

The Sovereignty of God (Part 2)

Definition

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 02-Mar-96; Tape #223

Today I'm going to continue the series that I began last week. I want to begin in the book of Haggai because Haggai was given the responsibility of stirring up the people to build the temple and the people were spending their time taking care of their own things rather than taking care of the temple of God. The temple of God, we understand, is symbolically the church of God.

Haggai 1:13 Then spoke Haggai the LORD'S messenger in the LORD'S message unto the people, saying, I am with you, says the LORD.

Now this, as you know, is my "modus operandi" you might say, to give subjects in series. It seems as though when I look at a subject I see a great deal more than I can give in any sermon, and sometimes almost to a ridiculous extent—like the 29 series on the Covenant. That was the longest by far of any series that I have ever gone into.

Regardless of how long some of them have been, I believe that right now I am in (this is my opinion) the most important series that I have ever given in my life. I feel that the second most important one that I have ever given is the series on the "Holiness of God," and that is not really finished yet. We just had a hiatus for a number of months before I get back to it.

These two I think are important, because the one tells us what God is, and the other tells us what we are to become. I don't feel at this time that there can be any thing more important in our lives than to get prepared for the Kingdom of God—that is, to do our part in building the temple of God just before the return of Jesus Christ.

You know that I am talking about the spiritual temple of God. It's very interesting that in Haggai's message, that even though he was there to first of all stir up Zerubbabel and Joshua, all the people had to be participating in what they were doing.

They were the leadership, but they (the people) had to be doing what they were doing, or the leadership wouldn't be able to get done the responsibility of building the temple. They had to know that the Lord was with them. Now, in Haggai chapter 2 and verse 4—a little bit of intervening time, Haggai says to Zerubbabel:

Haggai 2:4 Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land, says the LORD, and work: for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts.

The work that God has called us to do is something that is going to take a great deal of faith.

I'm not talking necessarily at this time about the monumental kind of faith that people might have to have at a time of martyrdom, but the kind of faith that people need during the mundane periods of time in our life—we have to know that God is with us, or do you know what we are going to do? We are going to fritter away our time and it is going to disappear and be gone before it's over.

I have been in the church now since 1959. That seems to be like a snap of the fingers—and it's been gone! I'm approaching 40 years since I was baptized. I can look back on that time—it has gone so rapidly that it's almost been like a blink of an eye. So much has happened in my life that I can't even begin to remember all the things that happened. I know my life is turning out far more differently than I ever thought it would. I think that in like manner that your life is turning out far more differently than you ever thought it would be.

I think that those of you who are older will reflect back on time and see that time is slipping away from you so fast you wonder where it all went. Those of you who are my age had little babies and now look at them. *Now* you have grandchildren. Where did the time go? Believe me, it takes "faith" to keep God in mind all the time. "I am with you," He says. "I have not gone way off some where. I am aware of you. I am aware of what is going on in your life."

Isaiah 46:3 Hearken unto me, [Listen unto me] O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb.

Notice the words of God—the parent. Yes, He bore us from the womb.

Isaiah 46:4-5 And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you. To whom will you liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like?

Isaiah 46:8-10 Remember this, and show yourselves men: bring it again to mind, O you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Remember that—"My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure." Are you willing to live with that? Are you willing to live with God doing His pleasure? Think of what I said in that sermon last week. This subject that we are talking about is one of those that we can readily accept intellectually, but sometimes when things occur, sometimes they are tragic things that occur—they occur very close to us. They may occur right next to us. They may involve us.

Are we willing by faith to accept what His counsel was for your life in those tragic times, too? Sometimes that's not so easily done. Who is the boss? Who is your sovereign ruler? Is it God in

reality, or is it God just intellectually—a concept that we carry around saying "*Oh yeah, God's the ruler. No doubt about that.*"

Isaiah 46:12-13 Hearken [listen] unto me, you stouthearted, that are far from righteousness: I bring near my righteousness: it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry: and will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory.

There's His will. There's His pleasure. He's going to do it. Who's going to keep Him from it? Who's going to stop Him from doing what He says He will do? So here we begin with this declaration by God, for us to remember that He is God.

We are to remember what He said in the past and see that has happened just exactly as He said it would. Remember that the idols that we set up are not able to deliver what we desire because they have no life, let alone the power to bring those things to pass.

