

The background of the cover is a dramatic photograph of a lighthouse. The lighthouse is white with a dark top section and a glowing lantern room. It stands on a dark, rocky island. Large, white-capped waves are crashing against the base of the lighthouse, creating a sense of power and struggle. A bright beam of light emanates from the lantern room, shining out over the sea. The sky is dark and cloudy, adding to the dramatic atmosphere.

# OUR GOD REIGNS

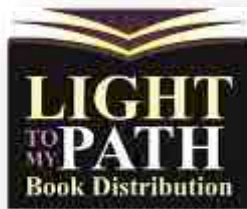
A PRACTICAL LOOK AT THE DOCTRINE  
OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

# Our God Reigns

*A Practical Look at the  
Doctrine of the Sovereignty of God*

**F. Wayne MacLeod**



Light To My Path Book Distribution  
Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, CANADA

## **Our God Reigns**

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## PREFACE

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The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is one that has caused great debate among believers over the centuries. It has been for some a real source of encouragement and blessing. For others, it has been an affront to human independence.

Please be aware that my attempt here is not to be exhaustive, scholarly or divisive in this study. My greatest desire is to show the reader how this attribute of God should affect our everyday life.

In the course of this study I have come to understand that a balanced understanding of this doctrine will have a dramatic impact on our response to the difficulties we encounter each day. It will change our attitude about our past personal history. It should also give us greater confidence to step out in faith.

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is immensely practical. It is my belief that every Christian needs to take the time to study carefully this vital attribute of God. My prayer is that this simple study will be a source of blessing and encouragement for all who take time to read it.

**F. Wayne MacLeod**



## DEFINITION OF TERMS

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# 1

## ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY

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The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is both the most encouraging and the most troubling of all Bible doctrines. For some, it has been a real blessing in the midst of the storms of life. For others, it has been an affront to human independence and dignity.

What do we mean when we say that our God is a sovereign God? We mean that God has absolute authority, absolute right and absolute control. Let's break this down and look at it more carefully.

Because God is sovereign, He has absolute authority. What is authority? Authority is the power to command. The voice of authority must be obeyed. Every society needs authority. Where there is no authority, society breaks down. Imagine what life would be like with no laws or people to enforce them. Imagine what our children would be like without parental authority. Authority is necessary if society is to function properly.

Authority is not bad. It is true that many have misused it to promote their own interests. Authority, however, ought to

create greater harmony. Where there is authority, we know our limits. Authority punishes those who disrupt the harmony of society. Authority determines what is right and proper within the context of our relationships with each other. It gives us a common agenda and enables us to work as a team with common goals.

When we say that God has *absolute* authority, we mean that He has the power to set the agenda. Because His authority is absolute, He commands full obedience to the agenda He has set. There is no one over Him. He has the final say in all matters. There can only be one person with absolute and unquestioned authority. God alone possesses this characteristic. Let's look briefly at what the Bible teaches us about the absolute authority of God.

### *God has Authority over the Rulers of the Earth*

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon boasted of his great achievements. Under his administration, Babylon reached its height of power and influence. His pride, however, was an affront to God. Nebuchadnezzar did not see his need of God. He felt he was god. Because of his pride, the Lord stuck him with insanity. For years he wandered in the fields with the wild animals. When God finally restored him, King Nebuchadnezzar spoke these powerful words:

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)

Nebuchadnezzar came to realize that there was a higher authority than his in the world. He bowed the knee to One who had a greater and unquestioned authority. Though he

was the ruler of the greatest kingdom on earth, Nebuchadnezzar could not question the authority of God nor could he demand and accounting from Him.

Consider this for a moment. The great king Nebuchadnezzar is stripped of his power in an instant. He wandered like an animal in the fields. While no other king on earth dared to stand up to him, Nebuchadnezzar was helpless before the God of Israel. As powerful as the rulers of history have been, all of them will have to answer to the God of heaven. He is over them all. They must submit to Him.

### *God Does What He Pleases*

Very few people in the Bible suffered like Job. The Bible tells us that he was a righteous and blameless man. It is never easy to understand suffering. Why does God spare one person and not another? Why does God give one person a life of ease and allow nothing but trouble for another? In his suffering Job learned a very important thing about God:

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

God does what He wants. This idea is not very appealing to some. They feel that God needs to do everything for their benefit. They feel He needs to be accountable to His creation for what He does. They have reduced God to a heavenly servant whose only responsibility is to meet the needs and wishes of His creation. The Lord God does care for and provide for His children but He does so not out of obligation but because He has chosen to do so in love.

Job discovered that God does what He pleases and no one can oppose Him or accuse Him of wrong. He is accountable to no one for His actions. Indeed who could ever hold Him accountable? Were it not for the fact that God is also good, this concept would be very frightening indeed.

### *God's Authority Has No Limit*

There is no place in heaven or earth where God does not have authority. Kings and political leaders have authority in their own countries but they have no authority beyond their boundaries. This is not so with God. His authority is absolute. It extends to all of creation. There is no place in the universe where God is not the sovereign ruler. There is no part of His creation over which His authority does not extend. This makes all of creation accountable to Him. The Psalmist put it this way:

The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. (Psalms 135:6)

### *God's Authority is Final*

Listen to what the prophet Isaiah told his listeners about the decisions of God.

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)

The decision of a judge may be overruled. A company president may be fired and his position given to another. This is not so with God. There is no higher court to which we can appeal. He is the final authority. What He decides

will stand. No one has the right to overrule what He determines. There is no authority above His.

*God is Accountable to no one for his Authority*

The apostle Paul tells us that God works out everything according to His own will.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11)

An ambassador is given authority to speak on behalf of his country. He must however, follow his country's agenda. He is not free to do as he pleases. He is not free to speak his own mind. He must share the opinion and agenda of the people he represents. This is not so with God. He works to accomplish His own will and purpose. All of His creation must surrender to that purpose or face the consequences.

God does what He pleases. He is accountable to no one for His actions. What He decides cannot be questioned. He has absolute authority over kings, leaders and everything His hands have created. Many people have rejected God because of this. They are not sure they want to surrender to a God with such authority. They prefer a weaker God who must listen instead to His creation.

Whether we like it or not, the God of the Bible is a God who has absolute authority on this earth. He sets the agenda and determines what is right. He makes the rules and decides the destiny of all His creation. He is a God who demands respect. Every knee will bow to Him as the

sovereign ruler over all. No one can question what He does.

For Consideration:

- What do we mean when we say that God has absolute authority?
- Why is it comforting to know that the God who has absolute authority is also a good and holy God?
- Why is the doctrine of God's absolute authority difficult for us to accept?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that while He has absolute authority on this earth, He is also a loving and good God.
- Ask the Lord to teach you to surrender to His authority. Ask Him to show you where you have not surrendered to His purpose for your life.

## 2

### ABSOLUTE RIGHT

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We have seen that God has absolute authority (power to command). There is no authority above His and no one can question what He says or does. In this next section we will examine the fact that God also has absolute right. What is a right? We can define right as license or privilege. When I received my driver's license as a young man, I was given the legal right to drive a car. My marriage license gave me the lawful right to take a wife. A right gives me legal permission.

As human beings, our rights are limited. The young man who has a driver's license must drive his car in a certain way or risk having his license taken from him. God's right, however, is absolute. No one can take God's right from Him. He has the right to do whatever He wants with all that He has created with no restrictions or limitations. This sort of privilege in the hands of anyone other than a loving God would be very terrifying. Let's take a moment, however, to consider some Bible passages that speak about God's absolute right.

In Joshua 1, the Lord God commanded Joshua to take the land of Canaan. This land was inhabited by the Canaanites. God told Joshua to drive the Canaanites out of the land and give it to the Israelites. Consider for a moment what is happening here. These Canaanites had been in the land for generations. They had built their houses on this land and settled their families there. God was telling Joshua to drive them out of the only land they knew.

Many people have a problem with what God told Joshua to do here. What we need to realize, however is that these Canaanites were merely tenants in a land that belonged to God. God had the right to give His land to whomever He pleased. Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 135:9-12:

Whatsoever the LORD pleased, [that] did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places. Who smote great nations, and slew mighty kings; Sihon king of the Amorites, and Og king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan: And gave their land [for] an heritage, an heritage unto Israel his people. (KJV)

Notice the phrase in the King James Version "Whatsoever the LORD pleased, [that] did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places." God took the land from the Canaanites and gave it to His own people. This was His right to do. No one could legally question His decision because the whole earth is His to do with as He pleases.

Later in Israel's history God spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the sins of His people. He told Jeremiah that He was going to take the land from Israel and hand it over to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Listen to what God told the prophet in Jeremiah 27:5:



With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please.

God has the right to do with His creation whatsoever He pleases. Nowhere is this more evident than in the illustration of the potter and the clay. On one occasion, the Lord God told Jeremiah to go to a potter's house to watch the potter at work. In Jeremiah 18:3-6 we read:

So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

God told Jeremiah that Israel was like clay in His hands. He could do as He pleased with them. The shape and destiny of their lives was in His hands. He blessed or withdrew His blessings as He pleased.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul used this same illustration when he said in Romans 9:20-21:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Paul made it quite clear that, as the creation of God, we have no right to "talk back" to God and complain about how He has made us or the shape our lives have taken.

On one occasion, the Lord gave permission to Satan to test Job. Satan responded by killing all his sons and daughters. He destroyed his sheep, cattle and servants. Job lost everything. Notice Job's response to these events in Job 1:20-22.

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Notice in particular verse 22:

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

God had allowed Job's family to be killed. God gave permission to Satan to strip Job of everything he possessed. Despite this, God had done no wrong. God does not sin by taking a life or allowing suffering. He has the right to do whatever He pleases with His creation and no one can accuse Him of wrongdoing. Job had no legitimate complaint against God. Everything he had, he had received from God. God could reclaim or do what He pleased with what belonged to him.

Imagine that you were an artist who painted a great work. You hung it up in your home and enjoyed its beauty. One

day, however, you decide that you no longer want that painting so you take it off the wall and destroy it. Are you guilty of a crime in doing so? By no means, the painting is yours to do with as you please. You can keep it or you can destroy it and you have committed no crime.

Imagine, however, that this painting was hanging on your wall and a thief broke into your house, took the painting and destroyed it. Is this thief guilty of a crime? He certainly is! He would be punished by the law of the land because he did not have the right to take what was not his and destroy it. God does not sin when He does what He wants with what belongs to Him.

Paul tells us in Colossians 1:16 that all things were created by God and for God:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Notice here that all things were created by God and "for God." We do not always understand what this passage is saying. God created everything for Himself. This earth was not created for us. Everything that God created was for Himself. We have no ultimate right to anything that God has created. Nothing is truly ours. Everything is God's and He does with it as He pleases.

The prophet repeats this thought in Isaiah 43:7, 21 when he says.

Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (Isaiah 43:7)

The people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise. (Isaiah 43:21)

We were created for God's glory. God formed us so that we could proclaim His praise. God accomplishes His glory in different ways in our lives. He revealed His purpose through Job's suffering. In the days of Joshua God manifested His glory by taking the land from the Canaanites and giving it to His people. Later on, He took the same land from His people and gave it to the Babylonians. In this too, God would be glorified. All these things are in His right to do.

What is our response to this? When Eli the priest discovered that the Lord had declared his family unworthy of the priesthood, he told the boy Samuel: "He is the LORD; let Him do what is good in His eyes" (1 Samuel 3:18). This is our only legitimate response to a sovereign God who has absolute right and absolute authority. We have no legitimate complaint. All we can do is surrender.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean for God to have absolute right?
- Does God sin when He allows us to suffer or takes our life? Why?
- Do we have absolute right? What is the difference between God's right and our rights?
- What is our response to God's absolute right?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He has absolute right to do with you as He pleases.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to accept that He has right to do as He pleases with you and all He has given you.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have grumbled and complained against Him and His purpose.

### 3

## ABSOLUTE CONTROL

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So far we have defined the sovereignty of God in terms of absolute authority and absolute right. We need to add one further dimension to our definition. It is theoretically possible to have absolute authority and absolute right but not have the ability to exercise these privileges. For example, a man may have the right and authority to drive a car but be incapable of doing so because of some physical injury or limitation. Sometimes situations, beyond our control strip us of our ability or right. God has no such limitations or restrictions. There is never a situation over which He is not in complete control.

What do we mean by absolute control? When we say that God is in control we mean that He determines what is to take place and makes it happen. He is master of His circumstances. The events and people around Him are held in subjection to His purposes. They are contained within parameters He establishes and used to accomplish His goals. When we say that this control is absolute we mean that there is nothing that can disrupt the purpose of God.

