

Sovereignty, Election, And Grace (Part Four)

God's Intimate Knowledge

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I want to follow up on the last sermon that I gave three weeks ago. It partly concerned Jonah and his resistance to putting God's will to action in his life. What we saw there was an excellent example of God's mercy, even to one who was as stubborn and recalcitrant as Jonah. We saw in that sermon that it was God who initiated Jonah's calling, and that Jonah, it seems, did everything in his power to escape the responsibility of his calling, and it was God who responded to Jonah's stubborn responses by forcibly narrowing Jonah's options.

Jonah was so stubborn, and he shows by his actions that he was willing to die for his misguided intolerant belief. None of what God did removed Jonah's free moral agency. Instead, God, through *His* means, eventually made Jonah see the light—that it was going to be futile to resist. God from on high had other plans and other means for convincing Jonah that he was wrong.

This also reminds me of Jeremiah's declaration that he makes in Jeremiah 20:7:

Jeremiah 20:7 O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived: you are stronger than I, and have prevailed.

The modern translation of that verse is as follows: "O Lord, you have induced me, and I was persuaded. You are stronger than I, and have prevailed."

Jeremiah knew that he was being worked with. He knew that he wasn't cooperating in the manner and the attitude that he should. There were times when his attitude was bad, but he responded to God by showing he understood that God was working with him. You read the book of Jonah carefully, and Jonah too knew God was working with him. Because of God's

responses, Jonah eventually repented to some degree, and he made some right choices to submit. I am not saying that he made the right choices in the right attitude. The attitude question remains unresolved in the book, because that was not the book's purpose.

I want you to turn with me to Romans 8:11-13.

Romans 8:11-13 But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if you live after the flesh, you shall die: but if you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live.

Regarding our calling in the things that we understand, regarding our relationship with God, regarding the *hope* of our calling and all of the responsibilities that these impose upon us, we are not obligated to any human, including ourselves, but to God. We are obligated to perform in harmony with God's spirit. That is what Paul is saying there.

We are obliged to respond to God because He has interfered in our lives, and because *He* has brought to us a knowledge of Himself and of His way. We are obliged because *He* has granted us repentance, and because *He* has given us His spirit, and because *He* has given us this hope. We'd have none of those things without His interference in our lives. We did not just happen upon these things by chance anymore than Jonah did. We did not, on our own, repent and decide to take up our calling's challenges. A matter of the magnitude that we have been given a spiritual awakening and an awareness of God's truth didn't just happen. We didn't merely stumble upon it.

Like Jonah's calling, ours too was *caused* to happen. Because it has happened, it has become part of our life's perspective and planning. But this raises another question. Is it wrong for us to plan because something is already planned out for us? Jonah's calling was already planned out. "*Jonah, you're going to go to Nineveh, and you are going to preach to those people.*"

What is planned out for us? We know with some generality that God wants us to be in His kingdom, bearing certain characteristics and fulfilling certain responsibilities. That's already planned out.

There are a few things in life more ordinary than planning. We plan to go shopping tomorrow. We plan to make a trip next week. We plan to have a family picnic on the Fourth of July. Our life is just filled with appointments and things that we are planning to do. Is this wrong, seeing that God has interfered in our life? In Romans 15 we can call on the Apostle Paul to give us some evidence in this regard. Paul is saying this to the Romans at that time:

Romans 15:22-25 For which cause also I have been much hindered from coming to you. But now having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you; whensoever I take my journey into Spain, ***I will come to you*** [That's easy to see. He planned to do that.]: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you [It seems there he was appealing for money.], if first I be somewhat filled with your company. But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints. [He was planning to do that.]

Romans 15:28-29 When therefore I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain. And I am sure that, when I come unto you, I shall come in the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ.

Here we clearly see an apostle of God planning a visit to Spain following another planned visit to Jerusalem. Isn't it obvious from the book of Jonah that Jonah made plans? They were far different from what God had planned for him though, weren't they? They were very much different. Let's look at what Job 42:2 says. Job is making this statement.

Job 42:2 I know that you can do every thing, and that no thought can be withheld from you.