We are to remember that whatever His counsel, whatever His pleasure—that will occur. Nothing—neither time (because He ever lives) nor any other being (because He is Creator) is far more powerful and wiser than He. Nothing can turn Him aside from what He has set His will to accomplish. So the question for us is, not that we intellectually agree with it, but do we live it?

How is your faith being used? Now this is a question that is necessary that we answer. In Romans the 6th chapter, after setting the stage (up to this point in chapter 5) Paul, in verse 1 asks the question:

Romans 6:1-2 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?

Remember that all the issues of life that involve true spirituality (morality, ethics), that involve character, come down to a simple issue—the same issue that confronted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. It's not complicated in terms of understanding.

Romans 6:11-13 Likewise reckon you [Christians, brothers] also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield you your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members [eyes, ears, nose, mouth, tongue—passions, the desires, the thinking processes] as instruments of righteousness unto God.

Is God such a reality? Is our faith so strong that we can do that on a daily basis, all of the time? Or is God reserved just a tiny portion of our life, like those who reserve an hour for Him on Sunday mornings, but the rest of the week He is relegated to the background there

somewhere as though He isn't on the job; as though He isn't with them shopping; as though He isn't with them in their home; as though He isn't with them in their marriage and childrearing.

Believe me, if we have the kind of faith that God wants us to have, God is never going to get out of our mind. It's not that we are living with Him as though He is a black ogre—a shapeless form that is hovering over our life as a threat. I don't mean that kind of a relationship at all, but a loving, kind, generous, good personality that is with us all the time.

Our life comes down to what is a very simple issue in terms of explanation. Are we going to permit the Sovereign Creator to be the Lord and Master of our life? Now this concept is simple in stating, but the application is not. On the surface this appears to be a "no brainer."

Anybody ought to be able to easily come up with the correct answer, but I think all of us have been in the church long enough that we should be able to just as easily tell from life's experiences that the application of it is not so simple. So we have to face this, because our life's experiences may show that we don't believe that God is supreme in His creation; or are ignorant of what to do; or are too weak to do what we know we should do; or we are deceived to some measure; or perhaps confused, or so self-willed we don't care; or decide to take our chances banking on God's mercy.

The critical part in all of this is the use of faith, and yet faith must be used. Do you know why? Because God has willed it so.

He's the one who set the standard. He said, "The just shall live by faith." That is His will. He says, "My counsel shall stand." Nobody is going to turn Him aside from that and get by—not living by faith. This is a critical issue and that's why I said at the beginning of this sermon I think it's the most important series that I have ever given.

This subject is not only the very foundation of faith. It's the "warp and woof" of Christian living, because as I mentioned to you last week, this is the factor that energizes faith and makes it living. Without it, all it is, is just an intellectual concept that we agree with. It's a good start, but it has to be energized by the reality that "*I will never leave you nor forsake you. I am with you in every aspect of life.*" So this sermon is devoted to more specifically defining the sovereignty of God and how it is shown in specific instances in God's word.

Let's go back to a scripture that in a way we are quite familiar with—in the book of Daniel (Daniel the 4th chapter) This occurred after Nebuchadnezzar had gone through those seven years in which he was deranged (I guess is the best way to put it) and living pretty much like an animal.

Apparently he had some recognition of what was going on, but he didn't have any capacity to really put his life into the kind of working relationship with God until that seven years had passed over him. Then when it was over, we get a pretty good idea that during that period of time Nebuchadnezzar was humbled a great deal, which indicates that during that period of time, even though he was acting somewhat like an animal, he was thinking, because he said, in verse 34:

Daniel 4:34 And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up my

eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honored him that lives for ever, whose dominion [listen to the way Nebuchadnezzar describes God] is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation.

Did Nebuchadnezzar believe that God was supreme, that God was sovereign over everything in creation? Do you understand that like Nebuchadnezzar, we too have to be brought to this place?

Daniel 4:35 And all the inhabitants of the earth [everybody taken together—billions of people] are reputed as nothing: and he does according to His will in the army of heaven, [amongst the angels] and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?"

Have you ever had any thoughts that came close to that? How about just during the last ten years? "What in the world is going on in the church?" Isn't that the same thing as saying, "What is God doing?" Do you think that slipped by without Him noticing? "*Ah, look what they're doing down there!*" We call God into question an awful lot. Should we?

