

Chapter 7 God's Sovereignty

The Struggles of Praying, Fasting, and Waiting

As Americans, we have ideals that can blind us from biblical truths. We encourage independence and honor the guts of trail blazers. We have been taught that we don't need anyone to succeed. The thought of being sent out by the Holy Spirit under the authority of a group of believers who are regularly fasting and praying isn't often considered. And the notion of waiting, for anything, in our instant gratification culture is foreign to many if not most of us.

Shortly after Jesus chose His first disciples, He gave them clear and basic instructions in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 how to condition their hearts to optimize their relationship and communication with the Holy Spirit. Those instructions included praying and fasting. Anyone that practices these disciplines regularly knows how difficult such a lifestyle sometimes is. And as far as waiting goes – even Jesus did not start His public ministry until He was thirty. The only valid reason why He waited was because it was His Father's sovereign will. He also wanted us to have a perfect example to follow.

Why Wait for a Sovereign Sending?

After closing the soup kitchen I went and submitted my spiritual future to the English-speaking Union Church and was asked to disciple young men. We studied the book of Romans together and learned from the bible teacher, Kay Arthur, to use S's to remember the book: Sin (Chapters 1-3:23), Salvation (Chapters 3:24-5), Sanctification (Chapters 6-8), Sovereignty (Chapters 9-11), and Service (Chapters 12-16). For many years, I thought God had made a confusing and illogical mistake when He put teaching on His sovereignty in this sequence. Eight years later after I returned to the states I taught Algebra and my students learned the order of operations from the first letter in each word of the phrase; "Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally." So, using PEMDAS, the order of operations when evaluating a mathematical expression, is to do parenthesis first, followed by exponents, multiplication, division, addition and subtraction. If you attempt to solve a problem using any other order, you most likely will not arrive at the correct answer.

At first glance, including the sovereignty of God in the sequence presented in the book of Romans would make about as much sense as placing the trigonometry function cosine after division. I apologize if you aren't a math person, but if you are, then you get my point. It really

doesn't make any sense.

It seems logical, especially to new born again zealots, after we have recognized our sin, been saved from it, and are being sanctified, we are ready to start a ministry. We are commanded to reproduce. But just as in Algebra, not following the order of operations for evaluating a mathematical expression, we will never arrive to our sovereign assignments unless we follow God's divine order for being sent. So what does the sovereignty of God have to do with it all?

Sovereignty Gets the *When* Right

When discussing the sovereignty of God, I sometimes use the example of driving exactly the speed limit so that I don't to get to my destination too early or too late. Although it may not be a perfect analogy, obeying the speed limit allows me to get the *when I arrive* right. In the same way, waiting for the sovereign release by the Holy Spirit, will get the *when* right. Take Abraham – he received the promise of a son at the age of seventy-five. We know he and his wife came up with a different plan after waiting ten years to fulfill what an angel had said to him. His plan was a pretty good plan.

Once we are born-again, God places promises in our hearts. The normal zealot begins to use his or her abilities, intellect and talents to achieve those promises. To quote a precious sister in the Lord,

“After men get saved then they want to work their a*#@# – off!”

God didn't stop Abraham's efforts. In fact, not a single word of rebuke is offered in the text, even though I have heard many inserted by well-meaning preachers. It is possible that part of the divine sanctification process for those that live by faith, is for us to exhaust our best in fulfilling God's will. But when God is ready to carry out His will, it is all Him. We won't discontinue a ministry He wants to continue. The work is supernatural – and everyone involved knows it.

When God told Israel to take the promise land; nothing stood in its way except Israel itself. They had clear direction by day or by night. They walked on dry ground through the middle of a sea and walls fell down by themselves. Knowing sovereignly God is with us, is more powerful than any circumstance, persecution or obstacle.

Biblical Waiting

Biblical waiting is not static, or passive. A man or woman of God who has, in secret, built an Isaiah 58 life of fasting and praying, and continually set their hearts to follow and are growing in what Jesus taught in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, is probably one of the most dangerous Christian to the kingdom of darkness. Add spiritual maturity, and he or she is ready to be a guide. And once a group of people like this join forces, great biblical things happen. In Acts 13, God recorded the humble believers at the Antioch church who were obeying the basics laid out by Jesus. The Holy Spirit spoke with great clarity, and, confirmed through many, His desire for a ministry to begin.

Satan knows we are born as proud and independent people, so he preys on the individual Christian who refuses to work within the body of Christ. He also hates zeal, and if can't quench it, he will definitely try to isolate it, and then, misdirect it.

Lost Zealots for a While

We lost two young men to a movement called "The Brotherhood". The requirement was to sell everything they had and join the amoeba-like group that supposedly rejected all the comforts of the American dream. They lived in tents and would find a friend and camp in his yard and leach food, water and sanitary services until they became unbearable and were asked to leave. They preached on campuses and promoted their simple lifestyle.