This verse is kind of awkwardly translated. Actually what Job is saying is: "*No plan of yours, God, can be stopped.*" I bring this up because I want us to see that God too makes plans. All men, to some degree, are in His image. God makes plans, and He wants us to know that we are free, since we are in His image, to make plans as well. In an overall sense, the scriptures show us that it is not wrong to make plans. Nowhere that I know of anywhere in the scriptures does it say that everything in life is already planned out.

We went through Psalm 139 in some detail and you might recall Psalm 139: 16. That is not what that verse is saying—that God has every detail planned out. Rather the purpose of the Psalm is David explaining how closely and intimately God is involved in our lives. And so David comes to the conclusion that God is overseeing our lives each and every day, and that He is working to develop the right godly characteristics in us.

Now back to Jonah again in thought. Jonah planned to escape the responsibilities of his calling, didn't he? That is why he headed west, away from God, away from Israel, and away from Assyria —just as fast as that boat could take him. This shows how shallow and how desperate Jonah's thinking was, because God is the God of the whole earth, whose awareness of what is going on is so complete that even a sparrow cannot die without His notice. And so God's plans and Jonah's plans clashed. But Jonah was still free to make wrong choices and attempt to gum up the works for a period of time. This begins to show us that there is a type of planning that is condemned in the scripture. We see this in the book of James, chapter 4, beginning in verse 13 and concluding in verse 16.

James 4:13-16 Go to now, you that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas you know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away. For what you ought to say, if the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now you rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.

This is directly addressed to people who make ordinary business plans. However, in the spirit, in the principle that is contained here, it includes all

who make plans in the ordinary business of life regardless of whether one is a businessman. James is not condemning planning in general, but he is condemning presumptuous planning that does not take the seriousness of the purpose of God, and of His sovereignty, and of His love for our well being into account in the planning.

Jesus warns in Matthew 24 that in the days before the flood people were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, and giving in marriage up until the day the flood came and took them all away. These people are a classic example of people who made plans and lived as though God did not exist. They just went along in their lives, doing the normal things, even though the world was getting ready to crash around their ears.

There was a time in the history of this nation that there was enough awareness of God, and enough respect for Him as well, that people commonly verbalized "*If the Lord will*" when discussing their plans with another person. We have gone downhill a long way since then. However, James is not advocating just a certain manner of speaking or verbalizing something that one may not really believe in at all. Rather, he is teaching an attitude of heart—an attitude that springs from a solid awareness of and a belief in, and a submission to God—to be overriding sovereign control of God in every area of life. What James is doing here is warning people of their disregard of God. James mentioned a scripture there that he quoted actually out of Proverbs 27:1

Proverbs 27:1 Boast not yourself of tomorrow; for you know not what a day may bring forth.

The word "boast" there is instructive, because it implies that God is not being taken into account, and so, "*I'm going to do this, and that, and the other thing,*"—something that just comes off the top of one's head without ever thinking that maybe God might have different plans. It's entirely possible that God is so far from these people's thinking that He never even enters into the thoughts of their plans. But God should *never* be far from our thoughts regarding our plans.

People talk about the future with absolute certainty sometimes. Church members do this with prophecy as though they know perfectly the mind of

God. Brethren, they're talking of things over which they have no control. This exposes the issue regarding sovereignty. It is *control*. This issue with sovereignty is control.

James is not teaching an irresponsible fatalism either. Despite what Doris Day sang in that movie, our life does not consist of "*what will be will be*, so why make plans or exert any effort at all to carry them out?"

James 4:15 shows it is actually an encouragement to plan. After what he said in verses 13 and 14, James said: "For what you *ought* to say [is] "*If the Lord will.*" He is saying, "*Go ahead and plan, but don't leave God out of your plans.*" Always have that little caveat in there—"If the Lord will." Planning is to be done always with God being central to our planning.

In regard to planning, there are two extremes. One is an irresponsible fatalism, which Islam for instance seems to advocate, which determines that one not plan at all, thus eliminating free moral agency. Then there is an equally irresponsible approach in which one makes plans—a lot of plans—but leaves God out as of no consequence to one's life. Neither one of these approaches hits the biblical truth. Turn to I Corinthians 10:30-31.