As human beings, we cannot control the circumstances of our lives. Our influence over the people around us is limited. Many things take us by surprise. We find ourselves facing obstacles that are too big for us to handle. This is not the case for God. Listen to what the Lord said to the prophet in Jeremiah 32:27:

"I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?"

Jesus repeats the same thought in Matthew 19:26 when He said:

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

How good it is to know that there is someone with absolute control. How much greater it is to know that this God cares for us and desires to work out all things for our good (Romans 8.28). Let's look briefly at the extent of God's control.

### *Circumstances of Life*

The Bible teaches us that God controls the circumstances of our lives. The classic example of this is the story of Joseph. As a boy of seventeen, he was sold into slavery by his brothers. This was a very dark time for Joseph. He was forced to leave his family and his country. He was the victim of his brother's cruel hatred and jealousy. In Egypt, he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and was thrown into prison for a crime he did not commit.

God was in control of Joseph's circumstances. Joseph would become second in command of all of Egypt and was

used of God to save the nation of Israel from a severe famine that would have wiped out the greatest part of their population. As he looked back on the events of his life Joseph said to his brothers:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20)

God overruled and brought much good out of what appeared to be a terrible injustice. The story is only one of many similar stories in the Bible that remind us that God is in control of all the events of our lives. There is a reason behind the difficulties and trials we encounter. God is using them to accomplish His purposes in us.

### *Human Nature*

God is also in control of human nature. God's people, the Israelites, had turned their back on Him. They had consistently refused to accept His word. To punish them, God sent them into exile. Even in exile, however, Israel persisted in rebellion against God. One day the Lord told Jeremiah that He was going to do a work in the lives of His people. Listen to what God told the prophet:

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart. (Jeremiah 24:7)

This rebellious people would be broken. Their old stony heart would be exchanged for a new heart. The heart the Lord would give them would be a heart that desired God. They would no longer turn away in rebellion from their



God. Their hearts would be turned to Him. Notice that this was not something these people did themselves. God would change their hearts. Isaiah put it this way:

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay,  
you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.  
(Isaiah 64:8)

We are as clay in the hands of a master potter. He can shape us in any way that pleases Him. He can change our hearts. He can overrule our sinful human nature. He took Paul, who persecuted the church, and made him one of its principal spokesmen. He can take the rebellion of a son or a daughter and melt it. He can break the calloused heart of a friend. God's absolute control extends even over our sinful natures.

### *Wrath of Men*

Psalm 76:10 is a very important verse in relationship to the sovereignty of God and His absolute control:

Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain. (KJV)

There are times when the evil of humanity appears to be out of control. Psalm 76 reminds us, however, that even the wrath of men will bring glory to God in the end. We have seen horrible deeds done in the history of this world. Believers have been persecuted and martyred for their faith. The Psalmist tells us, however, that even in these situations, God is working out His overall purposes. This was clearly the case in the story of Joseph mentioned above. His brothers lashed out against him in jealous rage but God used their actions to accomplish His glory and the

good of His people. We will not always see how these things work out for good, but we can be assured that no circumstance is outside of God's control.

### *Political Leaders*

God's sovereign control extends over the political leadership of history. Speaking of the Pharaoh of Egypt in Exodus 9:16 God says:

But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. (Exodus 9:16)

Pharaoh had done much harm to the people of God. He refused to let the people of Israel leave Egypt. He made their lives miserable. When the time was right, God sent Moses to deal with Pharaoh and deliver His people from Pharaoh's hand. The world saw the greatness of the God of Israel as His plagues were unleashed on the nation. They saw how the great nation of Egypt was brought to its knees before the power of the God of Israel.

Exodus 9:16 tells us that Pharaoh was raised up so that he could show God's power and that the name of God would be proclaimed in all the earth. What is true of Pharaoh is true of all great leaders. God can use even the evil of political leaders to accomplish His purposes in the end.

### *Nature*

God's control extends also over nature. We see how storms were calmed by the voice of the Lord Jesus (Mark 4:39). God parted the waters of the Red Sea to provide His

people with an escape from Pharaoh (Exodus 14). On another occasion, God brought water from a rock to quench the thirst of the nation of Israel (Numbers 20:8-11). On many other occasions the Lord caused barren women to give birth. Psalm 104:7-10 tells us of God's control over all of nature:

But at your rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight; they flowed over the mountains; they went down into the valleys, to the place you as-signed for them. You set a boundary they cannot cross; never again will they cover the earth. He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. (Psalms 104)

The Lord God has set the boundaries of the seas. At His voice the thunder makes itself heard. This world as we know it today is held together by the sovereign control of our Creator God and responds only to His voice.

### *The Course of History*

The course of history is in the hands of our sovereign God. Writing in his day the prophet Isaiah says

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. (Isaiah 46:10)

God knows the end from the beginning. There is no surprise to Him. History is unfolding according to His overall plan. Nations rise and fall according at His desire. Even

the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus was in direct fulfillment of the plan and purpose of God.

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. (Acts 4:27-28)

God had determined from the very beginning of time that His Son would die for the sins of the world. The death of His Son, the Lord Jesus, was in direct fulfillment of His purpose and plan. History is in the hands of the Lord God. He determines the course of nations and the path of great leaders. He also knows the details of my life.

### *Powers of Darkness*

The powers of hell are subject to the control of our Sovereign God. We see from Job 1 that Satan had no power over Job except what God granted him. In the gospels, demons fled from the presence of the Lord Jesus. Revelation 20:10 shows us about the ultimate destination of our great enemy Satan:

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

We see from these passages that God is in control of every circumstance of life. Even the wrath of evil men is used of God to bring glory to His name in the end. Nature listens to His commands. He has determined the course of history

and the forces of hell are under His control. There is nothing over which our God is not in control. We can take great comfort and encouragement in this fact.

The God we serve is a sovereign God who has absolute authority, right and control. He sets the rules, He does as He pleases and we are completely dependent on Him for life and breath. All of history is unfolding as He allows it to unfold.

It is relatively easy to define the sovereignty of God. What is more difficult is to work out the application of this doctrine to everyday life. In the remainder of this book I will attempt to work out some objections and show how this doctrine applies to our everyday life.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean that God has absolute control? Is it possible for someone to have absolute authority and right and not be in control?
- What comfort do you find in the fact that God has absolute control over this world?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has retained the control of this world. Thank Him that He will work out everything for His glory and our good.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you failed to see Him as being in control. Ask Him to give you grace to trust what He
- is doing even through you cannot understand it.

# WORKING OUT THE KINK

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## 4

# HUMAN DIGNITY

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We have defined the sovereignty of God as that characteristic of God that gives Him absolute authority, absolute right and absolute control in the universe. If we believe that the Scriptures teach that God is sovereign, what does this tell us about ourselves? Does this doctrine strip human beings of their dignity, rights and choices? Are we mere machines in the hands of God, programmed for a certain task and destiny? It is important that we consider these questions as they relate to the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

### *Human Dignity*

From the very beginning, God placed great value on human life. In Genesis 9:5 He told His people that anyone who took another person's life was to be punished by death. God reserved the most severe punishment for those who took a human life.

Reflecting on the creation of God in Psalm 8:3-6 the psalmist said:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet.

In this psalm the psalmist marvelled at the place of humanity in creation. God has made us rulers over all of His creation. He places more value on us than anything else in His creation. We are the crown of all that He has made.

Listen to the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Consider for a moment the beauty and vastness of this universe. Look at the glorious sunrise of the morning. Fill your mind with the beauty of the mountains and the waves of the sea crashing on the shore. Look up into the evening sky and marvel at the stars and the moon. Let the beauty and complexity of this universe fill your heart with joy and thanksgiving. All this has been given to us by God for our enjoyment. He challenges us to probe the limits of this beauty and fill our hearts with its wonder. All this has been graciously given to us by God to enjoy. What does this tell us about how He feels about us as human beings?



Who can forget the most famous of all Bible passages from John 3:16? Here the Lord reminds us that God loved humankind so much that He sent His Son Jesus to die so that we could have eternal life and live with Him forever. God wants us to be with Him forever. Again this shows us how much He loves us, values us and delights in us.

When Jesus walked on this earth He cared for the sick and the needy. He accepted those who had been cast aside by their fellow human beings. He was criticized because He was the friend of sinners. He treated all people with dignity and respect. Jesus loved us so much that He was willing to lay down His life for us on the cross of Calvary. There is no greater expression of love than to be willing to die for another. Christ's willingness to die for us is an indication of how much He valued us.

Listen to what Paul tells us in Romans 8:32:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

God's relationship does not stop with the death of Christ on the cross. He continues to provide for our every need. Listen to what Jesus told the crowd in Matthew 6:25-30:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" And why do you worry about clothes? See

how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

You cannot read this section of Scripture without coming to the conclusion that the Lord God cares very deeply about us and our needs. His concern for us is very personal. Jesus said in Matthew 10:30 that God even knows the number of hairs on our head.

Is God's love for us not clear from these passages? We are the crown of His creation for whom His Son died. We are His children. We are highly valued and He cares deeply for us. There is nothing more valuable in all of creation than human life. There is nothing God loves or values more than you and me.

### *Personal Destiny*

We have seen that we have great value and dignity in the eyes of God. The second question we need to address here is the question of whether we, as human beings, can determine the shape, flavour and texture of our own lives. Does God allow us the freedom of choice?

Personal freedom is an essential ingredient in dignity. A slave, for example, is not treated with dignity. All rights and privileges are stripped from him. He is an object to be controlled. His interests are not taken into consideration. His value is often determined by how he advances his master's cause.

How has God chosen to treat us? Listen to what Jesus told his disciples in John 15:15:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Jesus tells His disciples that He had chosen not to treat them like slaves but as friends. There is a great difference between a friend and a servant. A friend's rights and choices are respected. While God has every right to treat us as slaves, He has chosen to call us friends.

As friends of God, we have the privilege of approaching Him with our personal requests. In Jesus' day, the sick flocked to Him to ask Him for healing. Jesus heard their requests. Joshua prayed, that the sun would stand still so that he could defeat his enemies (Joshua 10:12-14). Solomon prayed for wisdom to rule his people. God granted him this request and much more (1 Kings 3:5-10). James 4:2 tells us that we don't receive because we do not ask.

What we need to see here is that there are many things God wants to give us but we do not obtain them because we do not ask. We have a choice to make here. The shape of our lives is determined in many ways by our prayer life. God's blessings are poured down on us in response to our prayers. We can experience great blessing or great defeat. We can call down great blessing or we can hold back His blessing by our refusal to seek Him and His purposes. We have the dignity of choice in this matter.

We also have the freedom as human beings to obey or to disobey God. In Genesis 2 God placed the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. He

told Adam that he was not to eat of this tree. If God did not want man to eat of this tree, why did he put it in the garden? He did this so Adam and Eve would have the freedom and dignity of choice.

From the beginning, human beings have had the freedom to choose obedience or disobedience. Each day we live is filled with temptations for the believer. We are forced to decide daily whether we will walk in obedience or in disobedience. While it is the will of God that we choose life and obedience, we have not always done so. God allows us to disobey.

Scripture is filled with illustrations of individuals making decisions. Some of those decisions were in direct opposition to God and his will. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. This was not the will of God but he was free to make this decision. God gives us the same freedom. We can choose evil or good. We can choose the world and its ways or God.

While Scripture is absolutely clear that God has absolute authority, right and control it is also clear that man has a free will. The shape and flavour of our lives depend on the decisions we make. We can choose to obey God or we can choose to walk away from Him. We can choose blessings or cursing. Speaking to the people of Moses' day in Deuteronomy 30:19, the Lord God offered them a choice:

This day I call heaven and 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

God gave to the people of Moses' day a choice between life and death, blessings or curses. While He pleaded with

them to choose life, He did not force them to make that decision.

Some years ago I was teaching a Sunday school class on Joshua and the battle of Jericho. As I taught some of the children literally got up out of their seats and started running around the classroom like Joshua's army walked around the city before it fell. I had one of two choices to make when I saw this happen. I could immediately call the children back to their seats and tell them to behave and listen to what I was saying or I could use what was happening to illustrate the lesson. I have often looked back on that situation and thought about God's sovereignty. You and I are like those children with our own minds. We are sometimes unruly and disrespectful. Sometimes we don't listen to God and we do our own thing. God, however, has the ability to use what we do to accomplish His overall purpose and teach us the lessons He wants us to learn.

Imagine a sports team with each individual working independently of his or her team mate. What would be the result? Any coach knows that if you want to win a game you have to tightly control each person's behaviour on the field. The coach will stand at the sideline and yell out orders to the players telling them what they need to do. What would happen if each team member decided to ignore the coach's orders? There would be chaos on the field. How can any team expect to win if they don't work together?

