

## **Fully Accepting God's Sovereignty (Part Four)**

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In all of these articles on God's sovereignty, the subject of government has in some way and to some degree been showing us that our responsibility to God within the New Covenant is to yield to it.

We tend to think of "govern" or "government" in the sense of a system or a body of people exercising rule over a state or community. Scripture certainly uses it this way, and so it is in terms of God's government, but it would be better for us to think of it more gently in relation to God. These days, the term "govern" has a rather negative connotation, and it might prove more beneficial to us to replace it with a more positive synonym.

"Govern" is derived from the Latin *gubernare*, which simply means "to pilot, steer, guide, and regulate." That is what we are striving to do under God in this way of life: steer or guide ourselves under and according to God's will. In God's operations among His Family, His exercise of authority is loose enough that we are free to sin. Our liberty is similar to driving a car on a busy, high-speed highway: It requires careful attention, or we can quickly find ourselves in a difficult situation. We are free to crash an automobile too.

With God, our obligation to His government is not largely an overbearing burden but acts as guidance to prepare us for living eternally in His Family. Jesus even states in Matthew 11:30, "[His] yoke is easy and [His] burden is light." However, knowing this does not remove the fact that human nature does not like to be governed, which is largely the source of the burdensome feeling. We feel this burden because we need to be changed.

Romans 13:1-7 provides a general description of God's place in government:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, custom to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

The subject of government in the Bible is indeed extensive. As we begin, notice that Paul writes that "there is no authority except from God" (verse 1). Though this statement appears in relation to civil authority, God's oversight is broad and deep. Even Satan's authority, as god and ruler of this world (II Corinthians 4:4; John 14:30), is assigned by God. Jesus tells Pilate in John 19:11, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above." Those in the church with a position of authority also receive it from God (I Corinthians 12:18, 28). We will cover authority and power below, but these are important statements on God's overall sovereignty.

In verse 2, Paul mentions "the ordinance of God." God's ordinance states His will, and He clearly establishes civil government. Therefore, we are responsible for obeying civil authority also, for in doing so we are obeying God. These verses do not imply that we must always obey civil government. Other verses show that we must obey it as long as the civil authority does not contradict God's laws. In verses 3-4, Paul comes close to stating that the civil authority somewhat parallels the Old Testament "avenger of blood."

In verses 5-7, God extends our responsibilities to submit to government as a means to keep our conscience clear, as well as to pay taxes, not only so the state can afford to employ these civil servants of God, but also to submit to community customs regarding them and even to give them honor.

These seven verses show three general reasons why humans must be governed. First, law-abiding citizens must be protected. Paul's life was saved in Acts 21:30-32 when Roman soldiers stepped in to save him from the murderous intent of angry Jews. Second, evildoers must be restrained. Third, the general welfare is promoted by helping to establish peace. In I Timothy 2:1-3, Paul commands us to pray that this function is carried out.

### **America's Constitution**

The government the Founding Fathers established in America was developed in the late 1700s from a foundation of a combination of rebellion against what they considered oppression by England on one hand and a sincere desire for their perception of liberty on the other.

The people at the core of the revolution were unusually well-educated, particularly in the history of English law and government. They established a Constitution that bears some close resemblances to what God requires of a Christian. When given the opportunity, they established a form of government that provided a great deal more liberty for the individual citizen than any nation before or since has ever enjoyed. The citizens were given a government with very few regulations.

Religiously, the men who crafted the Constitution were a cross-section of the nation's more prosperous people. America had been colonized primarily by emigrants from England who sought a better life through religious freedom, and the families of such colonists produced quite a number of the men who framed the Constitution. As products of the Protestant Reformation, Protestant doctrine and the desire for freedom from the Catholic Church dominated their spiritual thinking, which produced concepts that promoted individual liberty. Thus, they laid the foundations for what became known as the American Dream, the Protestant work ethic, and personal prosperity.

The framers of the Constitution understood that the liberties it gave were not only historically unprecedented but also somewhat risky in terms of public peace. Why? The answer contains a parallel to our responsibilities within our relationship with God. For the American Constitution to work, it required a citizenry that wholeheartedly believed in it and was voluntarily and religiously inclined to govern *itself* according to its precepts. The Constitution did not give the federal government much authority to enforce its laws, and among its laws, it contained very few detailed regulations.

Thus, John Adams, one of the foremost and outspoken of the framers, who followed George Washington as president, said: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." He also said, "[T]he people . . . have a right, an

indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, I mean, of the characters and conduct of their rulers." The Constitution requires a truly self-governed citizenry. The nation would prosper in peace as long as the citizens did so.