I Corinthians 10:30-31 For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks? Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God.

This thought needs to be part of all of our planning because here is the aim of *all* of our activities in life simply and clearly stated. Everything that we do is to be done for the glory of God.

We already saw that Paul planned to do this and that, and that James is saying in his instruction regarding planning that we should make every effort to show in our planning that accomplishing them is still dependent upon God's will. The overall theme of the book of James is in regard to faith—*living faith*. Living faith takes God into account. That's what James is teaching here. Living faith takes God into account in every activity of life,

including planning. Living faith's focus is always to show its reliance on God to guide the planning, even though the person will use all human means at his disposal to both plan and carry out those plans.

To living faith, God is never out of the picture because it always wants to please Him. Even though living faith knows that it is free to plan, it also acknowledges that even though it has made reasonable effort to carry out the plans, there are going to be times when God has His own good reasons for thwarting them. We may be pure before God in the plans that we make, and that there is nothing unrighteous about the plans that we have made, and that we have been careful to consult Him in prayer regarding the making of these plans, but He still stopped them, not because we've been evil, but simply because He has something else planned. Now what does one do in that case?

Living faith will submit in humility, and trust in Him, because it knows God's love, and understands that there are purposes being worked out in the larger scheme of things that are for the time being unknown to him. So living faith works together with God, all the while humbly acknowledging God's overriding sovereignty in all things.

One who has this faith knows that even though he has done his best to plan wisely, his plans are still at best imperfect and sometimes his choices are bad choices. He may not know that his choices are bad choices, and be going forward in the fulfilling of his plans with a completely free heart—mind pure and clear—and God stopped it dead in its track because God knows something that is down the road that he doesn't know.

Those with living faith will not get upset. They may wonder, they may question, but they will also humbly submit, because they know God. He is sovereign. He is in control, and that is what they are submitting to. They are submitting to His control, His love, His foreknowledge, and their knowledge of Him. Those who have this faith will also know that God, with His sovereign wisdom and power, can even work around those bad choices and still find a way to accomplish His sovereign will.

Look what God did with Jonah. He even appointed a fish to swallow Jonah so that he would be narrowed in, vomited up on the shore, probably pale as a ghost, and maybe his skin beginning to be eaten away and him thinking, "I

don't like this very well, but I'd better do it." God got His way, without ever taking Jonah's free moral agency away from him. That's what a good parent does. A good parent narrows in the child's choices. He hedges them in. So God can work around our bad choices, or even good choices that ordinarily would be fulfilled by Him, but He knows that other things are taking place and He will not permit it. His will cannot be thwarted or frustrated by our bad choices, again as the book of Jonah shows.

We have to go a little bit beyond this. I want us to look at another scripture that I have referred to in this series on God's sovereignty a couple of times. But this time I want us to look at it in a larger context, because the larger context involves us being caught in the malicious plans of others. It's not our plans this time, it's somebody else's plans, and we get caught in it.

Matthew 10:28-31 And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground with out your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear you not therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows.

Jesus was addressing those followers of His who were being threatened by death because they were Christians. Of course, the principle comes right on down to our day. One day we may have to face this. Jesus used the term farthing (or penny) to indicate a trifling amount. Think about this. Stretch your mind a little bit and think about the vastness of this universe that God has created. Our minds can hardly encompass even the vastness of the earth let alone the earth and all of the planetary system that is out there, and being warmed by our sun.

Beyond that, the next nearest star is some 4 light-years away. Traveling at the speed of light of 186,000 miles per second for 4 years, you finally get to the next star. Of what value is a sparrow? It is so trifling when seen against the vastness of God's creation, let alone the vastness of the earth, and God sees a sparrow fall, and makes a decision.