The same principle applies to a business. What would happen if the people in your business ignored you as boss and decided to do their own thing? They spend your money in whatever way they pleased. They came to work whenever they pleased. They made decisions about the business without consulting you. Could you run a business like this?

Consider for a moment what is happening in this world. People are making decisions every day without consulting the Lord God. They are turning their back on Him and ignoring His Word. They rebelliously wander from the path He has given them. Even in the church we see how believers refuse to work together in harmony. Sometimes they fight against each other or refuse to fellowship or work with each other. God allows us to make those choices.

It is relatively easy to understand how God could accomplish His purposes if He forced people to do what He required and stripped them of their freedom of choice. It is beyond human comprehension, however, to imagine a sovereignty that maintains absolute control while at the same time giving the dignity of individual choice and allowing the freedom of disobedience. God does not strip away our dignity of choice. He uses all that happens, however, to accomplish His purpose. Even the evil and disobedience will be used to accomplish His objectives in the end.

As human beings we will suffer the consequences of our disobedience and rebellion but God's overall purposes will be accomplished. As a sovereign God, He is able to work out all things to accomplish His purpose in the end while still giving us the freedom and dignity of choice. This is real sovereignty.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about how God feels toward us as His children?
- What evidence is there in Scripture that we have the freedom of choice?

- How has God used your failures and disobedience to teach you important lessons?
- Does the fact that God is bigger than our failures excuse our sin? What have been the lasting consequences of your sin in your life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for His love and commitment to you as His child.
- Ask the Lord to help you to walk in obedience to Him and His purpose. Thank Him that even when you fail, He is able to teach you.
- Thank the Lord that He is bigger than all our failures and sin. Thank Him that sin and disobedience will not defeat Him or keep Him from accomplishing His purposes for this world.

## 5

## SIN

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Anyone who studies the sovereignty of God must also deal with the question of sin. If God is both absolutely holy and sovereign why does sin exist? Could He simply not remove sin from this world? Who among us has not seen the terrible effects of sin? Murder, adultery, theft and injustice fill the headlines of our newspapers. Wars and uprisings rage throughout the earth. A brother who receives my books recently emailed me to say that his house was burned to the ground because of violence in his country over a disputed election. He and his family escaped with only the clothes on their back. They lost everything they owned because of sin and evil. Sin is a terrible thing and has been destroying this earth since it entered the world in the Garden of Eden. Why does God allow sin? How are we to understand the sovereignty of God in light of the terrible sin we see around us?

We began to answer this question in the last chapter. Sin exists because God has given human beings the dignity of choice. While God gives us the freedom of choice it can never be said that He is the author of sin. Let us suppose, for example, that you loaned your car to a friend. Imagine that while using your car, your friend was stopped by the



police for going too fast and driving recklessly. Who is at fault in this situation? It is true that if you had not loaned your friend the car, he would never have stopped by the police. Your friend, however, made a personal choice. He chose to disobey the law and he alone is guilty. You are not responsible for his crime. You did nothing wrong by loaning him your car.

This is how it is with God. God has given us life and the dignity of choice. Listen to Joshua's final words to the people of Israel in Joshua 24:14-15:

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Notice that Joshua called his people to make a choice. "If serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve," he told them. The people of Israel had a decision to make. God would not force His people to choose Him and His ways. They were free to choose other gods.

We cannot blame God if we choose to disregard His Word and do things in our own way. From the very beginning of time, sin has been the result of human beings choosing to ignore God and His purpose for this world.

Speaking to the people of his day the prophet Elijah said:

"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. "But the people said nothing. (1 Kings 18:21)

Elijah respected his people's freedom of choice and called them to make a decision. They were free to follow God or to follow Baal. Sin exists because God has given us the dignity of choice. It exists because we have chosen to walk away from God and choose our own way. The human race alone is guilty in this matter of sin. We have brought this on ourselves. God respects our freedom of choice but we pay the consequences of our actions.

Where does the sovereignty of God fit into this matter of sin? While sin and rebellion fill the earth and God respects our freedom of choice in this matter, the Bible teaches that He is also sovereign over sin. Let's consider what the Bible says about God's sovereignty and sin.

### *Sin is Restrained by God*

In Genesis 20 we read the story of how Abraham and Sarah lied about their relationship. Abraham told King Abimelech that Sarah was his sister. Hearing this, Abimelech took Sarah into his harem. This lie could have led to adultery. God, however, protected Sarah by revealing Himself to the king in a dream. God told Abimelech that He would take his life if he did not return Sarah to her husband. Abimelech reminds the Lord that he had not yet touched Sarah. Listen to the Lord's response in Genesis 20:6:

Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have

kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her”.

God refused to allow the king to touch Abraham's wife Sarah. God protected her despite her lie by restraining Abimelech and keeping him from her.

King David also experienced God's restraint of sin in his life. In 1 Samuel 25, David and his men were fleeing from King Saul. They were weary and in need of food. David approached a rich man by the name of Nabal and asked him for supplies. Nabal refused to offer any assistance to David. David became very angry with Nabal and decided to send his soldiers to kill him and his household. When Abigail, Nabal's wife, heard how her husband had refused to give assistance to David and his men, she immediately prepared food and went out to meet him. Listen to what David told Abigail in 1 Samuel 25:32-35 when he received these supplies:

David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak."

David recognizes here that it was the Lord God who sent Abigail to keep him from sinning. Had she not come, David would have sinned by killing every man in Nabal's household. God brought Abigail to David to keep him from sinning.

Using the example of an unfaithful wife, the prophet Hosea shows us how God was going to work in the lives of His people to restrain their sin. Speaking in Hosea 2:6-7 he says:

Therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now.'

Israel had been following other lovers. She had turned her back on God her husband. God would not give up on her, however. He would put thorn bushes on her path to restrict her wandering. He would hide her lovers from her and she would find no pleasure in them. While Israel had the freedom of choice, God would not give up on them without a fight. He would do all He could to bring her back to Himself. Notice in Hosea 2:7 that in the end Israel's resistance was broken and she willingly chose to return to her God.

The apostle Paul tells us that the day is coming when great evil will be unleashed on the earth. For the moment, however, this evil is being restrained by God. Listen to what Paul says about this in 2 Thessalonians 2:7:

For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.

While God has allowed man the freedom to sin, He has never taken His hands off the controls. He restrains sin. Though sin is rampant it is never out of God's control. He continues to work to protect us and to encourage us in the right path.

*Sin is Punished by God*

The second thing we need to say about sin is that God will ultimately punish the sinner. Listen to the advice of Solomon to the youth of his day:

Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

Here in this verse the wise King Solomon told the youth of his day to enjoy life but realize that they would stand before God to answer for all they had done.

There is a day of accounting. Paul tells us in Romans 14:10:

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Each of us will stand before God's judgment seat. Jesus told the people of His day in Matthew 12:36 that they would answer for every idle or careless word they spoke:

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken.

God will hold us all accountable for the sins committed here below. We are free to sin but we must also accept the consequences of our sin. We will all have to answer to God for our actions.

*God will Glorify His Name*

Finally, we need to understand that our sovereign God is able to use sin to accomplish His greater purposes. The greatest example of this is the death of our Lord Jesus. Listen to the words of Peter in Acts 2:22-24:

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Though evil men killed our Lord out of rebellion and hatred, God used the sin of these men to accomplish the salvation of His people.

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. God took this situation and turned it around for His glory. Joseph became second in command of Egypt and was used to rescue his own people from a great famine that would have wiped them out.

The prodigal son, in Luke 15, left home as a rebellious young man. He lived a sinful life. When his money was gone, and he had come to the end of himself, the prodigal son realized the error of his ways. The Bible tells us that he decided to return to his father. We can be assured that he would never take his family for granted again. His sin taught him a valuable lesson.

God has given humanity the freedom of choice. We have taken this freedom and used it to sin against God. God, however, remains in control. He restrains sin. He punishes sin. He will even use it to accomplish His glory and teach us great lessons. God respects our freedom of choice but He is not threatened by our sinful choices. Our world suffers the consequences of our evil choices but God is still working to accomplish His purposes.

#### For Consideration:

- Where did sin come from? Who is to blame for the entrance of sin in this world?
- What is the connection between sin and the freedom of choice God gives to each of us?
- How does God restrain sin? Have you ever experienced God keeping you from sin in your life?
- What lessons has God taught you through your sin and rebellion? How has this changed your way of life?
- What have been the consequences of sin in your life?

#### For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to teach you the lessons you need to learn so that you do not fall into sin and rebellion.
- Thank the Lord for the freedom of choice He has given you. Thank Him also that he protects and keeps you. Ask Him to help you to be sensitive to His leading so that you do not fall into rebellion.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord that despite the rebellion of human hearts, He will still work out

His purposes. Thank Him that He is bigger than sin and rebellion.



## 6

# INJUSTICE AND SUFFERING

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In the last chapter we looked at the question of sin as it relates to the sovereignty of God. It now falls on us to examine the question of injustice and suffering. If God is in control, why is there so much injustice and suffering in the world?

This world has seen its share of tragedy and injustice. We have seen evil political rulers call for the extermination of whole races of people. Wars have taken the lives of millions. Disease, famine, and natural disasters ravage the earth taking countless lives. Acts of terrorism have snuffed out the lives of innocent victims. There appears to be an increase of murder and sexual crimes. Our newspapers tell the stories of frustrated and hopeless youth taking their own lives in suicide. Where I live in Canada, we have heard many reports of shootings in schools. No one seems to be sheltered from this violence. Children and teens have been abducted, raped and killed. Senior citizens have been robbed and beaten in their own homes. Wives have been abused and murdered by their own husbands. Aids, cancer and other diseases threaten to wipe out entire populations. Where is God in all this? If He is sovereign, why doesn't He do something? If He is in control, why do these things happen?

The doctrine of God's sovereignty has caused serious problems for some. They claim that if God is in control of this universe and has allowed these things to happen, then they want nothing to do with Him. What kind of God would allow a daughter to be raped or killed? What kind of God would allow a person to enter a school with a gun and kill innocent youth in the prime of life? Can we trust a God who allows a terrorist to plant a bomb in an airplane or public building killing hundreds of unsuspecting people? What should we think of a God who would take my child or allow my husband or wife to die in a traffic accident? Can I accept a God who allows my business to go bankrupt so that I lose everything I own?

Christian counsellors throughout the world have struggled to find suitable answers to these questions. Ultimately, who can know the mind of God and His ways? I do not pretend to have the answer to these questions. I do, however, want us to turn our attention to the Word of God. It is here alone that we can begin to find comfort and hope in a world filled with suffering and injustice.

The problem of suffering and injustice is not new. The children of Israel suffered greatly under the oppressive reign of the Pharaoh of Egypt. Pharaoh took notice of their growth as a nation. He feared that the Israelites might rebel against him. To deal with this perceived threat, God's people were subjected to the cruelty of Egypt. They were beaten and oppressed. When Pharaoh saw that they continued to grow in numbers, he commanded the midwives to kill every male child they delivered. When this did not work, he issued a decree to all his people that anyone who found an Israelite male child was to drown him in the Nile River. Pharaoh's heart was evil. God gave Pharaoh, as he does with all of us, the dignity of choice.

God was not the author of Pharaoh's sin. Pharaoh made his own conscious decision to oppress God's people. Where was God when all these events were happening in Egypt? Why did it take God so long to intervene? Why did He not stop this injustice and suffering right away?

Imagine for a moment that you are a military commander. Your objective is to take a fortified enemy base. To achieve this, you are given a company of elite soldiers. Everyone knows that there will be casualties. In order to accomplish your mission, you will have to send your troops into a situation that could result in them being wounded or killed. While you understand the value of life, no one will fault you for sending your soldiers into this situation to accomplish a greater good. In fact, we honour those soldiers who are willing to lay down their lives for the cause they represent. There are some things worth dying for.

We are willing to pardon our military commanders for sending our sons and daughters to certain death because we believe in the cause for which they fought. God too is seeking the greater good of humanity. His war is against sin and Satan. Countless souls are at stake. They have been captured by the enemy and risk being sent directly to eternal hell. As a great commander, God wages war with our enemy Satan. His objective is to set His people free. He wants us to live in the peace of His son Jesus Christ. He wants to give us an eternal inheritance in His presence. As we wage war with sin and Satan, some of us will be wounded. The Lord Jesus Himself laid down His life for the cause of setting our souls free. Satan will not give up easily. God will call on some of us to enter the heat of the battle where we will suffer loss. This is the nature of war.