Our dear young brothers were won because they were sold out converts who had enough discernment to reject most of organized Christianity and saw "The Brotherhood" as the most biblical alternative available. As leaders we must repent and fully restore all the spiritual disciplines and basic teachings taught by Jesus so that our young converts have a living example how to lay a foundation that will hold their calling and defeat all enemies! We must teach them to wait for the voice of the Almighty General and provide a leadership team with heart's sensitive to His voice to hear and affirm their assignments.

Sovereignty Gets the *Who* Right

The Holy Spirit sent Paul and Barnabas. I'm sure there were plenty of believers to choose from and who wanted to go because the church had been around for some time. But only God knew who was ready, had the gifting, and had the relationship with Him to carry out His will. He knew who He wanted to send and declared it.

Proof that God Sent

2 Corinthians 12:12 gives us insights to the apostolic graces necessary to start a new work. “The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance.” Then, God gave the reason why in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5. “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words (a charismatic speaker for example or a moving video presentation although in and of themselves are not bad), but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”

God does not want to start new works without the supernatural because then everything is based on words. God constantly called Israel to remember the miracles He performed. That is what He was doing in the Corinthian Church through Paul. Remembering the miraculous in our lives sustains us in times of trials, persecution, spiritual droughts, or just the daily mundane routines of life, but most importantly that God was supernaturally (sovereignly) involved.

Proof that Jesus Sent

At the end of Matthew 9, Jesus had been going through all the towns and villages teaching and preaching, and “he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36) More workers were needed for the harvest. “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” He said. (verse 38, the final verse of the chapter 9).

Apparently the apostles asked for workers, and then, “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matthew 10:1). Nobody could doubt they were called and sent by Jesus because of the miracles that took place shortly thereafter.

Who Would You Rather Follow?

I do know of a very large Christian organization that requires all leadership to regularly pray and fast. They are called a cult by many for their radical demands placed on and by leadership. But, let’s be brutally honest. Who would you rather have leading you – a man that prays five minutes a day (which I was told as a new believer was the national average for those in Christian leadership) and almost never fasts, or one who

spends two or three hours a day in his closet praying and fasts a couple times a week. For those who know the clarity and passion that often accompanies that kind of lifestyle, the question is easily answered. But those who draw mostly on the world's system of leadership, they have no grid to compare.

Am I saying, then, that direction in a body of believers should come from a group of men (and women) who spend hours each day praying (or just the temptation-preventing hour Jesus taught us about in Matthew 26:41) and regularly fasting? The truth is, I am. You might object, thinking it is too radical or old fashioned. But just because many of us in developed nations do not seek God's help and direction in that way, doesn't mean the rest of the world operates the same way. We are no longer a good model for Christianity. Anyone who has spent years in third-world countries knows this.

Seeking, finding, and staying in God's will was the reason Jesus gave His new followers the simple and basic practices to seek, find, and stay in it.

Disciplines are Essentials for Victory

Those of us who have been in the military understand what basic training is all about. Your individualistic mindset, and biased beliefs, and poor physical conditioning must be broken down and rebuilt until you are selfless, unbiased, and physically prepared to operate as a powerful unit. We are taught the echelon of command, how to respect that order and work through it, physical conditioning, the use of weapons, and much more. It is not like a college hazing initiation and once you go through it you are an accepted member. We are equipped with the critical foundations of victorious warfare and we are expected to obey and practice what we learn every single day we serve.

Jesus laid out the Christian basics training in the Sermon on the Mount. Eternal battles and victories are achieved by following closely the strategies and instructions of our heavenly General Jesus.

Change the Sermon on the Mount Name

I personally would like to change the name. The first word I would eliminate is Sermon. For some it implies what we listen to Sunday after Sunday and many times goes in one ear and out the other. Have you ever been asked to comment on the message at lunch, and had to rack your brain to remember something? To others it causes them to yawn, get sleepy, or think of

their favorite restaurant. I also would choose another word besides mount because it implies ground that only the super spiritual rock climbers get to practice on. I prefer a name like Do or Die Basics of Christianity... or maybe Daily Routines that Keep the Holy Spirit's Fire Hot for Jesus.

Jesus Teaches Eternal Construction

The security from obeying, and the consequences for disobeying, Jesus' most comprehensive and basics teaching for a life of following, is found in His concluding remarks.