Most of you know that every morning I go out for a walk. I have walked in cities and countrysides all over this nation in Evelyn's and my travels. I

walked over in France, in Amsterdam, and in South Africa. You would be surprised at the places that I find pennies. I mean sometimes I find pennies in places that you would not think a penny would have any business being. I'm not talking about places in the city. I'm talking about places in the country where there are not even any houses around, and there I am walking, concentrating, praying, or whatever it happens to be, and I find a penny. Do you know what goes through my mind? I am thinking, "*How did that penny get there?*"

In a city I could understand that I could be walking through a parking lot and would see a penny on the ground that apparently rolled out of somebody's pocket when the person took his keys out, pulling the penny out with it. The penny clicks on the ground and the person doesn't even hear it. Or maybe the person does hear it, but it is so trifling to him. The person sees it roll out onto the ground and he doesn't even stoop to pick it up. I pick up every penny I find. God is aware, at least in the comparison here, of a penny that falls, called "sparrows" here.

There is a point to this that is very important to our faith, because He then goes on to say that every hair on our head is numbered. Do you understand what that means? The average head has 140,000 hairs on it. Jesus said they are all numbered. What He said there is given in the sense, "*This is number one. This is number six. This is number two thousand thirteen.*" He is saying that every one of those hairs is not only numbered, it has an identity to God. He *knows* it. Let that sink in a while!

What He is saying here is, "*Are not you more valuable than a sparrow?*" "*Aren't you worth more than a penny?*" He has every one of His children identified. He knows us inside and out, upside and down. He knows our mind. He knows our thoughts. He told us through David that He knows what we're going to say before we say it. Does that not provide a position for control? It's not mere power just to control, but this power and this knowledge is in the mind of a Being who loves us. Even the most insignificant details of our life are known to Him.

We can look at that negatively and say, "*Boy! I can't do anything but the Old Man is right on top of me there.*" But that's not the way it is. Yes, He's on top of the situation, but it's not that He's out to get us, except into His Kingdom.

You can see really how He worked with Jonah. He put him through the mill because Jonah should have known better as a prophet of God. "To whom much is given, from him much is required." But Jonah still came out of it alive.

God is aware of the most insignificant detail of our lives. Both illustrations are given to show us that God's sovereignty is not merely in the broad areas of managing His creation. He doesn't leave the smaller details of our lives to chance or to luck. Sometimes God's detailed oversight is revealed in, to me, eyebrow-raising situations.

The time when I went through Isaiah 5, I didn't pick up on this before, but in Isaiah 5:26-27, He is describing how the Assyrians are going to be coming into the land, and He says:

Isaiah 5:26 And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly.

Now listen to this detail.

Isaiah 5:27 None shall be weary nor stumble among them: none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken.

He is saying that not even a shoe tie of theirs is going to become unglued and break. Is that paying attention to detail, or what? Not even a single shoelace! Now is God just using hyperbole, or does He mean what He says? How many of you are willing to take a chance that He doesn't really mean what He says in any area of His book? He either means it, or He doesn't, and it is impossible for Him to lie. What we see is the thoroughness with which His sovereignty penetrates. Nothing is left to chance. Details are important.

You might remember the poem, "*For the Want of a Nail.*"

*"For the want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For the want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For the want of a horse the rider was lost.
For the want of a rider the battle was lost.*

...all because a nail came out of the horse's shoe.

Now why does it have to be this way? Because every major event, whether of history or in our seemingly insignificant lives, is made up of tiny details. Details affect outcome. God is messing around with His children, and He wants their lives to turn out right.

So what Jesus is assuring us there in Matthew 10 is that God doesn't leave the details of our lives to chance. There are many many circumstances in life that are calculated by Satan to make us afraid, and if God is not in sovereign control, then Jesus' words are meaningless. We could never trust God.

It's of little comfort to know that God loves us if we do not understand that He is also in control of the events of our lives. Do you understand that knowing this very fact is what enables us to trust God? If God weren't this way, there would be times that it just wouldn't work because God had His back turned. There is never a time that God misses something because His back is turned, or some other more important thing that He is working on distracts His attention. If that is not so, we could never really be sure of Him. He would be just like us.

Sometimes we're good. Sometimes we're bad. Sometimes we can be trusted, and sometimes we can't. That's not the way it is with Him. If it's not this way, everything with Him would be a hit-or-miss proposition, and so the kind of faith shown by the heroes of the Bible would be an impossibility. Our lives are not subject to chance, to luck, or to the whims of nature, or the malevolent plan of the actions of evil people.