Speaking about Pharaoh as the enemy of His people, the Lord God said in Exodus 9:16:

But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

Pharaoh made a conscious choice to oppress God's people but God used Him to declare the greatness of His own name. There were casualties in Egypt but there was also a purpose in what happened. The nation of Israel and the whole world needed to understand the greatness of God, His purpose and His compassion for His people. The world needed to see the power and evil of Pharaoh to understand the even greater power and compassion of God. The suffering of God's people was not in vain. It revealed the greater power of God. Israel would never have understood the compassion of God had they not first seen the cruelty of Pharaoh. They would not have understood God's power had they not seen it against the oppressive hand of a powerful Pharaoh.

The story of Israel's victory over Pharaoh has impacted countless souls over the course of history. Who among us has not been strengthened in time of struggle by this story and the lessons it teaches us about God? The suffering of God's people in Egypt was not in vain. It would accomplish a greater good. Their story would strengthen men and women all over the world for generations to come. They would see the power of God and take courage. They would stand firm in their oppression with confidence in the God who delivered Israel from Egypt. The kingdom of God would be expanded by men and women who took courage in this story.

Injustice and suffering happens in this world because of the sinful choices of human beings. God could strip away our freedom of choice but He has chosen not to do so. We are individuals who have a free will to choose either good

or evil. Our decisions have brought terrible suffering to this world. While God allows us the freedom and dignity of choice, in His sovereignty, He can use whatever decisions we make to accomplish good and teach us the lessons we need to learn.

The apostles of the New Testament suffered greatly because of the decision of the leaders of their day. They were thrown into prison for preaching the gospel. They were stoned, mocked and threatened. Listen to their response in Acts 5:41-42 when the Jewish ruling council ordered them not to preach the Word of God:

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

Like any good soldier they counted their wounds as an honour. These wounds were the symbol of their commitment to a higher cause. They considered it a privilege to be counted among the elite soldiers of Christ to suffer for His name and advance His kingdom in the midst of the terrible darkness of sin.

Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 119:71:

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

As the psalmist reflected on his suffering and affliction he realized that it had accomplished God's greater purpose in his life. No expecting mother enjoys the pains of childbirth.

Those pains are quickly forgotten, however, when she holds her newborn child in her arms. The affliction of the psalmist gave him a greater understanding of God's decrees. He came to appreciate God's ways and purposes in a new way through his affliction.

Speaking about his great suffering, Job said to the Lord in Job 42:5:

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

Job's afflictions and suffering brought him into a closer relationship with God. God was no longer distant; He was very close. God used what happened to Job for good. He drew Job closer through His suffering.

Listen to what Moses told his people in Deuteronomy 8:2-3 about what they suffered in the wilderness:

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years; to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

God taught His people many lessons in their time of wandering in the wilderness. He wanted them to understand His deep love for them. He wanted them to set their eyes on eternal things and not just on the things of this world. To accomplish this He allowed His people to be tested in

the wilderness. Their testing was intended to strengthen them and draw them closer to God.

Athletes know that if they are going to compete, they will need to train seriously. Training is not easy. Athletes stretch themselves beyond their limit. There will be sore muscles and long hours of hard work. We expect our athletes to discipline themselves. We expect that they will push themselves beyond their limits in order to compete. Do we really expect that there will be no pain in our spiritual training?

Pain is not always bad. The expectant mother sees pain as a sign of great things to come. The athlete sees pain as a means of fine tuning his or her skills. The sore back and aching bones of the labourer provides food for his or her family. We should expect that the same will be true spiritually. There will be suffering and pain in our spiritual life. If we are going to advance the cause of the kingdom, we must face this pain.

Let me be clear here, while God respects human freedom of choice, He could bring His justice in an instant. He could have done this thousands of years ago but realized that had He done so, you and I would never come to know Him. We would never have been given the opportunity to experience the grace and love of God for us.

In Revelation 6:9-11 the apostle John heard the voices of the saints in heaven crying out to God for justice.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the

inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed, as they had been, was completed.

In this passage the saints who had died asked the Lord why He delayed in stopping injustice on the earth. The Lord God told them that He did so in order that others might be brought into the kingdom. Not all of His children had come to Him. He delayed His final judgment for their sake.

God finds no pleasure in suffering and injustice. Listen to what the Lord said to His prophet in Ezekiel 33.11:

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, O house of Israel?'

God does not delight in the death of any human being. He does not rejoice in natural disasters. It grieves His heart to see injustice and suffering. God will eventually launch His final assault against sin but the time has not yet come. Not all of His children have come to Him. He waits patiently for them. He will not lose any of His children. Every one of them must be rescued before He brings about His final assault.

Until God brings about this final judgement we must live in the midst of suffering and injustice brought about by human free will and choice. In the meantime, we can be assured of God's presence and grace to help us face the afflictions and suffering here below. In these days we need



a shelter and solid foundation on which to build our lives. The sovereign God of the Bible will be the foundation and hope we need. We can be confident in Him and His purposes. When everything is ready, He will burst through and bring the final conquest. Then all injustice and suffering will be overcome and we will be with Him forever free from sin, suffering and injustice. May we find great comfort and assurance in this.

#### For Consideration:

- Is God the author of injustice? Where does sin and injustice come from?
- Should we expect that in the spiritual battle before us there will be no suffering? Explain.
- How does God use injustice and suffering to accomplish our good? Consider the example of Job in your reply.
- Why does God delay in bringing justice?

#### For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that the day is coming when He will bring an end to all injustice and suffering.
- Ask God for strength to face the injustice that abounds in this sinful earth. Commit yourself to Him and to obedience no matter what happens.
- Ask God to give you courage to face the spiritual battle and its injustice until He returns or takes you to be with Him forever.

- Ask God to bless and keep those who are facing injustice and suffering now. Pray that these people would find strength and comfort in the Lord God who will work out His purposes.
- Thank the Lord that He waits until every child has come to Him before His final assault against sin and injustice.

## 7

### PRAYING AND SERVING

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There is another important question we need to examine in this context. If God is working out His plan, what is the purpose of prayer? If God is sovereign, could He not accomplish His objectives for this world without us? Could we not just sit back and let Him unfold His purposes for this world?

These questions strike at the very heart of our God given mandate to be a light to the world. If taken to the extreme, this position would lead us to become spiritually lazy and unconcerned. It also threatens to undermine our understanding of a personal God who delights in using us to accomplish His great purposes.

The Bible is very clear when it speaks about the sovereignty of God. It portrays a God who has absolute authority, absolute right, and absolute control. On the other hand, the Bible also clearly calls us to prayer and Christian service.

The Lord Jesus taught His disciples the importance of prayer. In Matthew 6:5-15 He gave them instructions on the attitude they should have in prayer and showed them a model they could follow when they prayed. He taught His disciples in Matthew 5:44 that they were to pray for their enemies. He reminded them in Matthew 26:41 that prayer provided them the means by which they could overcome the temptations of the enemy. He challenged them to petition heaven to send workers into the harvest fields of this world (Matthew 9:38). The apostle Paul asked for prayer in 2 Thessalonians 3:1:

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you.

Paul understood that something happened when saint prayed. He believed that his ministry would be empowered by means of the prayers of the saints.

The apostle John challenged his readers to pray for those who had fallen into sin. He told them that their prayers would give life to a brother or sister and restore their faith:

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. (1 John 5:16)

Listen to the instructions of the apostle James in James 5:13-16:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in

the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

There is power in prayer. Through prayer the sick are healed and sins are forgiven. The afflicted are released by prayer and strength is given to overcome the temptations of life. When we pray, workers are sent into the harvest fields and wandering sinners are restored. There can be no doubt that our sovereign God has called us to pray.

This same God has also called us to join Him in accomplishing His purposes on the earth. Listen to the commission He gave his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus told his disciples that they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, Judea, and the ends of the earth. The apostle Paul went even further when he said in Romans 10:14:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

There are people who will never hear the gospel unless we tell them. The command of Scripture to prayer and Christian service is absolutely clear.

If God is in absolute control of this universe why does He need us to pray or to serve? One day the Pharisees told Jesus to silence the crowd who had been shouting praises to Him on the way to Jerusalem. Jesus answered the Pharisees in Luke 19:40 by saying:

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

The Lord God could make the stones proclaim His salvation to the ends of the earth. In His sovereignty, however, He has chosen to partner with us in accomplishing His plan.

I once heard about a teacher working with a group of rebellious youth. One young man, in particular, caused him real grief. This youth would not cooperate in the activities. He was part of the group only because he was forced to be there. He interrupted the meetings and showed no respect for either the leader or the other members of the group. After much prayer, the leader decided to place this young man in charge of group discipline. He took a real chance in doing this. The young man, however, moved by the confidence placed in him, took up the challenge and proved to be faithful and diligent. In the end it drew him into the group.

This is what God has done with us. He has taken rebellious sinners and given us the responsibility of reaching the world for the cause of His Son. We struggle with the Lord's will. Sometimes we are slow to obey and often seek to do things in our own way. How much simpler it would be for God to call on the stones, which have no will of their own, to proclaim His name.

There is a great mystery here. On the harvest fields of this earth there is what appears to be mass confusion. One servant rebelliously goes his own way ignoring the call of the Master. Another sleeps on the job, indifferent to the needs around him. Others are involved in heated argument about how things should be done. Two men are fighting over the right to do a certain task. A few servants have joined forces and refused to cooperate with anyone else because they don't like how they work. Another group stands at the sidelines evaluating what is taking place but they do not lift a hand to the harvest. Scattered throughout this confusion are some overworked and faithful servants struggling to get the work done. This is the team of workers the Lord has chosen to use. He uses their strengths and weaknesses to accomplish His purposes. We are left to wonder at a sovereignty that can use men and women like this to accomplish His great purposes.

Recently I was doing some work on my house. My one year old grandson wanted to help me with the job. The fact of the matter, however, was that his skills were not at a level that he could be of any help. Despite this obvious fact, we spent a good amount of time together. I would take his hand and help him do things he could not have done by himself. We enjoyed that time together and it strengthened our relationship.

God does not need us to accomplish His purposes. He has chosen to use us because He loves us. He delights in spending time with us and listening to us. It rejoices His heart to watch us learn to use the gifts He has given us. He promises to listen to us and grant those requests that are needful for us in the work He has called us to do. We struggle with the work. Sometimes we fail. God, however, uses our feeble efforts to expand His kingdom in phenomenal ways. He also uses our faithful efforts to draw us

closer to Himself and teach us the lessons we need to know.

The shape of history is changed through prayer and the actions of God's people. In Exodus 33:12-17 the Lord told Moses that He would not go with him as he wandered with the children of Israel through the wilderness. Moses pleaded with God that His presence would be with them and God answered his prayer. The course of Israel's history was changed because Moses cried out to God in prayer.

On another occasion, God told Moses that He was going to destroy the nation of Israel and raise up a new nation through him (Exodus 32:10). God can accomplish His objectives in any way He desires. He had already destroyed the earth through the flood and raised up a new people through Noah. He was going to do the same through Moses. When Moses pleaded with God, God listened to his prayer and saved the lives of His people. What would have happened if Moses had not prayed? The course of history would have been changed but God's objectives would still be accomplished. Lives were saved because of the intervention of Moses.

The apostle James tells us that we do not have, because we do not ask God (James 4.2). Prayer makes a difference. God is working out His purposes on this earth. He is drawing men and women to Himself. He is doing this through people like you and me. How much of an impact we have on this world depends to some extent on us. Will we allow Him to use us? Will we trust Him for more strength and resources for the privilege of participating in His purposes? If we do not go, He can use someone else but we lose the blessings.



Jesus told the parable of a master who went to another city and left his kingdom in the hands of his servants. He entrusted each of them with a certain amount of money to invest. At his return, he discovered that one of his servants had not invested his money. Listen to the response of the Master to this servant in Luke 19:24-26:

"Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.' "'Sir,' they said, 'he already has ten!' "He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away."

The Master took back the money he had given to this unfaithful servant and gave it to someone who was faithful. God will accomplish His purposes. He has given us the opportunity to be co-workers with Him because He loves us. If we prove to be unfaithful He will use someone else and we will forfeit this wonderful privilege. We will also have to answer to God for our unfaithfulness.

Is it not wonderful that of all the ways God could have chosen to accomplish His purposes, He chose to use us? He does not need me to accomplish this purpose but He does offer this privilege to me as His loving child. If I walk away from this privilege, God is still able to accomplish His purpose but I lose out. There is rich blessing in walking in the call of God for my life. There is great reward for faithfulness. Knowing the privilege that is mine to partner with Him in His purposes for this world, would it not be to my shame that I walk away or ask Him for far less than He wants to give?