So, God is sovereign. Nebuchadnezzar, a Gentile king who didn't have the benefit of growing up in Israel with the word of God and the prophets of God, came to see it. He came to see that nobody on earth has the right to call God into question critically.

Please don't misunderstand. I am not saying that it is not right for God's children to ask Him in a nice way, in a respectful way, what's going on. "Open my eyes that I might see." Do you understand what I mean? He expects those kind of questions from His children, but the attitude makes a world of difference.

Nebuchadnezzar had to be humbled to be brought to this position where he was able to see, that before he was humbled he was calling the God of heaven into account in a critical way—a way that was nothing more than a revelation of the vanity of the mind of what was undoubtedly a great man. But compared to God, he was less than a worm. We'll see that just a little bit later.

Psalm 115:1-3 Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God? But our God is in the heavens: he has done whatsoever he has pleased.

What does it mean to say that God is the sovereign ruler of all the earth? First of all, it is to say that God is the Almighty, that He possesses all power in heaven and earth, that there's nobody who can thwart His purpose or resist His will. Nobody. No group of men, no singular individual, nor all the angels that God has created. God's creation—all of them put together, all with their combined power—are not going to be able to thwart God in anything that He chooses to do. He is the sovereign God in heaven and earth. So He is the Almighty.

Psalm 22:28 For the kingdom [David wrote this] is the LORD'S: and he is the governor among the nations.

It's good to remember that a governor manages. A governor controls. When I was young—actually when I was in my early 20s—the very first job that I had in the steel mill was as a tender of the machines that made the blast for the blast furnace. Five of those machines were gas powered—powered by waste gas that came from the making of coke. Two of those engines were steam engines—huge things. I mean huge! Each one of these steam engines was bigger than any locomotive that you have ever seen. All they did was produce the blast for the blast furnace.

Each one of these steam engines had a huge flywheel. I mean huge! That thing was 20-25 feet in diameter. They were about 18 or 24 inches thick—solid cast steel. Those things were driven by this big steam engine. If you know anything about steam engines, they are virtually unlimited in the amount of steam that they can produce. It all depends on how much steam and how fast they are going. They had a fail-safe system on there.

The first one was to regulate the amount of steam that was going to the steam engine, driving the engine, in turn driving the wheel which in turn was driving the turbines that were making the blast. But they had a follow-up system on it and this follow-up system was actually the governor that controlled—it managed the speed of the engine so that it didn't go over a certain speed. All that it was—3 steel balls that were mounted on a shaft that was spinning—geared down into the engine.

The faster the engine went, the faster the shaft turned, and these steel balls—the centrifugal force would begin to pull them out away from the shaft. As it pulled them out, it began to shut down the steam, so if they got out perpendicular, it shut the steam off entirely and it kept the thing from going into a position where the flywheel might pick up enough speed to break away from its mount. A little tiny governor, by comparison, to the size of the engine.

God is governor. He manages. He controls all nations. Remember that word "manage." Remember that word "control." David said it so simply. "He is the governor among the nations." Therefore we can begin to pick up a principle that Daniel elucidates a little bit further. We're not going to turn to it but he said. "Therefore it is God who sets up kingdoms. It is He who overthrows empires."

On the other hand, He sets up dynasties, like David's, and regardless of the way things look to men, He keeps that dynasty going, under cover, but He never loses track of it. How about Zadok the priest? He was blessed by God to have an everlasting priesthood—for all eternity! Zadok and his family are going to be in that priesthood. God's going to make sure. Who can stop Him?

God manages. God controls. God governs. He is the one who determines the extent of ruler ships. I don't care how powerful they appear on earth. If God says they go, they go. Nobody stops Him. In I Timothy chapter 6, Paul wrote this to a young evangelist.

I Timothy 6:12-16 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto you are also called, and have professed a good profession before many witnesses. I give you charge in the sight of God, who quickens all things, [all life has come from God] and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; That you keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable [blamelessly] until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: Which in his times he shall show, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only has immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto: whom no man has seen, nor can see: to whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen.

Now brethren, we have only begun to scratch the surface on what God reveals about Himself in terms of this subject, especially in terms of its importance to Christian life and growth. I feel that it is very much needed because the God of this world's Christianity is viewed as a miserable creature—a blasphemous travesty of the truth, and yet much of the picture remains in our memory as the unseen source of much of the direction of our lives.