In like manner, God requires of us that we respect His sovereignty and show Him that we will govern ourselves within the framework of His laws. I Thessalonians 2:11-12 emphasizes this: "As you know how we exhorted, and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would have a walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." It is no wonder that Paul tried so hard to stir them up. Considering how many Israelites failed in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, it sometimes seems incredible that anyone will make it into God's Kingdom. There are reasons why so many failed. It was not only a lack of faith, but their lack of faith was the primary reason for so many failing.

Another major reason was that God was not dealing with them regarding eternity. Yes, they made the Old Covenant with Him, and they did it sincerely. However, we have something that they most assuredly did not have, something of value beyond price: God's Holy Spirit along with a personal relationship with Christ. These benefits must be tenaciously guarded.

### **Self-Government and Help from Christ**

God requires that His children make consistent and strenuous efforts to govern themselves. Although "God helps those who help themselves" does not appear in the Bible, it is overall a true principle. Certainly, He will not help those who make no effort at all. What would His reaction have been if the Israelites in the wilderness did nothing but sit? When they fearfully refused to enter Canaan, He added 38 years to their journey as punishment!

James 2 reveals that a living faith works, and most of the effort is expended in submitting to God in obedience, both in doing good and avoiding evil. Can we expect help from our Savior in these areas to bring glory to God? Can we count on Him to bring things to our minds and to instruct and inspire us?

John 6:32-39 contains an encouraging and comforting revelation from Christ about His responsibility and His determination to succeed in completing it:

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing but should raise it up at the last day."

Early in my conversion, I heard Herbert Armstrong say that, overall, the most important subject in the Bible is government. I do not know what he specifically meant by "important" because I cannot remember its context or even if he went on to explain it more fully. It stuck in my mind, however, and the thought would come back from time to time like a song from the past.

I have occasionally meditated on how it applies, and I think he meant that, to the person called into God's creative purpose, learning to govern himself willingly, freely, joyfully, understandingly, sincerely, and purposely to live under and within God's will is more demanding of thought and effort than any other subject.

Jesus says that He came to do God's will. Should that not also be our purpose now? Are we not to follow in Christ's steps? Is that not following the same basic path as our responsibility under the New Covenant to write God's law in our hearts and put on the image of Jesus Christ?

### **Christ Gives Help Through Instruction**

Another familiar scripture is enlightening in this vein: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law" (Proverbs 29:18). *The Living Bible* paraphrases the first phrase, "Where there is ignorance of God the people run wild." For us, that ignorance is gone because of God's calling. We have a prophetic vision, and we discipline ourselves to restrain human nature, to keep it from exercising its will. Thus, we are now governing ourselves as a normal part of life. This has to be, or we will not be prepared for God's Kingdom. We must do as Christ did.

We need to be a people with a sharp vision of where we are headed in life. The gospel tells us why we were born and provides us with detailed knowledge on how to prepare for that goal. The relationship with our God frames these elements into a vision that becomes our goal in life and helps to motivate us to do what is good in God's sight.

Hebrews 11:10 says that Abraham "waited for the city . . . whose Builder and Maker is God." This was a major part of his motivating vision. Hebrews 11:27 tells us that Moses "endured as seeing Him who is invisible." These men followed the vision that formed as a result of their relationship with God and what He taught them. As we walk with Christ, we are led along similar paths.

They believed thrillingly good news that provided them with the motivation to submit their lives to God's will. I Corinthians 9:24-27 shows us Paul's example of what every person who has achieved a great goal has had to learn and do:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Those who achieve must be focused on a goal to a degree given to no other area of life. They must be determined, disciplined, and sacrificial enough to become exceptionally skilled at what they hope to achieve.

However, regarding what we hope to achieve in becoming part of the Kingdom of God, even going all out is not enough! We cannot achieve our goal without Jesus Christ, our sovereign God, Creator, Savior, and High Priest, by whom we are saved because He is alive and oversees our lives. He supplies every need for salvation and sustains us along the way. Salvation is absolutely, totally impossible without help from Him.

## Christ Gives Help Through Spiritual Strength

John 15:1-6 deals with the productivity achieved in our lives after conversion begins. This teaching begins to make abundantly clear how much we need Him.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for *without Me you can do nothing*. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. (Emphasis ours.)

Interestingly, what Jesus teaches in John 6—which also shows how much we need Him—occurred fairly early in His ministry. The exhortation here occurs at the end of His ministry, speaking to His disciples following His final Passover observance. He confirms that what the Father desires to be produced in our relationship cannot be produced apart from Christ. This passage is a final admonition for us to make every effort to remain "in" Him, not allowing what just happened with Judas to happen to us. By betraying His Savior, Judas abandoned the responsibility imposed by the New Covenant.

