

Strategy and Sovereignty

Proverbs 16:1-9

Sunday, August 9, 2020

Turn to the person next to you and in one sentence finish this statement: “If I were king for a day, I would... .”

As Americans, we don’t think much about kings and queens and their ruling authority. But in other parts of the world, there are a number of monarchies that still exist today. So imagine for a moment that for 24 hours you were crowned king or queen for the day. What it would be like if you were granted the throne from now until this time tomorrow. What would your first royal action be?

As we turn once again to the book of Proverbs, our focus is not so much on kings and queens, but on God as our King. We are considering together what it means to declare that God is *sovereign*. What does it mean when Scripture says, for example, that,

“The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19, NIV),

or that,

God “is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15, ESV).

Perhaps an even more pertinent question for us is this: How does the sovereign rule of God relate to our daily decision making and the ups and downs of life? How are we to live in light of the sovereignty of God?

Let’s turn to the passage that was read earlier for us from Proverbs 16. This morning I want to share from this passage *five assurances* about the sovereignty of God. If you’re a notetaker, feel free to jot these down as we work our way through the passage. Once we’ve unpacked this section together, I hope that what we take away above all is this:

Our sovereign God is worthy of our trust.

There really are two parts to that statement: (1) Our God is sovereign, and (2) because he is sovereign, he is worthy of our trust. If we are going to believe the second part of that statement—God is worthy of our trust—then we have to be certain of the first part—God is sovereign. So let’s start there.

In verse 1 of Proverbs 16 we read,

“To humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the proper answer of the tongue” (Proverbs 16:1, NIV).

Another way to say this is that God always gives the right answer. God always has the last word.

Here in verse 1 there is a contrast between the plans that we humans make and the final outcome as determined by God. The point isn't that all human planning is a silly waste of time. I don't think we are to understand from this verse that the plans we make are unreliable because God will likely overturn them.

There is a popular saying that goes, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." There's a grain of truth in this statement. For example, Psalm 2 does speak of God as "the One enthroned in heaven [who] laughs" and "scoffs" at men (Ps. 2:4). However, in the context, God's heavenly laughter is not directed at *all* people, but rather, to "the kings of the earth [who] rise up and the rulers [who] band together against the LORD and against his anointed" (Ps. 2:2).

As we dig into Proverbs 16, our first assurance is *not* that our strategic planning is in the end a foolish exercise. No, the point of verse 1 is to establish the bedrock assurance that **God alone is sovereign**.

God's sovereignty is a truth that is revealed on every page of Scripture. How God demonstrates his sovereignty shows up in different ways in different books of the Bible, but the underlying doctrine of God's sovereignty runs through Scripture from beginning to end. From God as Creator in Genesis 1, to Revelation 21-22 where God the Restorer will one day finally and completely make all things new. Even in the book of Esther, where there is no explicit mention of God in the text, God's sovereign hand was clearly the one guiding Esther's story.

As we read Scripture and see what God has revealed about himself, we deepen our understanding of God's sovereignty. We see that our God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly wise. He is morally perfect, perfectly loving, and always good. We understand that God is eternal, unchanging, and wholly self-sufficient.

"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25, NIV).

The bedrock assurance that we begin with is that God alone is sovereign. Now that we've established that foundation, we can add layer upon layer of assurance as we work our way through the rest of this passage.

As we turn to verses 2 and 3 I want you to imagine yourself stepping onto your bathroom scale. These proverbs say,

"All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the LORD. Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans" (Pr. 16:2-3, NIV).

The harsh reality of life is that the scale never lies. Here we're not talking about our body weight, but the purity of our motives. The text says that when we evaluate our own motives, what verse 2 calls our "ways," we always tip the scale in our favor. We always give ourselves the benefit of the doubt.

Be honest. When you last renewed your driver's licence and you had to list your weight, did you overestimate or underestimate? If I were to ask you how many times you read your Bible this week, do you think you would round up or round down? If you asked me how many minutes I spent in prayer this week, I guarantee you my estimate would come in high. Why? Because we always tend toward self-justification.

I'm not suggesting that we're all a bunch of liars and cheaters, but I can, without hesitation, say that we're all sinners who are bent toward self-deception.

One of the most famous stories that Jesus ever told was the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It's the parable where the Samaritan—the unexpected hero of the story—is the one who showed the kind of compassion and neighborly love that God's law expected. But do you remember what prompted Jesus to preach that parable?

The Gospel writer, Luke gives us the backstory:

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." **But he wanted to justify himself**, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29, NIV).

Our sinful hearts always try to tip the scales in our own favor. But the scales don't lie. When the Apostle John wrote to a group of growing Christians, he reminded them,

"If we claim to be without sin, **we deceive ourselves** and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:8, NIV).

We need a better way forward. Our culture says that when we want to discern what's best we should listen to our hearts. But that's complete garbage! God's word tells us,

"**The heart is deceitful** above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9, NIV).

