

Once we have been restored to a relationship with God, the Holy Spirit resides in our heart. This allows us to desire and love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, as well as love our fellow man.<sup>55</sup> The Holy Spirit also enables us to continually conform to the image of Christ.<sup>56</sup> We, through submission to the will of God and prayer, become an active part of the body of Christ, the Church. God works through regenerated men and women to continue to reach the lost, and for the edification of the body of Christ. As the church—the elect body of Christ—we become part of God's plan on this earth<sup>57</sup> to be used by Him toward the ultimate culmination of this great story.<sup>58</sup> All who are part of the body of Christ will spiritually grow and mature and, one day, ultimately be united with Christ.<sup>59</sup> This is what God has predetermined for the elect, whom God has known and expected from the beginning of time.

Man also has the option to reject this free gift of salvation and is able to resist the grace of God. Those who choose to resist God are also a known part of God's story. Those who make this choice are responsible for it and cannot blame God. The result of rejecting God is eternal separation.<sup>60</sup> To advance the narrative of this great story of God, in His Sovereignty and foreknowledge, God can and will use individuals who reject Him for His purpose. We see examples of this in the Old Testament. After refusing to cooperate, God eventually hardened the heart of Pharaoh in the course of setting the children of

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<sup>54</sup> Matt. 3:8; Acts 8:22

<sup>55</sup> Luke 10:27

<sup>56</sup> Rom. 8:29

<sup>57</sup> 1 Pet. 2:9-10

<sup>58</sup> 2 Tim. 1:9

<sup>59</sup> Eph. 1:4-5

<sup>60</sup> Rev. 20:11-15

Israel free. We also see in the book of Jeremiah how God sends Nebuchadnezzar and his army to punish the Jewish people for their disobedience. In the New Testament, we read where the martyr Stephen tells the Jewish leaders, “Ye stiff-necked...ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did...”<sup>61</sup> We see this in the account where Jesus looked over the city of Jerusalem and wept,<sup>62</sup> knowing they would reject Him. We also read in Matthew 23 where Jesus tells the religious leaders His heart’s desire was to gather them all together “even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings.”<sup>63</sup> Instead, they continually rejected God’s prophets and all those who were sent to provide the good news of the gospel. One of the best examples of God using men for His purposes is how the Jewish leaders conspired to have Jesus killed, thinking that they would be rid of the menace. Their disobedience was used to accomplish God’s purpose to have Jesus crucified.

This story tells us that God is sovereign. According to the Bible and the character of God, He knows everything for all eternity and, as the author of this story, has accounted for everything. Man, in his sinfulness and spiritual deadness, is incapable and unable to restore himself to a relationship with God. In this state, he is unable to come to God: he needs the grace of God.<sup>64</sup> One should be careful, however, in how to interpret what this means.

At one extreme, some may believe that God’s sovereignty means nothing happens without God specifically directing it. If this were true, this potentially would make God the author of sin, which would completely contradict the essence of His character. Although the origin of sin was foreknown by God, it was not God who created sin. After creation, God rested and called everything “good”.<sup>65</sup> The origin of sin for mankind is found in the disobedience of Adam and Eve.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Acts 7:51

<sup>62</sup> Luke 19:41

<sup>63</sup> Matt. 23:37

<sup>64</sup> Eph. 4:18; Rom. 8:7; Tit. 3:4-7

<sup>65</sup> Gen. 1:31

<sup>66</sup> Gen. 3:7; Psa. 51:5; 1 John 1:8

The extreme view of sovereignty where God directs all things would also by implication mean that from the very beginning some individuals were chosen for salvation and all others chosen for damnation. If this were true in this great story, man would be reduced to a mere puppet. Those that suffer separation from God for all eternity had no real choice. This view is in complete contrast to a Holy and Loving God that we see expressed in scripture. It would limit the definition of the sovereignty of God to one who is unable to handle the choice of man. Rather, as part of God's plan from the beginning, God knew how man would react and planned accordingly. Those that reach out in faith to be saved, God would graciously accept. Those that reject the offer of salvation, with sadness<sup>67</sup> God would separate from Himself.<sup>68</sup> We cannot thank God enough that through the work of Jesus Christ, all men have the opportunity to choose Him and be saved.<sup>69</sup>

At the other extreme, some may believe that God does not know the future and reacts to human decisions only after they are made. This contradicts the omniscient and sovereign characteristics of God. This view does not account for the plan of God that originated from Him at the beginning of time. There are also some who may believe that because man is able to respond out of his own ability, it is therefore a "work" of man and the "earning" of his salvation. The Bible says that man can only respond in faith after being enabled by the Holy Spirit.<sup>70</sup> We read in 1 John 4:19 "We love Him, because He first loved us."