John 19:10-11 Then said Pilate unto him, Speak you not unto me? Know you not that I have power to crucify you, and have power to release you? Jesus answered, You could have no power at all

against me except it were given you from above: therefore he that delivered me unto you has the greater sin.

Jesus revealed to Pilate that Pilate's authority had been delegated by the Creator, and if God did not want Jesus put to death He would not have been put to death. Now do you think that this proposition applied to Christ only? Brethren, it applies to every part of the body of Christ. The principle applies to all who are being used to carry out some portion of God's work, and that includes you and me.

Many people are prepared to accept that God's sovereignty extends over nature and impersonal circumstances such as shoelaces. But nature doesn't have a will of its own, and so nature isn't free to make a choice, but other people, including evil people, *are* able to make choices.

We're going to go back to the Old Testament again, to Exodus 3:21.

Exodus 3:21 And I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall come to pass, that when you go, you shall not go empty.

That is a promise given to the Israelitish people through Moses, that when these slave people were free from their captivity to Egypt they were going to leave Egypt a wealthy nation. What I want you to see here is that the Egyptians didn't like the Israelites at all. In one sense it's very easy for them to blame the Israelites for all of the troubles that came upon them because it was the Israelites' God that was doing all this. They couldn't strike that God, but they could sure hate and strike the Israelites. Their head man, Pharaoh, was a pretty recalcitrant person. He was stubborn and hardheaded and represented the mind, the thinking, of the overwhelming majority of the Egyptian people. But here is God saying, *"I'm going to give you favor to this whole nation by these people who hate you right now."* So God is going to affect the thinking and the attitude of an entire nation.

Exodus 11:1-3 And the LORD said unto Moses, Yet will I bring one plague more upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go hence: when he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust

you out hence altogether. Speak now in the ears of the people, and let every man borrow [ask, demand, request] of his neighbour, and every woman of her neighbour, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold. And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people.

That is in there to show you and me they were doing something that they ordinarily would not have done. But God pushed the button in their mind, and made them (the Egyptians) give of their wealth freely.

Exodus 12:35 And the children of Israel did according to the word of Moses: and they borrowed [asked] of the Egyptians jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment.

Why the translators used the word "borrowed" here I have no idea. The Egyptians *owed* them that money for all the work they had done as slaves.

Exodus 12:36 And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they lent unto them such things as they required. And they spoiled the Egyptians.

God used His powers to give the Israelites favor. Again, is that something that only applied to the Israelites in Egypt, or is it possible today that God can give *us* favor in the eyes of even our enemy? He says in the Proverb that He will do that, but we're not going to go to that one. How about Ezra? Let's go to Ezra 1:1.

Ezra 1:1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing.

Ezra 9:9 For we were bondmen; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage, but has extended mercy unto us in the sight of the

kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

The word *kings* in this verse is plural. God gave the Israelites favor so that they were enabled to do that.

Psalm 106:46 He made them also to be pitied of all those that carried them captives.

Israel went into captivity, but God gave them favor in the eyes of their captors. There are many who consider Psalm 106:46 to be a prophecy of the future. And who knows? It may apply to many many Israelites. Let's look at a specific example of this in Daniel 1:9.

Daniel 1:9 Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender *love* with the prince of the eunuchs.

Brethren, the evidence of God's sovereignty over the minds of men is all through this book. There is a place in the Proverbs that says that God can make our enemies be at peace with us. I'm going to show you an outstanding one in just a little bit. Are you beginning to see why Jesus said, "*Don't be afraid*"? Our God's power is awesome.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turns it whithersoever *He* will.

A modern translation of this verse is: "*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.*" One commentator said: "*The general truth of God's sovereignty over the hearts of all people is taught by the strongest illustration: God's uncontrollable sway upon the most absolute of all wills—the king's heart.*" The stubborn will of the most powerful ruler on earth is directed by God as easily as a farmer directs the flow of water in an irrigation ditch.

The idea we are supposed to get from this is that if God can control the king, He can surely control anybody else. God could subdue Nebuchadnezzar and

turn him into almost an animal with the snap of His fingers. The man who threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the fire was a tough man to convince until seven years living like an animal he finally learned that God rules. That guy was more stubborn than Jonah.