The God of this world's Christianity is seen as a helpless effeminate—a model at handling sentimentality, who is desperately trying to save mankind; and I submit to you that if He is as He is portrayed in popular Christianity, then He must be constantly disappointed, dissatisfied, discouraged, because he is being defeated by the very creatures He is supposed to have created and is supposed to be greater than.

Is He? He sets out to save somebody like little old you. Can He? Even in all of your rebelliousness, if He decides that He loves you, do you think that He can turn you into an animal for seven years (like He did with Nebuchadnezzar) to finally humble you and bring you to the place where you say, "Yes Lord, You are boss." Now we don't want to go in that direction, do we? That hurts to even think about it. I think we need to consider that we don't want to go in that direction. It's so much easier to choose to do it right.

In I Peter, chapter 1 and in verse 20 there's a very important principle that we need to see here.

I Peter 1:19-20 But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.

Now remember that phrase, "Who verily was foreordained *before* the foundation of the world," and flip back to Ephesians 1 and verses 3 and 4. We just read one apostle's account. Now here's another apostle's account.

Ephesians 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in

love.

Notice that in both places (thought somewhat different subjects), it says, "Before the foundation of the world." I want you to understand this because it shows in either case—whether in terms of Jesus' dying for sin, or in terms of Him choosing to do His work through a church—that God ordained that this occur before the foundation of the world. Do you know when the foundation of this world was?

It wasn't until after Adam and Eve sinned, setting the stage for this world to be formed, apart from God, which means then—even before then, God knew they were going to sin. He didn't want them to sin. Don't get me wrong. That was their choice. So when they did sin, it didn't catch God by surprise.

He had thought it all through. And so He had to say, "*If they do this, then it's plan A. If they do this, it's plan B.*" But in any case, He thought it all out—from the very beginning. Nothing brethren, catches Him by surprise. We're not going to out-think Him. So He had all the alternatives mapped out, so that even though He gives us free moral agency, He says, "*If they do this, I'll do this, and if they do that, I'll do this other thing.*"

What's the purpose behind all this thinking? It's to save you—to bring you and me to the place where we will willingly cooperate with Him and choose Him as the sovereign of our life—our Lord and Master in everything. Because then and only then are we going to live the kind of life that He wants us to live—to the greatest extent possible.

So to even suggest that God's original plan has been frustrated (frustrated by the sins of Adam and Eve; frustrated by the sins of Satan) is to degrade and dethrone the thinking of our great God. To say that He was taken by surprise by what occurred in the garden, is to declare that God is nothing more than an erring finite mortal.

There is no reason to believe, considering God's infinite wisdom, that He had not planned on these possibilities before He even created the angels, and thus He even planned on the possibilities that the angels would sin, too. Now it's very interesting that God has found a way for even our sins to glorify Him.

Psalm 76:6-11 At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, both the chariot and horse are cast into a dead [deep] sleep. [You know what that's referring to—coming out of Egypt.] You, even you, are to be feared: and who may stand in your sight when once you are angry? You did cause judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was still, When God arose to judgment, to save all the meek of the earth, Selah. [Think on this, David said.] Surely the wrath of man shall praise you: the remainder of wrath shall you restrain. [Then in verse 11 comes advice to you and me.] Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God: [David's advice is—keep your word to God.] let all that be round about him bring presents unto him that ought to be feared.

So verse 10 is declaring that even the anger (the wars of man against God) shall turn to His praise, because it will be shown by these events and by His judgments that He is righteous, wise, and merciful in the way that He conducted Himself for the greater good of His marvelous purpose.

Let's kind of conclude this section by going back all the way to the book of Revelation where we get a glimpse into heaven—into the very throne of God—and we hear the four and twenty elders singing. It says:

Revelation 4:10-11 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that lives for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they are and were created.

The sovereignty of God is absolute; it is irresistible; it is infinite, and it is by our belief (as shown by the way that we live) that we affirm God's right to govern the universe for His glory and for His pleasure. It is, after all, *His*. That seems like such a simple thing, but in our vanity we think that we are so important. He has power over the clay—you and me—to do with us as He pleases.

He can choose to mold each and every person as He sees fit—this one to honor, this one to dishonor, even from the same lump of clay, like Jacob, like Esau. Now with that thought in mind, let's turn to Romans the 9th chapter.