## For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about God's purpose to use us in the unfolding of His sovereign plan?
- What encouragement do you receive from the fact that of all the ways God could have chosen to accomplish His purposes He chose to work through you and me?
- Consider for a moment how God has chosen to use believers like you and me? Consider how often we fail to walk faithfully with Him. How is God's sovereignty displayed through our weakness? What does His decision to use us despite our failures teach us about His relationship with us?
- Who ultimately loses out when we fail to serve and call out to Him in prayer?

## For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord that of all the ways He could have chosen to accomplish His purposes, He chose to use you.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not understood the privilege you have to partner with Him in the unfolding of His purposes for this world.
- Ask the Lord to help you to walk faithfully with Him. Ask Him to help you to understand the privilege that is yours in being part of His great plan.
- Thank the Lord that He is big enough to accomplish His purposes without us.

## 8

### CONTINUING IN SIN

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There are some who might find in this doctrine of the sovereignty of God a license to sin. They might say something like this, "If God is sovereign, He will work it all out for good in the end so what difference does it make what I do? Someone else might say: "If God really wanted me not to commit this sin He would stop me from doing so." Consider the young Christian considering marriage to an unbeliever saying, "If God wanted to, He could stop me from marrying my boyfriend or girlfriend. Because He hasn't stopped me, He must be telling me it is okay." Imagine someone who gets angry very easily. When approached about their angry outbursts they respond: "This is just the way I am. I can't help it. God made me like this."

What an insult it is to God when we use His sovereignty to justify our sin. We are in reality accusing God of being the author and source of our sin. The responsibility for sin falls on our shoulders not God's. It is the result of our own free choice to rebel against God.

Let's go back to the Garden of Eden. God placed Adam and Eve in that garden. Initially they enjoyed perfect communion with each other and with God. One day, Eve

picked fruit from the forbidden tree. Both she and her husband ate the fruit of that tree and condemned themselves and the generations to follow to spiritual and physical death. Creation was immediately plunged into the darkness of sin. Consider for a moment the effect that this act of rebellion had on the world. Wars, crimes and disease filled the earth. Heartache and turmoil came to relationships. Humanity was condemned to an eternal separation from God. All the evil we know today had its roots in this one simple act of rebellion and disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve's act of rebellion destroyed the earth and broke our relationship with God. This was the greatest tragedy this world has ever seen. What is most striking is that while God understood what would happen as a result of this act, He did not stop it. He allowed them the freedom to disobey.

On another occasion, David, the man after God's own heart, saw the wife of Uriah bathing in the privacy of her own quarters. He lusted after her. He had his servant call her to his palace and committed adultery with her. He then murdered her husband to hide the truth. God did not stop him either. The Bible is filled with examples of people who walked away from God to commit terrible sins.

God will not always stop us from sinning. Men and women through the ages have ruined their lives by sin. Many have rebelled against God's Word. God has allowed them to continue on that path. Listen to what Paul said in Romans 1:22-27:

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and rep-tiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to

sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.

These individuals chose to seek other gods. They engaged in all sorts of immoral activities. Paul tells us that God gave them over to their own lusts. He let them continue in their evil ways and suffer the consequences of their sinful choices.

No one can say: "If God did not want me to sin He would stop me." Let's be clear here, God hates sin. Though He hates sin, He still gives us the freedom of choice. The fact that there is so much sin in the world is a testimony to the grace and mercy of God allowing us the freedom of choice. How easy it would be for Him to destroy us but instead He is patient and delays His judgment, pleading with us to repent.

At the very centre of this issue is the free will God has given us. Free choice is at the heart of every good relationship. You cannot force someone to be your friend or to love you; this is something they must choose themselves.

In Isaiah 29:13 the Lord grieved over the fact that the hearts of His people were so far from Him.

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.

Do you see the great desire of God here? He could force us to worship and bow down to Him and we might do so because we had no option. This is not what God wants. He wants us to worship Him from the heart. He wants us to choose Him freely. This is why He has given us the freedom of choice. Regrettably, we have used that free choice to walk away from God.

You may respond by saying: "Okay, maybe God does let us freely choose to sin, but won't He use it for our good anyway? Even if I fall into sin won't there be lessons He will teach me through it? Won't He work it all out in the end?"

In His sovereignty, God can turn the evil we do into good. He did this clearly with the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. When evil men killed Him, God used what they did to accomplish our salvation. When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, God used this terrible sin to save the Israelite nation.

Listen to what the Lord says about King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in Jeremiah 27:5-8:

With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will

hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him. If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the LORD, until I destroy it by his hand.

It is very clear from this passage that King Nebuchadnezzar was the instrument of God to judge the earth. He is called God's servant in verse 6. While God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to conquer His people, He also held him accountable for what he did to them. Listen to what God told this great king in Jeremiah 50:17-18:

"Israel is a scattered flock that lions have chased away. The first to devour him was the king of Assyria; the last to crush his bones was Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon." Therefore this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "I will punish the king of Babylon and his land as I punished the king of Assyria.

Is it strange that God would allow Nebuchadnezzar to conquer His people and then judge him for it? What we need to understand is that Nebuchadnezzar was making free choices. He chose to harm God's people just like the religious leaders of Jesus' day chose to crucify Him. God gave Him the freedom to choose his actions. While Nebuchadnezzar made some evil decisions, God used this evil to accomplish His purpose in the end.

Because God is sovereign, He can work out all things for good. He can fix the messes we make and heal the wounds we inflict on others but this does not excuse our actions. Imagine that because of something you did, your friend's house was burned down and he lost everything. Seeing his need, the people of the community get together, build your friend a new house and provide him with all he needs to start over. While the kindness of the people of your community repairs the problem, it does not make you less guilty. You still burned down your neighbour's house and will have to answer for your actions. The same is true in our relationship with God. God can fix the messes we make and heal the people we have hurt but we still have to give an account of our actions to Him.

Every one of us is accountable to God for our actions. We all have a choice to make in this life. We can choose to walk with God and enjoy His fellowship or we can walk away from Him and suffer the consequences. God can heal, repair or even use the damage we cause because He is a sovereign God but we will answer to Him for our actions. The doctrine of God's sovereignty gives me courage in a world filled with sin. I have hope and confidence that despite the evil choices of men and women around me, God will accomplish His purpose. It also reminds me however that, despite the rebellion of humanity, God's purpose will triumph in the end and we will all stand before him to give an account of our lives.



## For Consideration:

- What evidence is there that God can use even the evil of men and women to accomplish His greater purpose?
- Does the fact that God can heal or use our failures to accomplish good, excuse our sin?
- What comfort do you find in the fact that the sinfulness of men and women on this earth will not triumph but God is sovereign over even the evil of humankind?

## For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that His is greater than your sin and failures.
- Thank the Lord that He will triumph over sin and evil.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for excusing your sin. Ask Him to give you grace to use your free will to seek Him and His purpose alone.

# PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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## 9

### DYING TO SELF

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Having defined and examined some of the objections to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, it now falls on us to see how this doctrine affects us personally. We have defined God's sovereignty by saying that God has absolute right. We used the illustration of the potter in Romans 9:20-21:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?  
"Shall what is formed say to him who formed it,  
'Why did you make me like this?' "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"

The Potter, as a skilled craftsman, shapes the clay into the form he desires. The shape this piece of clay takes depends entirely on the will of the potter. As the clay spins on the wheel, the potter applies pressure where needed to force the clay to take a certain form. The potter has the right to decide the shape and purpose of the vessel on his wheel. Some pottery is fit for a king's palace, while other pottery serves a very humble purpose in the homes of the poor. The potter determines its purpose.

We are clay in the hands of the Heavenly Potter. He shapes us through circumstances and situations in life for a particular purpose. He allows things to happen to us and uses those incidents to make us more effective in the work of the kingdom. Admittedly, this process is not always pleasant. All of us can tell a story of hurt and pain. There are times when we look at our lives and cry out: "Lord, why have you made me like this? Why did you allow me to face the abuse and the suffering?"

There is no easy answer to these questions. God works in different ways in all of us. One thing is sure however, the Master Potter, is shaping you into a vessel for His honour. He has a very particular purpose for your life. There is pain involved in the shaping process but the end result is always perfect. Unlike the earthly potter, the Heavenly Potter never makes a mistake.

Having said this, I want to remind you of two important points. First, as the Master Potter, God deeply loves you. He takes great pride in His work. Listen to what God says to the nation of Israel in Isaiah 49:15-16 as they experienced the heavy hand of discipline:

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

It is easier for a mother to forget the nursing child at her breast, then for God to forget His people. His love for you is greater than the love between a mother and her new born baby. His concern is for your well-being. He cares

very deeply for you. Because He cares so deeply, He disciplines you for your good. This is the clear teaching of Hebrews 12:5-7:

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

The pain we experience on the potter's wheel is because God loves us and wants to shape us into a vessel for His honour. As an expert craftsman, He does not let the smallest detail escape His notice. This Potter takes great pride in His work. He works long and hard on every piece He creates. Every creation is special.

The second thing we need to remember is that God will never discipline us beyond our ability. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

There are times when we look at the pain we experience on the potter's wheel and wonder if we will ever be able to survive. Paul tells us that the Sovereign Potter knows just how much we can handle. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He will never let us be tempted or disciplined beyond our means. This does not mean that we will

never experience problems and trials. Writing about his own life in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, the apostle said:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Paul felt the pressure of the Master's hand shaping him. He reminded his readers, however, that though pressure was applied on all sides he was never crushed. He was often confused but never despairing. He suffered much but was never abandoned by God. He was struck down but never destroyed.

The Sovereign Master has the right to shape us as He sees fit. He knows us and does all things for our greater good and the honour of His name. He knows what we can handle and will only stretch us in ways we can endure.

What is our response to the Master Potter? Paul challenged his readers in Romans 12:1-2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

God has been working on your life ever since you were born. He has been shaping you and transforming you into a vessel that will bring Him honour and glory. He does this

because He loves you and desires you to be everything you were created to be. All too often, however, we have our own ideas and dreams in life. As the potter's wheel turns, we fight against the working of the Master Potter. We complain about our lot in life. We resent His discipline, though it has always been for our good. We claim that we have the right to determine our own destiny and purpose, though none of us are happy outside God's purpose.

Those who understand and accept that God is a sovereign and loving God willingly surrender to His purposes. They know that His will is always best. They die to their own ideas and plans and let their Sovereign God accomplish His plan.

God has absolute authority, right and control. There is purpose in everything He does. Our first response to a sovereign God is to surrender to Him, die to our own ideas and trusting His will, let Him accomplish His purposes. In this and only in this can we be truly content.

For Consideration:

- Can you trust the purposes of a sovereign God even when they are difficult?
- How has God been working in your life? Have you been facing trials or discipline? What should be your response?
- Are you willing to surrender yourself and all that you have to God? Can you trust Him and His purposes today?

- Is there anything you are holding back from God? Is there any area of your life where you are not trusting Him today?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to renew your commitment to walk in God's will no matter the cost.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have failed to surrender to Him and His sovereign purpose for your life.
- Ask God to give you grace to trust what He is doing in your life. Surrender yourself afresh to Him and to His purpose.
- Thank the Lord that He is sovereign and has absolute right in your life. Thank Him that He will use all that is happening to you to accomplish His greater glory.
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# 10

## SURRENDERING OUR POSSESSIONS

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We find great comfort in having a good job or owning a home. We find security in our possessions. We do not easily surrender the things we worked hard to obtain in life. When we come face to face with the doctrine of God's sovereignty, however, we realize that God has absolute right over everything we have. Nothing is truly ours.

The apostle tells us in John 1:3 that God is the source of everything we have:

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

According to John 3:27 we have nothing that has not been first given to us by God:

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.

The apostle James says something very similar when he said in James 1:17:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

There is nothing we have that we have not received from God. He is the source of every good gift we have ever received.

Not only is God the source of every good gift but there is nothing we could ever accomplish without God's power working in us. John 15:5 makes this quite clear when it says: "Apart from me you can do nothing." Listen to what God told his people in Deuteronomy 8:17-18:

You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

Were it not for his wonderful enabling, we could accomplish nothing. The Psalmist understood this when he said in Psalm 33:16-19:

No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.

No king is saved because of his own strength. The battle belongs to the Lord. It is in His strength alone that we can overcome. Job 12:9-10 reminds us that our very breath comes from God:

Which of all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.

Everything we have has been given to us by God. All the strength we have to accomplish anything in life comes from Him. We can claim no accomplishment apart from God and His enabling.