"Therefore everyone who (Luke adds the detail, "comes to me" implying all believers) hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Luke adds, "dug down deep"). The rain came down, the stream rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand (Luke adds, "built the house without a foundation"). The rain came down, the stream rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell (Luke adds, "the *moment* the torrent struck") with a great crash." (Matthew 7:24-27)

On a short term mission trip to Honduras many years later, we built a rather large two-room school building, deep in the jungle. I worked side by side with ten men in the sweltering heat. We used pick axes and shovels to dig meter-deep (3 feet) trenches in hardened clay. My blistered hands and aching body testified to the extreme labor that was necessary to lay a foundation that would resist Mother Nature's best assault. If we hadn't gone to all that effort, and instead built the school on top of the soil, the building would already be in ruins.

Revival Awaits

"Deny," "take up," and "follow" are three flesh destroying verbs, which disciples, empowered by grace and love for Jesus, obey. Most Christians correctly recognize that nothing from God can be earned which is a wonderful truth to embrace fully and completely. But Satan has taken that revelation and caused many to define effort as earning.

Also, because I have had a couple life-changing supernatural events occur in my

thirty plus years of following the Lord, I sometimes fall into what I call a lottery mentality for revival. Instead of practicing the spiritual disciplines regularly, I sit around waiting for the Holy Spirit to turn me into an anointed servant. I expect God to pour out His sovereign manifest presence without any effort on my part. When I repent, and, decide to obey the basics again, God's manifest presence is always restored.

I also find it interesting that Jesus didn't speak about what was built above ground. The structures could have been identical. But Jesus was interested in the unseen part – the part that no one but God would see. “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.” (Matthew 6:1a) Then, He elaborated on three acts to be done consistently (present tense and prefaced with “when you”), and emphasized *in secret*: giving (Mt 6:4), praying (Mt 6:6), and fasting (Mt 6:18).

My Rescue

After the Lord revealed that He had not sent me to Guatemala to start a ministry, and that I needed to shut down my mission there, I confessed my sin and repented. My heavenly Father threw a party in my heart! You would have thought I got saved again. And really, I had been – saved from enduring and persevering in a ministry for thirty, forty, or fifty years that was never His will in the first place.

The scales had dropped from my eyes and I finally understood why many missionaries went home, even though they thought mission work was their life calling. I began to ask hard questions to many who had left their homeland to serve in Guatemala. Their answers were as varied as people's imagination, but I never heard one of them say they acted after the Holy Spirit had spoken through a group of believers.

Contractor Qualifications

Men have constructed beautiful structures over the ages, but the only structures with eternal value are the ones God initiated. Solomon – whose wisdom was greater than any other man's (1Kings 4:30) – knew this. In fact, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote Psalm 127, and *he* was the one God chose to build His temple. The beauty of God's Word is that the same anointing given to Solomon is given to us by the Holy Spirit, if we are willing to obey Jesus' teaching.

Vanity Defined

God used the word “vain” numerous times in the Old Testament. The first instance, and one that should send shivers down our spines, is found in Exodus 20:7, “You shall not misuse (take in vain) the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses (takes in vain) his Name. Those who claim to speak for Him should tremble when proclaiming anything in His name. Should we not also fear applying the same principle to a ministry? The Lord has given us all of the necessary details to ensure we do not. We must diligently seek, believe, and practice them.

We start a work, find financial support from our Christian brothers and sisters, and then ask God to bless what we are doing. We don’t even consider that God is that exact and might not want His name attached to that work. To fear God, is the beginning of wisdom. To believe what He says, and live accordingly, means we build with eternity in mind.

The many other uses of the word “vain” (or vanity) in the Scriptures is translated as: deceitful, worthless, meaningless, futile, and false. Man’s dictionary helps us to further extend our understanding and defines the word as: without purpose, for no reason, and has a foundation of being deceived.

We must not be afraid of the Holy Spirit asking the question, “Is what we are doing from heaven, or from men?” We also must not take the easy way out and say, “We don’t know” when we really do, or we will continue to walk in blindness and never find our sovereign assignment ordained by God.

Repent, and Do It God’s Way

Can you think of a more valuable way to live and serve the Lord than to know without any doubt that your life actions are eternal? Oh body of Christ, let us repent for the time we have spent building our ministries, for all the resources we have used as we did so, and for all the zeal we exhibited without knowledge. Let us throw ourselves before a merciful God and start over again. Let’s relearn the basics of the faith that new Christians practice without ever being told, and start anew.

So what if we prepared and practiced the basics of Christianity until we have such a strong and secure connection to the Source of all we need, no matter what set of circumstances we encounter? What if we waited until the clear and detailed voice of the Holy Spirit names us through others who are like-hearted and trained in biblical warfare? Can you think of anything

more empowering than knowing God is with you? That's how Paul survived beatings, hunger, thirst, nakedness, rejection, sickness, and desertions. He knew *God* had sent him and that suffering was part of the cost of victory. Paul was prepared for the spiritual battle, knew God's grace was sufficient, and had the foundational obedience to Christ's basic teachings to weather the constant storms and trials in his ministry.