Romans 9:9-24 For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son. And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calls;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger, As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, [Who's the boss?] but of God who shows mercy. For the scripture says unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore has he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens. You will say then unto me, Why does he yet find fault? For who has resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why have you made me thus? Has not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor? [Are you willing to accept that, brethren?] What if God, willing to show

his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he has called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

Now we have to understand what Paul is talking about here, or our relationship with God is going to have the wrong footing. It will have a footing that gives us far too much to say in things. And if allowed to run amuck, it will build into a resentful misunderstanding of events. We have to understand that God is under no rule or law outside of His own will or nature—that God is a law unto Himself and that He is under no obligation to give anybody an accounting of what He is doing, that is, even including what He does to and with us. God is sovereign in the exercise of His power, and that power is exercised as He wills, when He wills, and where He wills.

We must always remember that He is operating according to His purpose, from His perspective (not ours) according to His plan and according to His time schedule. Let me give you some examples. The Bible is the only direct light—a window that we have into the mind of God and His operations—and even here God must reveal. He must remove the veil from our minds in order to put them on to some of the mysteries contained within. Now what do we see to the relation of the exercise of His power that would cause Paul to write what He did here in Romans 9?

Let me give you just an overview of what I mean, and you'll see that everything that I say here is tied into things that are primarily in the Old Testament. We see that for long periods of time God's power appears to be dormant, as if God has gone away off somewhere and He is paying no attention to what is going on.

There are hundreds of years sometimes between major characters and events, like between Noah and Abraham and then on to Moses. Hundreds of years between something like the flood and the Exodus—between 8 and 9 hundred years, as best we're able to calculate it for that example; and then on to the forming of the nation of Israel under David—another 3 to 4 hundred years after the Exodus.

In Egypt, God exercised His power, and Israel was delivered from their cruel taskmasters, and their taskmasters were slain. Now think of this: Just a few weeks after Israel walked out of Egypt (the most powerful nation upon the face of the earth at that time) without even a dog barking against them, He brought them to the Red Sea and performed one of the most stupendous miracles anybody could ever imagine.

The ocean parted and they went across, and it wasn't even muddy! They get on the other side and the weight of hundreds of millions of tons of water crash in on their enemies and crushes the life right out of their enemies' bodies. Israel becomes rich with all of the loot and everything that floats to the surface. At least that's part of it.

Now I want you to think of what happened now just a few weeks later. Israel is marching along and the Amalekites came up behind them (on a Sabbath day I believe that it was. I didn't check into this. Maybe I should have.) and made a cowardly attack on those who were at the back

end—the stragglers that were on the lines. Now, where was God when that took place? Did He intervene and crush the Amalekites? No, He didn't.

It was almost as if He went to sleep again, because it says in verse 16 of Exodus 17, "For he said, Because the LORD has sworn that the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." Now God in His wisdom exercised His will, and He says He's not going to wipe the Amalekites out. He's going to allow them to be around and we're going to be fighting every generation perhaps. Won't that be fun? We could look at it that way.

You see, to you and me that may not seem like that is sensible at all, that He would do this to Egypt, but why didn't He do it to the Amalekites? Only He knows for sure, but the Israelites had to live with it and the Amalekites were a "thorn" in Israel's side, even to this day. You see, He made up His mind. So they (the Israelites) get all away across the wilderness and the first city they come to, that they have to conquer to go into the land, is Jericho.

So what does He tell them to do? He told them to march around it one time every day till they got to the Sabbath. Then they were to march around it 7 times on the Sabbath, then blow their trumpets, and the walls will fall down.

"*Hey! That's all right! God's out there fighting for us, isn't He?*" Yes He is!

He never did that again—only one time in the history of man, and every other city they had to conquer by the edge of the sword. *His* decision. Who's running the show? Israel, or God? You and I, or God? Are you beginning to get the drift?

God has mercy on whom He will have mercy. He says that because He wants us to understand that if we're going to be living by faith, we had better be ready for some surprises, because He's the one who's calling the shots. He knows how things are going to work out. He is going to manipulate them so they work out for the best for His purpose, not ours.

Are you willing to live with that? If you're willing to live with it, it is my responsibility to tell you that there might come a time when it's going to be awfully painful for Him to make the decision. Are you going to be willing to live with what He decides? If we're not, we're going to have trouble. We're going to end up fighting God, all the while we're saying we believe that He is the Sovereign.