There is another important point we need to make here. God has created everything to bring glory and honour to His name. Colossians 1:16 puts it this way:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Everything was created by God and "for" God. This means that whatever God gives you is to be used for Him and His purpose. To use what God has given in any other way is to misuse it.

We often claim what has been given to us by God as our own. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, however, Paul told his readers that they did not even belong to themselves:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received

from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

"You are not your own," Paul told the Corinthians. That is to say, they did not have any ultimate right even over their own bodies. If we belong to God then certainly everything we have also belongs to Him.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:7:

For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

We can boast of nothing. All our strength, wisdom and wealth have come from someone else. We cannot claim any credit for ourselves. All we have and all we have achieved in this life has been by God's strength and enabling and not our own.

When King David examined the treasures that had been laid up for the construction of the temple, he could have boasted about the great achievements of his people. Instead, however, he was humbled when he realized that they had given nothing of their own, because all they had, was given to them by God. Listen to what he said in 1 Chronicles 29:16:

O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.

What are we to understand from all this? God has the right to reclaim all that is His. There is no greater example of this than the example of Job. When God allowed Satan to take away his wealth and kill the members of his family, Job said:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." (Job 1:21)

When Job's wife protested, he replied in Job 2:10:

"You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

Job had no legitimate complaint when God took his health and possessions. All these things belonged to God anyway and He had a right to take them back.

Believing in a sovereign God implies a surrender of all our possessions. If God is absolutely sovereign He has the authority and right to do with your possessions as He sees fit. If you are living under His sovereignty you will never claim anything to be truly yours. You will never hold on so tightly to your belongings that you could not give them up should He call on you to do so.

God asked Abraham to surrender his son Isaac. He called Jonah to leave his home in Israel to go to a foreign land. He told the disciples to leave their jobs and families to follow Him. What does it mean for you? Believing in a sovereign God requires nothing less than the complete surrender of our lives and possessions. God has absolute

right over everything we own. Will you accept His right over your life and possessions today? Will you be obedient when He calls on you to surrender what is His already?

For Consideration:

- Is there anything you have that you can truly claim is yours alone? What right does God have over your life and your possessions?
- Are you willing to let God have all that He has given you to use as He pleases? Are you holding back anything from Him?
- What is your response when God reclaims from you what He has given? Does He have a right to do this?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment right now to surrender all you have to the Lord. Tell Him that He has the right to do as He pleases with what He has given you.
- Thank the Lord that when He recalls what He has given us it is for our good.
- Ask God to give you wisdom to use all He has given you for His glory and honour.
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# 11

## RESTING IN GOD

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We all experience pain and suffering in life. As long as we have the freedom to choose evil, we can expect nothing less. Sometimes circumstances can overwhelm us. There is nothing more comforting, however, to a struggling believer than the knowledge that a sovereign and loving God is in control. When we grasp the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, our hearts are laid to rest in even the most difficult of circumstances.

We have defined the sovereignty of God as His absolute control over the events and circumstances of this life. This life is not left to chance and fate. God is unfolding His purposes in everything that happens.

Admittedly, there are times when things do not make sense to us. The Lord told Jeremiah to buy a field from his cousin at a time when the enemy was encamped around the city. It did not make sense for Jeremiah to buy this property when the enemy could take it from him at any

time. Recognizing Jeremiah's struggle with this transaction, the Lord spoke these words in Jeremiah 32:27-29:

"I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me? Therefore, this is what the LORD says: I am about to hand this city over to the Babylonians and to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, who will capture it. The Babylonians who are attacking this city will come in and set it on fire; they will burn it down, along with the houses where the people provoked me to anger by burning incense on the roofs to Baal and by pouring out drink offerings to other gods."

The Lord told Jeremiah that the Babylonians would take the land he had bought and destroy it. In telling the prophet this, He reminded him that He knew what was about to happen. He also reminded him, however, that nothing was too hard for God. God would work out the circumstances in the end. The day was coming when he would enjoy the property he had bought from his cousin. Listen to what God told the prophet in Jeremiah 32:42-43:

"This is what the LORD says: As I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will give them all the prosperity I have promised them. Once more fields will be bought in this land of which you say, 'It is a desolate waste, without men or animals, for it has been handed over to the Babylonians.'

Jeremiah was to leave the matter in the Lord's hands. The Babylonians were at the doorstep ready to conquer the land but they did not have the final say. God would work out circumstances so that His people would return to the land taken from them. Jeremiah's property was safe. While



the situation looked bad from a human point of view, nothing was impossible for God.

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Consider the prophet Jonah, running away from the Lord God. As he ran, the waves of the ocean crashed against his boat, threatening to drown both him and everyone on board. Discovering that Jonah was the cause of this storm, the sailors cast him overboard. Things looked bad for Jonah. God sent a great fish to swallow him. How do you think Jonah felt watching that great fish coming toward him with its mouth open wide? He certainly did not see this as his deliverance. I'm sure Jonah thought that his life had come to an end. God does not see things the way we see them. He was completely in control of the circumstances of Jonah's life. That fish proved to be the prophet's deliverance. God commanded it to vomit Jonah on shore. It was not the most comfortable means of transportation but Jonah was safe in that fish's belly. God was protecting Jonah and transporting him to safety. God also used this event to bring Jonah to a place of repentance in preparation for the ministry He had for him in Nineveh. The whole situation was in God's hands.

Like he did in Jonah's life, the Lord is working out His purposes in our lives as well. Often we don't like His way. We don't like being transported in the stinking belly of a fish. We would prefer a luxury cabin on a cruise ship.

We fret and worry about the circumstances that come our way. We can't imagine how these things could ever be for our good. We say we believe that God is in control and can use anything that comes our way for our good and His glory but we still struggle, worry and complain.

As Moses led the people of God through the wilderness they complained about the manna they had been eating every day. God had miraculously kept them alive by means of this manna but they grew tired of it and grumbled against Moses and threatened to kill him if he didn't give them some meat to eat. Moses was in a very difficult place. How could he find meat in the desert for about 2 million hungry people? Moses cried out to the Lord for help and the Lord responded in Numbers 11:23:

The LORD answered Moses, "Is the LORD's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you."

God sent a wind that blew in from the sea. The wind brought with it large numbers of quail. That day the people of God feasted on quail. What was impossible for Moses was not impossible for a sovereign God.

Imagine how Moses felt when the people came to him, threatening to kill him if he didn't give them meat to eat. They were asking him to do something impossible. I have often found myself in situations that were too big for me to handle. Instead of trusting a sovereign God and resting in Him and His control, I find myself worrying and trying to take things into my own hands. In these times we need to be reminded of the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:26:

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

On one occasion, Jesus and His disciples were crossing the lake in a boat. As Jesus slept, the wind rose and a storm struck. The disciples feared for their lives. In despair they cried out to Jesus. He woke from His sleep and re-

buked the winds. Immediately the storm calmed. The disciples were astonished that the Lord Jesus could command the winds.

What does your response to the storms of life teach you about what you believe concerning the sovereignty of God? Do we really believe that God is in control and will work out all things for our good and His glory? If we do, it will be evident in our responses. Those who believe in a sovereign God find rest even in the storms of life. They know that God is in control and will work out His purposes in and through them.

There is no situation over which our sovereign God does not have absolute control. Writing in Ephesians 3:20 the apostle Paul gives glory to God who was able to do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."

Paul reminded the believers in Philippi in Philippians 3:20-21 that God would bring everything under His control:

We eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by that power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies.

He told the believers in Romans 8:28 that all things would work together for good:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

In Luke 13:34 Jesus compared Himself to a mother hen who gathered her chicks under her wings. We have nothing to fear. We are safely kept under the wings of a sovereign God who loves us and has promised to work out all things for our good.

Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 34:7-8:

The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.

God promises His protection. He encamps around us on all sides to protect us. There is no circumstance over which our God is not in control. He watches over His people and cares for them. Who can stand against us if God stands with us? There is no enemy powerful enough to overcome those who rest in Him. As the apostle Paul said in Romans 8:31:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Those who understand the doctrine of the sovereignty of God are able to face the difficulties of life with confidence. Under His wings they are secure. There they can rest and be at peace in their hearts.

This is not to say that we will never have to face trials and suffering. Jeremiah was confused when God asked him to buy his cousin's field. Jonah was uncomfortable in the belly of the fish. Paul was stoned and beaten for his faith. Jesus died a terrible death on the cross. What gives us courage to face these trials? Is it not the fact that the Lord God is a

sovereign God? Knowing that He controls and uses even the pain we feel, gives us hope. If I truly believe in a sovereign God, I will banish from my mind all grumbling, complaining, worry and fear. I will learn instead to put my confidence in Him and quietly rest in His purposes for my life.

For Consideration:

- What are some of the promises of God to those who belong to Him when they face trials and struggles in this life?
- How does knowing that God is in control of every circumstance help us to rest peacefully in Him?
- What has been your response to the trials that come your way? Is God bigger than the problems you face today?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is sovereign over every problem you face in life.
- Thank the Lord that He will work out all things for your good.
- Ask the Lord to help you to rest in the knowledge of His sovereign care in every trial that comes your way.

# 12

## UNEXPECTED CIRCUMSTANCES AND DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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We have all had to deal with unexpected circumstances and difficult people. Hardly a day goes by that we do not encounter some form of obstacle in our path. Rare are the days where everything goes exactly as planned. What is your reaction when things do not go as you expected? How do you respond when you see a difficult customer coming into the store where you work? What is your attitude toward the person whose only goal in life seems to be to make your life difficult? The doctrine of the sovereignty of God speaks to these issues.

As those who believe in a sovereign God, we understand that there is purpose in everything that takes place. Nothing happens by chance. If you had to face an unexpected circumstance today you can be sure of one thing –God will use whatever happens for your good and the expansion of His kingdom.

I am not saying that God is the author of sin. Nor am I saying that God brought that miserable customer into your store to make things difficult. We have repeated this thought often in this study but let me repeat it again. Human beings have a free will and make decisions contrary to the purpose of God. The comfort we have in our unexpected circumstances is that God is infinitely good and can use even the evil done to us to bring great blessing into our lives.

In Job 1 we have the record of a unique conversation between Satan and God. During this conversation, God spoke to Satan about His servant Job. He told Satan that Job was a blameless man (Job 1:8). Satan asked for permission to put Job to the test. God granted his request. Satan then killed Job's family, took away his livestock and inflicted Job with sores. Job found himself sitting on an ash heap, scratching his sores with a piece of broken pottery.

It is important to notice that Satan could not have touched Job had God not granted him permission. These circumstances were allowed by God and would be used by Him to accomplish His purposes in the life of his servant Job. Listen to what Job said to the Lord God at the end of all his suffering in Job 42:5:

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

How many of us long for a deeper relationship with the Lord God? What would you give to have this relationship? For many of us God is distant. He is someone we have heard about and read about in the Bible. There are those, however, whose relationship with God is very intimate. They seem to be able to hear God and see Him in a way that many can't. Job, despite the fact that he had lived a

"blameless" and godly life, now looks back at that time of his life and realized that he really didn't know God. Through his suffering Job found himself in a new relationship with his Lord. God was now very real and personal. His love and respect for Him had grown tremendously. Satan had done his best to destroy Job's relationship with God but in the end Job loved Him even more.

The story of Job would prove to all that God is greater than all that Satan can throw at us. How many faltering believers have been comforted by this story? How many have been encouraged to persevere when faced with the example of Job's suffering? While Job lost his family and his wealth, he was amply rewarded. Not only did God return to him even more than he had at first, but he also used his example to bring hope and blessing to countless believers through the ages. What Satan meant for evil, God turned to good.

Some time ago a prominent member of a church I was attending died. The news of his sudden death sent shock waves through the entire church. While, to all appearances, his death was a horrible tragedy, God used it to accomplish His purposes. The unexpected death of this dear man of God had an impact on the lives of the youth in particular. In the months that followed, the Lord began to do a work in their lives. One by one they recommitted their lives to Christ. Was it worth the cost? Knowing this brother as I did, I know he would have been only too happy to offer his life so that these youth might be restored to fellowship with their Saviour.

Consider for a moment the great apostle Paul. He had a powerful impact for the kingdom. He was an incredible evangelist and moved from town to town with the message



of the gospel. People came to Christ in large numbers because of his powerful ministry. Then the day came when Paul was captured and put in prison. The early church felt the impact of Paul's imprisonment. It looked like the enemy had won the battle. Paul did not see it this way. Writing to the believers of his day in Philippians 1:14 the apostle told them that because of his imprisonment many people were stirred to proclaim the gospel with greater boldness.

Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

I am sure that many people asked why the great apostle Paul had to be in prison. Would it not have been better for him to be preaching and planting new churches? Paul's imprisonment, however, had a greater impact on the church. Now that he was in prison, people began to realize that they could not sit back. If the message was to get out, each of them had to become serious about the task. The Lord used Paul's bonds to cause the church to realize its own responsibility.

When the angry mob came to arrest Jesus, Peter drew his sword to fight them. As Peter looked at the situation before him, he saw a people who were going to take his Lord away. He could not understand how this could possibly be for good. He drew his sword to fight them off. Had Jesus not stopped him, he could possibly have laid down his life right there for his Lord. What Peter did not realize, however, was that he was fighting against the purpose of God. Jesus had to die to accomplish the salvation of His people.

Like a child fighting against his father who is removing a splinter of wood from his foot, we too fight against God not

realizing that this pain is for our ultimate good. Listen to what the Lord God said through His servant in Isaiah 55:9:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

We cannot pretend to understand the will of God. God often works in ways that are very strange to us. How important it is for us to learn to accept what He sends our way. These unexpected circumstances and tragedies may very well be disguised as some of God's greatest blessings.

How do we, who believe in a sovereign God, respond when we encounter unexpected circumstances and difficult people? In response, let me quote the words of Andrew Murray who said:

In time of trouble say: FIRST, God brought me here; it is by His will I am in this strait place: in that I will rest. NEXT, He will keep me in His love and give me grace in this trial to behave as His child. THEN - He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends me to learn and working in me the grace He means to bestow. LAST - In His good time He can bring me out again - how and when He knows. SAY THEN I am here by God's

appointment, in His keeping, under His training, for His time.<sup>1</sup>

We can be sure that God watches over each of us. He knows every circumstance that comes into our lives and will use whatever we face to accomplish His glory and our good. If something has happened to me, God must have a particular purpose in it for me. Knowing this, we have one of two choices to make. We can fight against God and His purposes or we can humble ourselves, submit to His sovereign working, watch what He does and enjoy the fruit.

We may not understand what God is doing or how He will work out every detail. All we need to know is that He will use each circumstance we face for our good. This understanding should radically change how we react to difficult people or unexpected situations in life.

If we truly believe in a sovereign God, we will accept our trials and expect God to use them in our lives for good. Instead of grumbling and complaining about what happens, we will see each obstacle as a means for God to expand His kingdom and draw us closer to Himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Choy, Leona, Andrew Murray, *Apostle of Abiding Love*, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, 1978, pg. 215

For Consideration:

- Have you ever had something unexpected happen in your day that kept you from doing what you intended to do? What was your response?
- What comfort should we find in the fact that God is over even the little hindrances that come our way each day?
- Can you accept that God has the right to change your circumstances in life? Can you trust Him in the midst of those unexpected circumstances that come your way?
- Do you have an example of how God used unexpected circumstances in life to open a door for you to minister in a special way or to protect you from harm? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He is bigger than all the unexpected problems and difficult people that come into our day.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to trust Him with the difficult people and circumstances you have to face each day. Thank Him that He is bigger than every obstacle. about the problems
- Ask God to forgive you for grumbling or complaining when things did not go as you expected in the day.

# 13

## BOLDNESS IN SERVICE

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The apostle Paul once said: "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4.13). This was a bold statement but the apostle had absolute confidence in the God he served. Paul was empowered by the Sovereign God of the universe to whom nothing was impossible. With this confidence firmly planted in his heart, he moved out to accomplish the impossible for the sake of the kingdom of God.

There are two points I want to mention. First, Paul's confidence was not in himself but in the Lord his God. Paul did not trust his own ability. Listen to what he said in Romans 7:18-19:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

Paul knew the sinfulness of his own evil nature. For this reason, he relied fully on the inner working of the Spirit of God to accomplish the work he had been called to do.

Writing in 1 Corinthians 2:3-5 Paul shared with the believers the secret of his strength:

I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

The power of the sovereign God was working through the apostle Paul. He told the Ephesians that this God was able to do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

The Lord God has not changed. His power has never diminished. The God who worked in the life of the apostle Paul still works today.

The second point we need to make is that God still wants to work in us today. He wants to reach this generation as much as He wanted to reach the world of Paul's day. Listen to the words of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And

surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

These words were spoken to all believers of all generations. God has called us to go to the whole world and make disciples. Notice His promise. "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." Notice particularly the phrase "to the very end of the age." The end of the age has not yet come. This means that the promise of God is still applicable to us today. There can be nothing more sure than this. The God who calls us will also be with us. Wherever we go and whatever we do in His name, we can be assured of His presence and enabling.

When God called the prophet Jeremiah, it was to a very difficult ministry. People would not listen to his words. His life would be constantly in danger. At one point in his ministry, discouragement seemed to overwhelm the prophet. He cried out to God in Jeremiah 15:15, 18:

You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors. You are long-suffering—do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake... Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?

Understanding the prophet's pain, the Lord reminded him in Jeremiah 15:20-21:

I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the LORD. "I will save you from the

hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel."

God promised to surround His prophet with His sovereign care. He would place a wall around him so that none of his enemies could penetrate. Jeremiah had no reason to fear his enemies. They would not be able to break through the defenses God had set about him unless God so desired. He was in the hands of a sovereign God who cared for Him. Jeremiah could trust His purposes.

God spoke similar words to the prophet Ezekiel. The people to whom He was sending Ezekiel were a hard and calloused people. Though they were hard, God promised to make His prophet harder. Listen to what He told His servant in Ezekiel 3:9:

I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house.

We have no cause to fear. The Lord God promises to strengthen and keep us. Listen to the words of the Lord in Zechariah 2:8:

For this is what the LORD Almighty says: "After he has honored me and has sent me against the nations that have plundered you—for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye—

He who touches us touches the apple of God's eye. We are His children. He cares deeply for us. He will protect us and provide for all we need.



Over and over again the Bible challenges believers to put their trust in the Lord and resist fear.

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." (Genesis 15:1)

That night the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham." (Genesis 26:24)

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (2 Kings 6:16)

David also said to Solomon his son, "Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished. (1 Chronicles 28:20)

Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." (Isaiah 35:4)

Do you hear the words of these verses? "I am your shield. I am with you. I will bless you. I will not fail you. I will not forsake you. I will come to save you." The sovereign God of this universe, who has absolute authority, right and control makes these promises to us. What confidence this ought to give us in the work of the kingdom. What strength

there is in these words to face the obstacles on our daily path. Speaking to the believers in Thessalonica Paul said:

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.  
(1 Thessalonians 5:24)

When God calls and enables, there is no task too difficult. There is no temptation too strong. There is no need too big. He will never give you more than you can handle in His strength:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

There are times when things look impossible. Jesus reminds us, however, that with God all things are possible:

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."  
(Matthew 19:26)

It is for this reason that Sarah was able to bear a child when she had passed the age of bearing children. It was for this reason that David, the shepherd boy, was able to kill the giant Goliath when the whole Israelite army drew back in fear.

"The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

The God who calls will also equip and protect. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our means. He will enable us to do the impossible in His name.

When we believe in a sovereign God, we find courage and strength to step out in faith. As Romans 8:31-32 says:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

As we walk in obedience, we can be assured that God's strength in us is adequate for the task. He has overlooked nothing. Nothing will take Him by surprise. There is no enemy too powerful. Because the sovereign God has called and empowered me, I can step out boldly trusting His judgment and knowing His strength is suitable for all He has called me to do. This knowledge should give us greater boldness in the work of the kingdom.

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8.37)

For Consideration:

- Do we have strength and wisdom in ourselves to do the work the Lord has called us to do? What happens if we trust in our own wisdom and strength?
- What are some of the promises of the sovereign God to us in this chapter?

- How does knowing that the sovereign God will keep and enable us give us boldness in the battle before us?
- Are there any particular fears you have in ministry? How does this chapter speak to those fears?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the promises He gives to be with us and to keep us in the ministry to which He has called us.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for trusting in your own strength and wisdom when His power and wisdom are at our disposal.
- Ask the Lord to help you to trust Him in the ministry He has called you to. Ask Him to give you boldness as you step out in obedience
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## WAITING AND LISTENING

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None of us likes to wait. Generally speaking we are an impatient people. Timing, however, is absolutely crucial in life. Take a soccer or football game for example. As the player runs down the field towards his opponent's net, he is aware of the importance of timing. As he rushes toward the net, his eyes are on the goaltender. He watches him move out to cut down the angle of the shot. At the last moment he swerves to the left, kicks the ball and scores a goal. Timing is essential.

Life is like this game. There is a time for everything. We can speak the right words but if we do not choose the right time to speak those words, they will likely fall on deaf ears.

In the spiritual battle before us our enemy is not predictable. Often we cannot even see our enemy. As the father of lies and deceit, Satan and his angels do not play by the rules. They will stop at nothing to keep us from accomplishing God's purpose. How can we compete with such an enemy? How do we deal with an enemy who will stop at nothing to keep us from reaching the goal God has set for our lives? How can we fight an enemy we cannot even

see? If we are going to accomplish the purposes of God for our lives we need His direction and leading. We cannot possibly accomplish His purposes without waiting on Him and listening to Him.

Like a great military commander, God sees the battle field before Him. He knows exactly what He is doing. He works with great skill calling out His orders. His soldiers wait for those orders and promptly obey. They trust His leading completely and risk their lives in obedience. Every movement is precise and properly timed. No effort is wasted. Victory is sure but we must listen and follow His commands.

Those who believe in a sovereign God will learn to wait on Him for His timing and leading. It is true that God can use our mistakes and bad judgment to accomplish His purpose but how much better it is to follow His leading. Jonah decided to turn his back on God's calling and took a ship heading in the opposite direction. God brought Jonah to Nineveh but the prophet had to face a terrible storm and the wrath of the sailors on the ship. He was swallowed by a great fish and vomited up on the shore. How much better it would have been had he listened to God and obeyed Him when He first called.

1 Samuel 13 tells us the story of Saul's battle with his enemies in the region of Gilgal. It was the tradition of the kings of Israel to consult the Lord before going to battle. For seven days Saul waited for Samuel the prophet to arrive to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. As he waited, he saw his soldiers desert him one by one for fear of the enemy. Afraid that he would lose his entire army, Saul decided to offer the sacrifice himself. When the prophet Samuel arrived, he brought Saul a word from the Lord. He told him

that because he had not waited on the Lord, his kingdom would not endure (1 Samuel 13:14).

This seems like a harsh judgment but the reality of the matter was that Saul struggled with waiting on the Lord his entire life. Over and over Saul seems to rebel against what God was saying to him. Unlike David, who sought the direction of the Lord, Saul seemed bent on doing things his own way. It was because Saul could not wait on God and refused to listen to Him, that God stripped him of his reign.

We have all found ourselves in a similar situation. As the pressure mounts we begin to question the ways of the Lord. Soon our lack of faith begins to show. We take matters into our own hands and step out in our own strength and wisdom instead of trusting God's ways and waiting for Him to accomplish His purpose.

For two years I served as a pastor on the island of Reunion, in the Indian Ocean. One day I received a phone call from a lady in the church asking me to come to her house as she had a problem she needed to discuss with me. When I arrived she told me about another woman in the church who had offended her. She wanted me to go to see this woman and make things right. As I listened, I asked her if she had personally spoken to her sister about the offense. She told me she had not. As I considered what we needed to do, the teaching of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:15 came to mind:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

I told her that I was not going to do anything about this matter until she had spoken to her sister personally. She

fought with me about this for some time. I told her that the matter needed to be dealt with in God's way if we expected to have God's blessing. Finally, she accepted and picked up the phone to speak to her sister. Within three minutes she put the phone down and turned to me and said: "She told me that God was convicting her about what she said. She apologized and everything is fine between us now." Our hearts were overwhelmed with gratitude to God for what had taken place. God blessed when we did things His way.

Those who believe in a sovereign God understand that His way is always best. They will take the time to seek His heart and purpose in the situations that come their way. We are living in an age that questions the ways of God. Even believers question God and His purpose. Some time ago I spoke with a pastor friend who left his family and ministry to live another lifestyle. As we discussed what had happened I was struck by how he justified his actions. His view of Scripture had changed. He twisted it to suit his new lifestyle or, in some cases, completely ignored what the Bible said. He stepped out on his own and was doing things his way.

I have seen youth refuse to wait on the Lord for the partner of His choice for their lives. Growing impatient, they fall in love with an unbeliever and marry against God's purpose. We have seen Christians compromise the principles of Scripture to make money or advance their personal cause rather than wait on the Lord and do things His way. Christian leaders have resorted to manipulation and control rather than trusting God and His timing.

Waiting on God and seeking His will and timing is not always easy. Saul watched his men desert him and wondered whether he could win the battle with fewer soldiers.