All of our ways *seem* pure to us, when in fact when God weighs our motives, he finds them wanting. But here's the good news that we can be sure of: **God is sovereign over our self-deceiving hearts.**

Verse 3 says that we are to “commit to the LORD whatever [we] do.” Behind that word “commit” is a picture of someone rolling a heavy object onto something more secure. I’m sure you can picture something in your own life right now that is rather weighty. Maybe there’s a big boulder in your life right now—an unwelcome obstacle or unwanted interruption—and it isn’t going where you want it to. Up to this point, you’ve deceived yourself into thinking that you know the best way to handle it. You’ve pushed and pulled and it’s gone nowhere.

Listen to what the Lord is saying: “Roll that boulder onto me and I, your sovereign God, will establish your plans.” Now, be aware that committing our ways to the Lord does not necessarily mean that the Lord will commit himself to our ways. Remember, we have our plans, but God has the last word (v. 1). Our plans arise from a heart that is always bent toward self-deception (v. 2), but God alone is sovereign. Commit your life to the Lord, and he *will* establish your plans. His plans won’t necessarily be what you had planned, but his plans will always be perfect. And that’s true even when his plans include a path of suffering.

Take a look at verses 4 and 5 where we’re given a third assurance about our sovereign God. **God is sovereign over every act of evil.**

“The LORD works out everything to its proper end— even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished” (Pr. 16:4-5, NIV).

Throughout history people have wrestled with how to reconcile God’s sovereignty with human suffering. Why does God permit evil? Why does God allow suffering? Why doesn’t God do more to fix what’s broken in this world?

Each one of us has at one time sought a specific answer to one of those questions. And while a specific answer is not always available, our passage does assure us that God is sovereign over every act of evil. The text says in verse 4 (NIV) that,

“the LORD works out everything to its proper end,”

or as the ESV translates it,

“the LORD has made everything for its purpose.”

The last quarter of the book of Genesis centers around one person, a man named Joseph. His rollercoaster story of triumph and tragedy began at age seventeen with his brothers’ jealous anger resulting in Joseph being sold into slavery. Over the next 90 years Joseph experienced high highs and very low lows. But throughout Joseph’s story, during times of great blessing and times of great suffering, the Bible says that,

“The LORD was with Joseph” (Gen. 39:2, NIV).

Then one day, after many years apart, Joseph was reunited with his family. By this time God had blessed Joseph to the point where no one in Egypt had more power other than the Pharaoh himself. And when Joseph's brothers—the same brothers who started Joseph on his path of suffering—came to Egypt seeking famine assistance, they heard their brother say to them,

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

Writing to Christians in the city of Corinth, a man named Paul shared a bit of what it was like to serve the Lord Jesus as an apostle.

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:22, NIV).

And yet, this same man when writing to Christians in the city of Rome famously said with great confidence in the sovereignty of God,

“[W]e know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, NIV).

That same idea is there in Proverbs 16:4, that our sovereign God “works out everything to its proper end.” And as that verse continues and then moves into verse 5, we are assured that God is sovereign over every act of evil. We know that this doesn't mean that God sovereignly stops every act of evil in its track or blocks our experience of suffering. God hasn't promised to save the day the way that Superman, Wonder Woman, and your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man have set out to do. No, God has a greater purpose in mind.

Returning to Romans 8:28 it's worth reading a bit more from that passage:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also

called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:28–30, NIV).

If the Lord’s purpose is that we would be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ his Son, then not only is God sovereign over suffering and evil, we can be assured that **God is sovereign over his plan of salvation.**

Proverbs 16 continues in verse 6,

“Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided. When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone’s way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them. Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.”

Though our plans are often focused on the day to day, God has a plan for us that is focused on eternity—our salvation. I’m not looking to get into the weeds here talking about God’s sovereign work as it relates to our faith in Christ. Regardless of how you understand the relationship between God’s sovereign will and the freedom of our will as human beings, there is no doubt that Scripture affirms and assures us that God is sovereign over his plan of salvation.

And here we’re not just talking about God’s sovereign plan in leading a person to salvation. We’re saying that God is sovereignly overseeing your walk with Christ from beginning to end. Going back once more to Romans 8, we can picture God’s sovereign plan of salvation like an unbreakable chain. Consider how God is sovereignly at work in each link of the chain as I read these verses once again.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:28–30, NIV).

It is no exaggeration then to say that our final assurance is that **God is sovereign every step of the way.** Coming back to Proverbs 16, verse 9 serves as a bookend along with verse 1. Verse 9 reads,

“In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps” (Prov. 16:9, NIV).

The verb “to establish” that appears here in verse 9 is the same one that appeared in verse 3. It means more than just that God sets our feet on a path and points us in the right direction. According to this verse, the idea is that our steps are *firmly* established by a sovereign God. Our God is sovereign every step of the way.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that our main take away from Proverbs 16 and from the five assurances that this passage gives about God's sovereignty ought to be this: **Our sovereign God is worthy of our trust.** Simply affirming along with this passage and with the rest of Scripture that God is sovereign won't be enough to properly navigate our path of life. Let these words not only assure you that God alone is sovereign, but that our sovereign God is worthy of our trust. Do you believe this?

Let's pray.