Now the same principle that I just elucidated to you just a little bit holds true in regard to individual deliverances as well. Some He chooses to heal; others He chooses not to heal. It's very interesting because the word of God even accounts for this, but let's look at it so that we see it, in Hebrews the 11th chapter.

Hebrews 11:33-39 Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again; and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And [Here comes the fine print!] others

had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy;) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth, And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise.

Why? Why are some delivered, and others are not? Why is there not consistency, more consistency shown here than there is? Why is Stephen allowed to be stoned, but Peter is released from prison? And then later, Peter, according to surviving legends is crucified upside down, and Paul is beheaded outside of Rome; but John, on the other hand (though he is reputed to have been thrown into a pot of boiling oil, escapes unscathed) lived to be in excess of 90 years (probably 100 years old) and died a peaceful death. Why? Is your faith up to such decisions?

There is a very interesting conversation, which took place between Peter and Jesus. Let's look at it in John the 21st chapter. After telling Peter, "Feed my sheep," Jesus said, in verse 18:

John 21:18-22 Verily, verily, I say unto you, When you were young, you girded yourself, and walked whither you would: but when you shall be old, you shall stretch forth your hands, and another shall gird you, and carry you where you would not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he said unto him, Follow me. Then Peter, turning about, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following: [meaning John, the apostle] which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrays you? [John said that, not Peter.] Peter seeing him said to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do" [Now notice God's reply.] Jesus said unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, [if he lives 2 thousand years] what is that to you? follow you me.

Who's the boss? That's what Jesus said. It was just a nice way of saying that He is the head of the body, and if He chooses for one to do one thing, and another to do another, what is that to you? "Don't bother with that Peter. That is my responsibility." Now, are we willing to follow God like this?

Back in Deuteronomy the 8th chapter there is a principle expressed there that fits into this subject. Moses said:

Deuteronomy 8:18 But you shall remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that gives you power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he swore unto your fathers, as it is this day.

God is sovereign in the delegation of His power. To one He may give the power to do things that He does not give to others. To a Samson He gives great physical strength. The rest of us are just normal. Some of us are less than normal. To those before the flood He gave the power to live hundreds and hundreds of years—almost a millennium in some cases. The rest of us live, roughly, 70 years. Moses said in Psalm 90, that if by reason of strength, maybe we will live 80 or 90 years.

It is God who chooses Assyria to be the rod of His anger against Israel. But Egypt, He makes the basest of nations, even to this day. He does this because God is sovereign and He does what He pleases, and we must, must adjust our thinking to this.

Do we have any right to call Him into account, or to get into a bad attitude because He permits or directs our lives to go in a direction maybe that we don't like? Can we live, even in difficult times, believing that He is there? Do you know that that's what separated the great ones from the not-so-great ones? Remember what it said about Moses in Hebrews 11—"He [Moses] endured as seeing Him who is invisible." Quite a statement.

Now let's make this really personal. Let's go back to Paul's writings once again. Remember, it is God who gives us the power to get wealth. Please do not restrict this to wealth in terms of money, but let's expand it out to what it really means in principle, that it is God who gives us the power to do our part within the body. It is He who gives grace. It is He who gives gifts, and what does He say in I Corinthians 12—that He distributes gifts to everybody for the profit of all.

Now, we're going to look here in I Corinthians the 4th chapter, because Paul is leading up to that place there in I Corinthians 12. We're not going to go back to I Corinthians 12. There is a thread of thought that goes right through the entire book.

In chapter 3 Paul accused these people of being carnal. They were converted, but they were still thinking carnally. They were weak people, even though they were a gifted church. God gave this group of people a great number of gifts, and Paul says in verse 6 of chapter 3:

I Corinthians 3:6 I have planted. Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.

In verse 5 he says that he and Apollos were ministers by whom they believed. Now verse 1 of chapter 4.

I Corinthians 4:1 Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Now when he says "ministers" here, he is speaking again of Apollos and himself. But I want you to see that eventually he is going to get around to including every one of us. Now the word "minister" here is not the normal word that is used for minister in other places, and I believe that this is the only place in the entire Bible that this particular word is used.

What it means, in a broad application, is a "servant." I will make it a little bit more specific. It

means an attendant—one who waits on another, and that "another" is the Master. That ought to put it right into its context. He was saying that Apollos and himself were attendants, serving a master, and their master was Christ. The way that they were serving was in the congregation.