The ways of a sovereign God are different from ours. He doesn't work or think the way we do.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)

We cannot possibly understand the ways of God. Those who believe in a sovereign God will learn to trust His ways, even when they don't seem to make sense. They will wait on Him and His direction, trusting that His will is best and His purposes cannot fail.

I am so thankful that a sovereign God is not thwarted by my faithlessness and impatience. I realize at the same time, however, that I have sacrificed much blessing in my life because I have not waited on Him. The promise of the Word of God is that those who wait on Him will be strengthened.

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew [their] strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; [and] they shall walk, and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31, KJV)

The psalmist reminds us that that no one who puts their hope in the Lord will be put to shame.

No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse. (Psalm 25:3)

The Lord will defend and deliver those who wait for Him:

Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you. (Proverbs 20:22)

When we understand that God is working out His purposes in this world, we will submit to His leading. His timing and direction are always perfect. If I believe in a sovereign God who loves me and cares for me, I will wait on Him. I will not take matters into my own hands. Instead I will commit myself to listening to Him and following the leading of His Spirit even when it does not always seem to make sense to my limited understanding.

We can trust our God fully. As a sovereign God, He has absolute control and authority. He is working out His purposes. He delights in leading us in accomplishing His purposes. It is our privilege to know His leading and to wait on His timing. May we trust Him enough to wait on Him.

#### For Consideration:

- Have you ever grown impatient and missed the blessing of God because you were unwilling to wait for His timing?
- How important is the timing of the Lord in our ministry? What can happen if we are not sensitive to the Lord's timing in our ministry?
- What is the difference between our understanding and God's understanding? Are God's ways different from ours? What is the result when we choose our ways instead of God's?

- How does a proper understanding of God's sovereignty impact how we seek to walk in obedience to His Word and His leading?
- What comfort does knowing God is a sovereign God give you in your personal life and ministry? How does the doctrine of God's sovereignty impact how you seek God and His direction for your life and ministry?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not been obedient to His leading and timing in your life.
- Thank the Lord that He is able to turn even your failures into blessing.
- Thank the Lord that He is willing to lead and guide you in your ministry and personal decisions.
- Ask God to help you to know Him more. Ask Him to give you patience so that you can wait for Him to work in His timing in your life.
- Thank the Lord that His ways and His timing is always right.

# 15

## PAST HISTORY

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There are few people in life who live without regret. We have all experienced and done things in our past we would like to forget. We have all made bad decisions. These experiences and decisions have had an impact on our lives and the lives of those we love. Sometimes we are left with deep emotional scars. What we wouldn't give to turn back the hands of time and do things over again. Life can be filled with regret. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God brings hope and encouragement in these times of reflection on our shortcomings.

John 2 tells the story of the first miracle of Jesus. It happened at Cana in Galilee. Jesus and His disciples had been invited to a wedding banquet. While they were there, the host ran out of wine. There could be any number of reasons why this happened. One possible suggestion is that the organizers had either invited too many people or they had not purchased enough wine. When Mary, the mother of Jesus, saw the situation, she came to Jesus and asked Him to do something about it. Jesus asked for some jars to be filled with water and brought to the Master of Ceremonies. By the time the master received the jars, the water in them had turned to the finest wine he had ever

tasted. What was a public embarrassment turned out for good.

Have you ever been in a similar situation? Maybe you were not a good steward of the resources God had given you. Maybe you made a bad business decision. Maybe you suffer the consequences of your past sin. The encouraging thing about the story of the wedding of Cana is that even though the organizers had failed, God was willing to make things right. Because He is sovereign, He can cause even unwise decisions to work out for His glory and our good.

Maybe you feel like you don't deserve to come to the Lord with your problems. You realize that the reason you are in your present situation is because of your own decisions. Mary brought her problem to the Lord Jesus because she knew He was the only one who could make things right. The sovereign God of this universe delights to work out all things for your good and His glory. Bring your failures to Him. Confess that you have made a mess of things. Ask Him to reach out to you in your situation, like Mary did that day. You will be surprised at what a sovereign God can do.

Joshua 9 is the story of how the Gibeonites deceived Joshua and his men. In obedience to a direct order from the Lord, the Israelites were conquering and destroying the inhabitants of Canaan. They were told not to make a treaty with the Canaanites but to slaughter them lest they be a stumbling block for them in their walk with God.

The Gibeonites were afraid. They knew that something needed to be done if they were to survive as a people. They also knew that they could not stand up against the might of the Israelite army. They decided to resort to lies and deceit. Dressing themselves in old clothes, and taking old bread and wineskins with them, they went to meet

Joshua. When they arrived at his camp, they told him that they had come from a distant land to make a peace treaty with the Israelites.

Because Joshua believed these people to be from a distant land, and not Canaanite enemies, he signed a treaty with them. Joshua 9:14 tells us, however, that the Israelites did not consult the Lord in this matter. Only later did they realize that they had been deceived.

Obviously Joshua had made a bad decision. He should have consulted the Lord before making such a treaty. The story does not end here, however. Because Gibeon had made a treaty with the Israelites, the king of Jerusalem, claiming that the Gibeonites were traitors, allied himself with four other kings of the south and declared war on them. Gibeon pleaded with Israel to help them against this coalition of kings. Because of the treaty he had made with them, Joshua came to their aid. God gave him victory and he defeated all the kings of the southern region of Canaan.

Joshua made a bad decision to ally himself with the Gibeonites. God used the situation, however, to give His people victory over southern Canaan. The story teaches us that a sovereign God is able to take even our failures and use them for good. He is greater than our failures. His sovereign rule extends even over the bad decisions and messes we make. While we often suffer terrible consequences because of our decisions, there is still hope in the wonderful mercy of our sovereign God.

I remember a conversation I had with a brother in the Lord who was a leader with me in a church where I worked. He was very concerned about the spiritual walk of his young children. He wanted to see them all accept the Lord and walk with Him. He felt inadequate and wondered if he was

really reaching his children. As we spoke I reminded him of his own childhood. His father was a Hindu who wanted nothing to do with him becoming a believer in Jesus. There were times when his father would come and take him out of church because he didn't want him to be a Christian. As we spoke we came to the conclusion that God is bigger than our failures as parents. He can overrule our faults, weaknesses and shortcomings.

Maybe as you look at your life you recognize just how much of it you have wasted. For years you have wandered aimlessly from the Lord. Today you are ashamed of all the wasted years lived for self. Listen to the words of a sovereign God in Joel 2:25:

"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten— the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm— my great army that I sent among you.

Many years have been eaten up by sin in your life. Today the sovereign God reminds you that He can restore those wasted years. In His strength you can rebuild that relationship with your wife or child. He can use what remains of your life and multiply His blessings through you. Is this not what the Lord did in the life of the apostle Paul? When he came to know the Lord as his Saviour, he grieved over the years of living in sin and ignorance. He remembered how he had persecuted believers and sought to hinder the advance of the gospel. The Lord, however, restored to him all those wasted years. At the end of his life, his impact for the cause of the gospel far outweighed his opposition to it.

Consider the condition of this earth that God has entrusted to us. As human beings we have made a real mess of this earth. My bad decisions have impacted the lives of many

people. Abuse, disappointment, shattered dreams, are all the result of the sin and rebellion of humanity against God. There is a day coming when sin will be judged. For now, however, God has given us the dignity of choice. Where choice exists in a sinful world, we must also expect disappointment and sorrow. There is someone, however, who is greater than all this disappointment and sorrow. God's purposes are not thwarted by sin. Your hurt can be healed and used of God to accomplish His great plan.

Sin has brought much misery but God can change it into something beautiful. I have no way of knowing how God will do this in your life. I do want to point you, however, to a sovereign God who is greater than every abuse and disappointment you have ever suffered.

Only when I understand that there is someone bigger than my failures and sins can I face them head on. Bring your sins and failures to the Lord today. Come to Him with all the abuses you have suffered. He is Lord over your past history. He will heal, strengthen and comfort. What a joy it is to know that there is someone bigger than my sin and failure. The doctrine of God's sovereignty gives me courage to face my past and great hope to face my future.

For Consideration:

- Are there things in your past that you are ashamed of? What does this chapter teach us about God's ability to touch you in those areas of your life?
- How has God used your past failures or abuses to change you and equip you for greater things?



- How does knowing that God is sovereign over all that has happened to me in the past comfort and give you strength to face these issues?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He can use whatever happens to you for good.
- Take a moment to confess your past failures and sin. Thank the Lord for His forgiveness. Ask the Lord to teach you through these failures so that you are strengthened in your faith and personal walk.
- Ask the Lord to heal and give you courage to face past failures and abuses with the confidence that while God is not the author of sin, He is able to change the evil done to us into good.

# 16

## W O R S H I P

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We have, over the course of the last few chapters, sought to define the sovereignty of God and consider our personal response to such a God. We would certainly fall short in this study if we did not mention that our greatest response ought to be one of worship and thanksgiving.

We have said that the sovereignty of God implies that God has absolute authority, absolute right and absolute control. There is no one like our God. Some time ago the leaders of some of the greatest nations came to a city close to where I live for a summit. The streets were lined with people hoping to catch a glimpse of the world's most powerful leaders. In preparation for their arrival, no expense was spared. A somewhat obscure city suddenly became internationally known because of the presence of these powerful leaders.

There is one to whom all these leaders will one day bow. He has absolute authority, right and control. There is no

one like Him in heaven or on earth. We owe Him everything. He has watched over us and provided for us from birth. There is only one legitimate response toward such a God. We must bow in worship and adoration. The great leaders of our day, as important as they are, owe everything to this sovereign God. If we honour those to whom position and power is given, how much more ought we to honour Him who gives that position and power?

This sovereign God works out His purposes despite the attempts of human beings and Satan to thwart them. From the very beginning of time He has held this world in His hands, guiding, protecting and working out all things for our good. Listen to what the Lord said to His people through his prophet in Jeremiah 29:11:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

The Sovereign God of this world has plans for our peace and happiness. What comfort and assurance this ought to bring us today. How this ought to cause us to bow our knee in praise.

Hell has no power over our sovereign God. Speaking to the apostle Peter the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 16:18:

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

God, like a great military commander, is expanding His kingdom on this earth. There is no force powerful enough to overcome Him. The sin and injustice that surround us

will not stop God from working out His purposes for good. Good will triumph, evil will be overcome. What joy this ought to bring to our hearts. How we need to fall down before such a God in adoration.

Though He is sovereign, God has chosen to use us to accomplish His great purposes in this world. I can think of no greater privilege. As we move out in obedience to the Lord God and His call we can know His presence with us always. We have His promise never to leave us in Matthew 28:19-20:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus also promises to provide for all our needs. Listen to his words in Matthew 6:28-30:

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

All the strength we need will also be amply provided. God promises this to all who will wait on Him in Isaiah 40:29-31:

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

When we need wisdom to make the right decisions all we have to do is ask God and He will give us all we need.

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

How do you respond to such provision? Why would the great and sovereign God pour Himself into me? Why would He choose to empower, provide and guide me? Why would He decide to use me in the accomplishing of His purpose? Only love can explain this. Our only response is one of awe and wonder.

Because God is sovereign, I can live in perfect peace. Because God is sovereign, I know that sin and evil will not triumph in the end. Because God is sovereign, I can step out in faith, realizing that His power in me can overcome even my greatest foe. Because God is sovereign, there is meaning and purpose to all that takes place. Because God is sovereign, my destiny is assured. No one can take away my hope. How can I not bow in humble adoration toward such a God and what He has done for me?

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God offers hope and security. It gives courage to face the obstacles that come our way. How we need to praise God today that He is a sovereign God. If this study has not given you reason to praise

Him, it has fallen short of its objective. Those who understand that God is sovereign over all are quick to bow in humble adoration and worship. May all our hearts be filled with praise and thanksgiving to such a God.

#### For Consideration:

- How knowing God does is a sovereign God comfort and reassure you in your life and ministry?
- Take a moment to think about your personal life and ministry. How does the sovereignty of God touch these areas of your life? Is there reason in this to praise the Lord?

#### For Prayer:

- Take a moment to recognize and confess the Lord God as a sovereign God who is over all.
- Thank the Lord for the way you can live with boldness and assurance knowing that He is Lord over all.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for times when you have doubted His control and right.
- Ask the Lord to reaffirm the truth of His sovereignty over your situations to your heart. Ask Him to give you such an assurance of His control and authority that all fear, worry and doubt are cast off.
- Take moment of quiet before the Lord to submit yourself afresh to His Lordship, leading and strength. Ask Him to give you grace to trust Him more in whatever comes your way.

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