Others may even feel accepting the gift of God in faith is meritorious, an effort to work for our salvation. This view is understandable in light of our sinful and pitiful state. Considering how man is lost in sin and separated from God, the magnitude of this gift is beyond understanding and, again, is an incredible reflection of who God is. Salvation is a gift. This can be illustrated as follows. Imagine drifting at sea, desperately hanging onto a piece of debris that is breaking

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<sup>67</sup> Eze. 18:23; 2 Pet. 3:8

<sup>68</sup> Matt. 25:31-46

<sup>69</sup> 1 John 2:2; 1 Tim. 2:3-6

<sup>70</sup> John 6:44; 16:8-11

apart. A rescuer comes along and reaches out, offering the safety of his ship. We now have a choice, reach out in faith and trust the rescuer or continue to cling to that piece of debris. If we decide to reach out, we are then pulled to safety. We did not work or earn or deserve to be rescued, but would be ever thankful and have nothing but gratitude for being saved.

God not only enables us to respond to His offer of the free gift of salvation, but expects us to. God created us with this free will even in our sinful state so that our love for God is not imposed or forced—otherwise, as we learned earlier, it would cease to be love. In fact, our response in faith to the need for a Savior is recognition that we can do nothing of ourselves, that we are unworthy and helpless, have nothing to offer for this free gift of salvation, having no merit of our own.

Some think they will “go to heaven” because of their good works or because they belong to a special group. Many of the Jewish people, God’s covenant nation, thought this way. They felt that by virtue of obeying the law and having Abraham as their father, they were the elect of God, His chosen. In the book of Romans, Paul explains to the Jewish believers that who they are as the physical descendents of Abraham does not automatically qualify them as the elect. The elect are not a particular predetermined group that God has chosen before the world began, based on His inscrutable will alone and with no reference to man’s response to God.

Instead, Paul declares that all (both Jew and Gentile) have sinned and come short of the glory of God and only those who believe in Jesus Christ are accepted in Him.<sup>71</sup> Paul further points out that God shows mercy according to His own will, and He owes nothing to the distorted reasoning of man.<sup>72</sup> Salvation is available to all, and they are not the ones to dictate the story, a story that God has set from the beginning of time. From His fallen creation, God chooses those who humble themselves and believe in the completed work of His Son.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Rom. 3:22-23

<sup>72</sup> Rom. 9:15-20

<sup>73</sup> John 3:16; 2 Pet. 3:9; John 15:19

They are the elect, the bride of Christ<sup>74</sup> that He redeemed with His own blood.<sup>75</sup>

In this booklet, we have described how the Bible has provided us with a consistent message of who God is and what is required of us. We examined the nature of God himself, the reason why we were created, and the biblical understanding of love. We see how God loved His chosen people, the children of Israel, but always had a plan in mind to extend His love to all mankind through His Son Jesus Christ. We reviewed how man is created in God's image and is responsible to respond to His love. God desires that man responds in love toward Him and He helps all mankind to that end. God does not desire anyone to reject Him, although all have the option to do so. This dynamic is all within the omnipotence of God, the author of His story.

This is God's story, a love story in which we are an integral part. If you are reading this and are not yet a child of God, God is offering salvation to you personally. As you get to know God, may you come to realize that the pleasures of sin and self-will do not last and will only lead to suffering and, ultimately, eternal separation from God. Do not let the weakness of your flesh and Satan, the enemy of your soul, distract and deceive you from the love of God. God loves you so much that he desires you to be with Him forever. Come and be part of the bride of Christ! The choice is yours. Choose God!

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<sup>74</sup> 2 Cor. 11:2

<sup>75</sup> Eph. 5:25-27