For the moment, consider the beginning of the relationship. We can overlook the arresting fact that, without Jesus paying the penalty for our sins, there would be no future except for death. Without it, there would be no looking forward to a joyous and productive life in the Kingdom of God. In fact, there would be no relationship at all. Without Him providing this for us, there would be no hope at all. Could we pay the penalty for sin and continue living?

Understanding the symbolism Jesus used is helpful in grasping how much we need what Christ did and does. To glean as much as we can from this, we need to tie it to its wider context, Jesus' final Passover with His disciples. Certain references to bread are made as part of Jesus' change of the Passover symbols, which helps to tie the symbolism together with His crucifixion for our forgiveness. Paul writes in I Corinthians 11:23-24:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

In John 6, bread plays an important role. It is frequently used as a metaphor for Christ Himself. I Corinthians 11 clearly ties bread, also named in John 13:18, to the giving of His body in the crucifixion. I Corinthians 11:25-26 adds:

In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying. "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

This second symbol is important to grasping what Christ teaches in John 15:1-6 correctly. The vine He speaks of is obviously the grape vine. He clearly states that He is the vine and that we are the branches attached to Him. Just as grapes can be produced only by a shoot that remains attached to the vine, we can produce spiritual fruit that pleases the Father and thus be in the Kingdom of God only if we remain attached to Jesus Christ. In this illustration, all nourishment that results in fruit must come from the vine. He not only pays the penalty of our sins, but He also supplies the spiritual nourishment to produce fruit that glorifies the Father and prepares us for life in God's Kingdom.

John 8:31-32 reminds us that continuing in His Word is the key to knowing the truth and becoming free. This greatly enhances the production of fruit. Thus, if we fulfill our responsibility, we are in that sense in partnership with Him in performing our duties under the New Covenant. A wonderful additional benefit of remaining in Christ is that those who faithfully fulfill their roles are not gathered up and cast into the fire, as John 16:6 warns.

### **Christ Is Always Present**

John 6:31-40 is an encouraging passage, showing that we are never alone. Therefore, guidance and help in governing ourselves is ever-present as we walk the path toward God's Kingdom.

"Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

These verses give people of faith solemn assurance that Christ is always present in our lives and always willing to help. Jesus makes the ironclad promise in Hebrews 13:5 that He will never leave nor forsake us. A large portion of Jesus' preaching in John 6 is a comparison between food that satisfies a person's hunger and also provides strength and energy to carry out his responsibilities. At the same time, we understand that food enters the body as one eats and becomes a more or less permanent part of the body as the body uses it.

The illustration is drawn from Israel's pilgrimage through the wilderness when God mercifully and miraculously provided food in the form of manna. God produced that daily miracle for the Israelite's benefit so that they could physically make it to the Promised Land, in addition to giving us encouragement by His assurances.

Jesus' concern for us is spiritual, and accomplishing our pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God is the goal we strive for. Producing fruit along the way greatly pleases the Father. Bread symbolizes the means of internal, spiritual strength and energy, whereas the fruit metaphor of John 15 is external,

something seen and produced because the individual uses the spiritual strength and energy drawn from the "bread."

(We may understand Jesus' instruction in this important discourse more clearly if we focus, not on the term "bread" specifically as bread, but more broadly as including a wide range of strengthening and energizing food.)

Jesus begins in John 6:32 by declaring that He is the true bread. In John 13 and I Corinthians 11, bread is specifically used as a metaphor in a different circumstance. Here, bread is figuratively used as the source of spiritual nourishment, strength, and producing fruit by those making the pilgrimage.

The manna is a type of Jesus Christ. It descended, as it were, from heaven, but the Father was the real Giver. Thus, in the wilderness Moses did not literally provide the manna but only gave instructions for its use. The manna indeed satisfied their immediate need for nourishment for physical strength and energy, but by way of contrast, Jesus, the true bread of God, gives *life*, not mere nourishment. Verse 34 shows that the Jews, as with virtually everything else He taught, did not grasp His teaching spiritually.

Thus, in verse 35, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." He explains His mysterious teaching more plainly, essentially saying, "I am the One who both imparts and sustains life." He is, of course, emphasizing spiritual teaching. The Greek shows that He completely identifies Himself with the bread, as it actually reads, "I am the bread of *the* life." It is not mere life but *everlasting spiritual life*. He means that through faith and an intimate, spiritual union and relationship with Him that, as the body assimilates actual bread physically, so spiritual assimilation with Him gives everlasting life (John 6:63).

Continuing in verse 35, He adds that "he who comes to Me"—meaning the one who believes in Christ, coming with nothing but sin and needing everything—will in no way become spiritually hungry or thirsty. In other words, he truly will be fed, unlike those in the wilderness who became hungry. Those who come to Him will be given complete and enduring spiritual satisfaction.