God's power that is working in our behalf does not leave even one iota of room for irresponsibility. Turn to Romans 6:1 to see what Paul says here.

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

Romans 6:14-15 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under the law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid!

We are absolutely not to sin that grace may abound. We are responsible to this powerful God to be obedient, to be diligent, and to be prudent. We are to repent with all of our being when we do sin. But when we have done all our best, we should know that our life and our prosperity are ultimately in God's hands, not men's. God can, and He does, move people at His will to reach the end of His purposes.

There is a very beautiful and powerful promise that He gives to each and every one of us when we keep His feasts. Turn to Exodus 34:23-24.

Exodus 34:23-24 Thrice in the year shall all your menchildren appear before the Lord GOD, the God of Israel. For I will cast out the nations before you, and enlarge your borders: neither shall any man desire your land when you shall go up to appear before the LORD your God thrice in the year.

In order to grasp the significance of this, we have to go back in thought to Israel dwelling in the land of promise, and again parallel that as if it were happening in the United States of America, or in Canada, or in South Africa, or wherever the Israelites dwell. When the Israelitish people went to keep the

feast, whether to Shiloh or Jerusalem—to wherever the tabernacle or temple was located—the entire nation was virtually abandoned while the people journeyed to those locations.

Three times in a year, and perhaps for periods of time as long as a month, virtually everything in the nation—all of its commerce, its educational institutions, its entire military and security personnel—shut down. Now think how vulnerable a nation would be during those three times in a year. God holds such sway over the minds of men that nobody in the surrounding nations would so much as even covet or desire anything in Israel, let alone think to invade with their army and take it over.

God can do that because He is in sovereign control over every detail. He has the power to restrain people from even desiring to harm us. It's obvious that God does not always restrain the desires and the actions of the wicked, does He? He does not, so that's why we find psalms like Psalm 73, and I want you to turn there. This is a Psalm of Asaph. (Psalm 37, written by David, parallels Psalm 73.)

Psalm 73:1-12 Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart. But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasses them about as a chain; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth. Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. And they say, How does God know? And is there knowledge in the most High? Behold, these are the ungodly who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.

We all know that not only do the wicked (at times) prosper, they prosper greatly. Sometimes that prosperity lasts from generation to generation. There are times when we have been victims of other people's malicious behavior.

Sometimes that malicious behavior comes from fellow brethren in the form of gossip, slander, and even other hurtful actions.

There is a familiar example that covers and provides a clear and true explanation. Let's go back to Genesis 45:1-8.

Genesis 45:1-8 Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren. And he wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; does my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two year has the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.

This statement takes place when Joseph first reveals himself to his brothers. And then it repeats itself again a second time in Genesis 50:14.

Genesis 50:14-21 And Joseph returned into Egypt, he, and his brethren, and all that went up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father. And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him. [They knew they were guilty.] And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Your father did command before he died, saying, So shall you say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray you now, the trespass of your brethren, and their sin; for they did unto you evil: and now, we pray you, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.

And Joseph wept when they spoke unto him. And his brethren also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold, we be your servants. And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore, fear you not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them.

This second occasion takes place following Jacob's death, and the brothers feared that Joseph was, up to that time, at peace with them only out of respect for their common father, Jacob. The Bible does not state when Joseph understood God's hand in the very frightening and hurtful things that happened to him. Probably it was sometime shortly after he saw them for the first time, and he immediately began testing his brothers. Regardless of when it was, understand he did.

If we do not understand the same reality that Joseph expresses here, life can be a miserable mess of endless pain, always with us, seeking to apply blame. If all that is happening to us is not within God's view, His purpose and control, and therefore an expression of His will, how then can He be the almighty, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and trustworthy God? The answer is, He can't. How then can we truly have peace and trust Him, and be assured (despite the way things look, and the pain that we feel on the path that we have chosen to follow Christ) it is going to be worthwhile in the end?

What we have just gone through, in this section of the sermon, is that this ultimately means that God is in control of our pain and suffering too. It means that there is no such thing as pain without purpose for a child of God. Believing in the sovereignty of God can be, and it should be, an impregnable rock to cling to. All evil is subject to God, and evil cannot touch us unless He permits it. We are *not* at the mercy of people who intend to harm us, even though humanly it may seem so. We must understand that our believing this does not make it so, but the peace and trust God intends we have of Him is *dependent* upon us believing.