I Corinthians 4:2-4 Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yes, I judge not mine own self, For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judges me is the Lord.

I Corinthians 4:6-7 And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that you might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another. [Now look at verse 7] For who makes you to differ from another?

Now we're getting real close to home here, right down to the nitty-gritty—right down to what we might say is our position within the body. Does it not say in I Corinthians 12 that God put us in the body as it pleased Him?

I Corinthians 4:7 and what have you that you did not receive? Now if you did receive it, why do you glory, as if you had not received it?

What room is there for boasting? There is none. There is room only to be humble, to stand in awe, to stand in appreciation, to stand in the deepest of gratitude. He has even opened up to us what the purpose of life is, let alone put us within the group that He is forming in His image. So He gives gifts and He gives those gifts to be used for the benefit of the body. Now Paul spoke about this before. It's not the first place he did, but in Romans 12, verse 3 he says:

Romans 12:3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, [He's talking to the church here] not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith.

So who among us (who are the clay) has any right to ask God, "Why have you made me thus?" There is in every one of us the desire to be in control of everything, so that we can feel a measure of safety, security, within ourselves. Now think about this, that if we were in control, there would be no need of faith. Faith involves trusting God, and that means we aren't in control, but rather that He, possessing this monumentally pure love, power, and wisdom, is in control, and we trust His use of that power. That's what faith is.

So that God says that He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy, and He says that to remind us that He is running the show. That is why I said what I said last week regarding those people who say that they will never follow another man. I said that these people may be

looking in the wrong direction because the only really important factor for them in regard to this question is to decide whether that man is a minister of God.

The reason I said that is because God shows in His word that He has willed it, that it is His pleasure, that there is always going to be a man in the mix, charged with the responsibility of leading God's people. So Jesus said, "You shall know them by their fruits." It's a good place to begin looking. Look to the message, and are they themselves living that message? It's a good place to start.

So God bestows His mercy on whom He pleases, and on them whenever He pleases, whenever it seems good to Himself. There are quite a number of examples to this. I'll just give you two quick ones. There aren't many men who were greater servants of God than Moses. That's a given. Yet Moses messed up one time. To whom much is given, much is required. Moses pleaded with God, it says in Deuteronomy 3. He said, "*Please let me see the good of the land.*"

Do you know what God said to him? Well, Moses recounts it. "*He wouldn't let me see it for your sake,*"—Israel. And for yours and my sake, too. He could look at it (the promised land) from afar, but you would think, "*Oh, come on God, all you have to do is walk a half a mile.*" Nope! "*This was a good man, a great man. Look at how he served You.*"

God told Moses, "*I won't say it again. No.*" See? Then about 5 or 6 hundred years later, another man comes along. He was a good man too, but he was not in the class of Moses—my own opinion. I'm talking about Hezekiah. Hezekiah pleads with God, and God says, "All right. Fifteen more years I'll give you." That was God's choice.

Let's finish with one here that we can read in John the 5th chapter. It says here this was God in the flesh. You think that He didn't act like God? Yes He did. He acted just like the Father.

John 5:2-9 Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he said unto him, Will you be made whole? The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steps down before me. Jesus said unto him, Rise, take up your bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the Sabbath.

So there were two things. First, there was a great multitude of people there. Second, Jesus could have chosen any number of them. He chose a man who didn't even ask Him to heal him. How about those apples? In fact, Jesus initiated the contact. He was acting just like His Father.

See, who can know perfectly the mind of God? None of us can. The result of this is that we have to live by faith. He has willed it that way—we are going to be created in His image through the process of trusting that He knows best what to do with our life. He knows into what we are being made.

Did John not say that now we are the sons of God, but we don't yet know what we shall be, except we do know that we're going to be like Him? John said we don't know specifically what we are being made into. By that, I mean, what part of the family we are going to be used within, when God finally does bring His kingdom on earth.

But one characteristic that all of His children will have, is that they will have demonstrated in their lives that they implicitly trust what He says—without question. That way, brethren, there will never be a problem of disagreement in the Kingdom of God. But we have to prove that now. So there it is. Is God sovereign, or is it only an intellectual concept that we give agreement to? Are we allowing this to be the driving force in our life?

Now we will stop for today, but God willing, the next time I speak we will continue this subject.