Verse 36—where Jesus says to the Jews, "You have seen Me and yet do not believe"—is interesting in that it shows that God does not hold unconverted man guiltless. Indeed, as soon as a person sins, the death penalty immediately falls on his head. Here, Jesus places the entire blame for the Jews' rejection of Him on them. Why? Because, being of Israel, they should have known better by recognizing the fulfillment in Him of familiar scriptures. Thus, their rejection of Him contained a large measure of deliberateness.

Verse 37 ought to be especially encouraging to us because John 6:44 implies that a calling must be given for fuller understanding of what Jesus is teaching. Obviously, we do understand what He is saying, or we would not be in our present circumstance in relation to Him. Verse 37 is a strong promise that He will make every effort to provide us with salvation.

Verse 38, then, asserts to us that, if God calls a person, it is definitely God's will to do so. It is no mistake or happenstance. God's will is being worked in the called one's life. In verses 39 and 40, Jesus adds that it is the will of the Father, and therefore the Son's also, that all those given to Christ should be resurrected to everlasting life!

### **Christ's Promises Are Sure**

Verses 39-40 are the closest statements regarding a guarantee of salvation as one will see in God's Word. Verse 58 confirms His words, "This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever."

God has appointed Jesus Christ as largely responsible for our salvation. He has already given His life's blood for us so our sins can be forgiven. He has paid the penalty that inhibits us from receiving everlasting life. Once that penalty is paid, the responsibility falls on us to give of our energies to change our lives so that they exhibit consistent obedience.

Whereas in times past we did not care much about our responsibilities to God, it has now become incumbent upon us to be very concerned. In making the New Covenant, we owe submission to the Father and Son, to conform our conduct to agree with theirs. Thus, we will be formed into their image. We must submit to their rule, then, as well as those parts of their rule that they have assigned to others.

Yet another gift has been given to assist us along the way as we begin to yield to God's sovereignty. Jesus says in John 14:15-17:

If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.

Note well that the condition for receiving this gift: We must keep His commandments.

Jesus gives a specific reason for gifting us with the Holy Spirit: that God may be in and with us forever. His wording is very important in this regard. The Holy Spirit is power to be directly in contact with the God Family, but in this case, the way He says it emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is a Person. Though God is Spirit, we must fully grasp that, in this spiritual family relationship, we are dealing with real, living Persons of awesome power, generosity, mercy, and kindness who are willing to deliver us fully into their Family. Verse 23 reveals that the Holy Spirit is the Father and the Son, not a third person in a non-existent Trinity.

However, we live in an age when the vast majority all but ignore Him. Some give Him a measure of lip-service, making an occasional mention of Him. Certainly, the ruling elite and the leaders in government and education openly flout His Word and denigrate Him. Irreverence—the failure to ascribe to the Majesty on high what is due Him—is the hallmark of this age in America.

Many within this nation's leadership are humanistic secularists. At creation, man was made in the image of God, but today, gods have been made in the image and likeness of man. They do not bow before the true God because, to them, men stand at the apex of life on earth, and science is their powerful tool. They worship their own intellect and accomplishments, not even realizing that they are flatly denying the true God's sovereignty, ignorant that they are at the disposal of the Divine Ruler.

Solomon writes in Proverbs 19:21, "There are many plans in a man's heart. Nevertheless the Lord's counsel—that will stand." Men plan what they are going to do and even take steps to fulfill them. Even so, behind the scenes, God is ruling and over-ruling from heaven above, fulfilling His eternal purpose, not only in spite of, but also by means of His enemies.

On the plain of Shinar, men had a plan to make the world one under them. Pharaoh had a plan to keep his slaves. Balak had a plan to curse the Israelites. The Canaanites had a plan to prohibit Israel from settling the land. Saul had a plan to kill David. Jonah had a plan to avoid going to Nineveh. Nebuchadnezzar had a plan to throw three men in the fire. Herod had a plan to kill Jesus.

All failed. Who is sovereign, God or man?

II Chronicles 20:6 records a confident statement by King Jehoshaphat of Judah, one that each of us needs to live by:

O Lord God of our fathers, are You not God in heaven, and do You not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You?

This describes the God who created us, called us, converted us, brought us into His Family, and is preparing us for His Kingdom. He has assured us that He can save us. It is His will to do so, and who can resist His will? Nobody can, for He will accomplish it through Jesus Christ.

Our part is quite small compared to what Christ does, but it is important. We must willingly accept His sovereignty over us and yield in submission so that we will become like Him. God's promises are sure. There is but one realistic conclusion. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose except what is not in the image of God.