Those who believe God is in control can take courage and have hope in the fact that God is working in and through their pain and their suffering for their ultimate good. This is where the promise of Romans 8:28-29 applies. None of what I have said is of any leeway to be irresponsible for not acting prudently in every situation—acting as prudently as we possibly can.

John 7:1 After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him.

John 7:30 Then they sought to take him: but no man laid hands on him because his hour was not yet come.

Brethren, there was nobody who ever lived who was as confident of the sovereignty of God in His life as Jesus. Verse 1 in John 7 tells us that Jesus did not act carelessly. He took steps to avoid danger whenever He needed to, and we must do the same. He counsels us in Matthew 10:23 that "If they persecute you in one city, **flee** to another." We don't have to stand there and take it, unless God wills. Jesus is saying, "*Don't be irresponsible. Act prudently.*" The book of Proverbs is filled with counsel for making prudent choices.

Why would Proverbs even be in the Scripture if God didn't expect us to choose prudently? There is no room for fatalism for those who follow Jesus Christ. Always, in every circumstance, God is striving to teach us discernment, wisdom, judgment, and the knowledge and understanding of God's will. He is teaching us to have the vision of the complex sequence of cause-and-effect relationships so that we might choose the right way. Why? Because these are qualities that kings and priests need for the exercise of their responsibility.

Despite the way things look in this world, we do not live in a world run amok and out of control. The more limited our knowledge and faith in God's sovereignty is over the affairs of this world, the greater our fear that things are out of control and are hopeless. See, the more limited they are.

God's sovereignty is of great help in most circumstances over which we exercise no control. Do we know Him, and do we trust Him to oversee not only the outcome of our life, but also to secure the best for us in each and every circumstance of it? That is the heart and core of the sovereignty issue to you and me.

You can look in Job 37 and you will find in that chapter that God is in control of the weather; Satan is not. God is. Satan can only do God's bidding. Brethren, the major issue in the sovereignty subject is not predestination. That is a part of it. It is omnipotence, power, and control, wisdom, and love, all of which should produce, in us, trust. God is over all. He rules this vast creation, and all of the forces of nature, and all of its beings, whether angelic or human. He rules and He superintends all of the cultures and populations of every nation on earth, and God shows that this superintending extends all the way down to sparrows and the hairs on our head.

Lamentations 3:37 is one of the scriptures that got me started on this subject. It was in Lamentations that bells began to go off in my mind. "Ding! Ding! Ding!"

Lamentations 3:37-39 Who is he that says, and it comes to pass, when the Lord commands it not? Out of the mouth of the most High proceeds not evil and good? Wherefore does a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?

Let me give you this in a modern translation. That version was rather poorly translated. "*Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?*"

Mr. Armstrong taught us repeatedly that the overall issue in life is government. The Bible, from beginning to end, is showing us over and over again from every possible angle who it is that we must use our free moral agency to submit to. It is *we* who must trust and take hope, because our

spiritual Father not only governs, but also is in absolute control. It is *we* who must repent and obey *His* laws, not man's cultures, and not our own recalcitrant, stubborn, uncooperative and perverse will.

Turn now to Romans 8:35 and we will end on this scripture.

Romans 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For your sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Belief in the absolute sovereignty of God is of little comfort if we do not also believe just as strongly in His infinite love and His unfathomable wisdom. But it is also equally of little comfort to believe in the love of God if we do not also believe in His sovereignty. We are assured here that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Yet, if God is not in control of every circumstance of our lives, then we can be separated from His love.

Consider this simple little illustration. If your child—somebody that you love with all of your being—is drowning, your love is of no value in saving him if you can't swim. If you don't have the power to swim, your love is not going to save that child.

The point is simple: God can swim. In every situation He has the power to save and to deliver. That is why Jesus said, "*Don't be afraid*," and why Paul said to give thanks in all circumstances. Without God being in control, as shown by the sovereignty doctrine, we have nothing realistic to base our faith and hope in. This doctrine is just that important.