

Fully Accepting God's Sovereignty, Part Three: The Fruits

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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This series of articles began with the purpose of helping us prepare for the times just ahead. It is presented in the spirit of Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 of the five wise virgins who made the better use of their time and energies while awaiting Christ's return. Jesus' instruction regarding the sobering events that He predicts in the Olivet Prophecy forms part of the background.

What He says in Matthew 24:13 projects that seriousness: "He that endures to the end shall be saved." Since Jesus spoke this prophecy directly to His disciples, it must be intended primarily as an admonition for His disciples living during the end time. It also indicates that, when compared with the persecution Christians have received all through the times since the church was formed, Christians will have to endure some measure of the Tribulation that Jesus forecasts. Zephaniah 2:1-3 adds:

Gather yourself together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you! Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It *may* be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger. (Emphasis added.)

Some in the church of God today teach that just because a person is part of a certain group, he will escape this wrath. However, the mention of fleeing implies a generality rather than a promise given as an absolute certainty. According to traditions retained from history, all of the apostles except for John suffered violent deaths from persecution.

Are we more deserving of safety than they were? Paul writes in Romans 14:12, "So then, each of us shall give account of himself to God." Revelation 2:23 confirms individual judgment during Christ's evaluation of the Thyatira church, without a doubt part of His church: "I will kill her children with death, and all the church shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works."

We must not allow ourselves to think presumptuously that we deserve to be hidden. God is the Master, and we are slaves bought at a price with Christ's blood. He is the Master Potter, forming and shaping us into the character image of Jesus Christ. If He determines that we need the shaping that Tribulation will bring, then He will not hesitate to set that path before us. If He believes we need to glorify Him before men, He will do the same.

The prophecy in Daniel 11:32 also played a role in motivating this series: "Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." Not only does this show that Christians will undergo intense persecution, but it also shows that they will be doing things to glorify God during that period of testing. God specifically chooses those who know Him to carry out these exploits before men.

In this series, then, we have explored the means that will produce the understanding and traits to prepare us for this eventuality, should God choose us for such an assignment. We are exploring what will help us, not merely to endure the times we live in, but to be prepared to do even more.

Specifically, we will isolate some of the more important positive characteristics that fully accepting God's sovereignty over our lives will produce. Daniel 11:32 mentions one area of growth in particular: We will come to know God with an intimacy not otherwise possible. At the same time, other positive qualities will be added to our lives to bring us ever closer to the true image of Jesus Christ.

To have the clearest and most motivating vision of our invisible God—to the degree that Moses saw God (Hebrews 11:27)—we must discipline ourselves to seek Him actively and consistently as we come to know Him. Unless we give of ourselves in this way, as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), little of these fruits will be produced and become part of our characters.

The Fear of God

The circumstance prophesied in Daniel 11:32 is gradually taking shape on the horizon. Those who know Him and "see" Him are those who so respect and revere Him that they never want to be out of His presence nor disappoint Him. The Bible describes such people as "fearing Him." *Fear* is generally defined as an unpleasant emotion caused by exposure to danger or expectation of lack or pain. Its synonyms include "dread," "terror," "panic," "alarm," and "fright." Though it contains elements of these characteristics, the fear of God is most certainly not dominated by them. This particular quality of fear is not abject terror.

The fear of God centers on worshipful admiration and appreciation. It is a wonder, awe, delight, pleasure, and warm approval of all He is in His Person. It esteems Him above all others because of the awesome, loving mixture of His intelligence, creativity, generosity, wisdom, kindness, patience, and mercy, all within an aura of overwhelming and yet subdued power. These qualities are not ones that a person immediately recognizes, but rather ones that an individual comes to know as the result of experience with Him. His qualities draw a person to God rather than repel him in cringing terror.

Psalms 34:11, a psalm of David, a man after God's own heart, makes a telling statement regarding this fear: "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord." This fear is not natural to man; it is not built into the carnal mind. Human nature will reject it because the carnal mind is enmity with God (Romans 8:7).

Godly fear is a quality of reverence and respect of God that must be learned, and only those whom God calls and converts can learn it, because doing so requires a relationship with Him to come to know Him. The unconverted do not have this relationship. Those who fear God will do great exploits regardless of their human status, great or small. To be in that position, we must make the best use of the relationship that He enables by His calling. We have to respond by seeking Him to remain in His spiritual presence, or we will never learn the fear of God nor have it as part of our characters.

The fear of the Lord is a necessary, foundational plank supporting a life lived in faith. It is a strong influence that drives us toward God and His way, not one that incites us to flee from Him. It is not only foundational to this way of life, it is also a fruit of it, learned and strengthened in the character of those who pay the costs of living by faith. The sons of God live in the present yet always look to

the future in the Kingdom of God, humbly accepting His judgments on their lives. They strive to make good, daily use of His Word. Such people will receive God's spiritual blessings and do exploits.

What practical, spiritual effects does understanding God's sovereignty have on us? How are we spiritually helped? Its benefits are the fruits of a growth process. The process begins with God's calling and revelation of Himself, and it is carried forward and grows as we voluntarily, by faith, begin combining the foundation He has given us with seeking Him as a vital part of everyday life.

Since we have the Spirit of God through His calling and our repentance and baptism, the fruits of this relationship, the practical effects, are borne from how we use the Bible. We saw in Part Two how important "eating" God's Word is to seeking Him. The Bible is not given to satisfy our idle curiosity but purposefully written to guide us in preparation for God's Kingdom.

Paul writes in II Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." God's instruction is given so that we are well-supplied with knowledge, understanding, inspiration, and motivation to live actually and practically by faith. Yielding to God's sovereignty is not merely the rationale for divine government. *Doctrine* means "teaching," and it is by means of these teachings that the great realities of our God and Savior are revealed to us. We are spiritually nourished by doctrine, and as we apply it, growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ occurs.

A couple of easily understood scriptures will help us understand how God's Word and living by faith work together to cause growth. Romans 1:16-17 informs us:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

Add to this Jesus' words in John 6:63: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life."

Jesus is characterized as the living Word of God. At the most basic level, like any book, the Bible is simply a collection of words. However, its words are specifically instructions from our Creator God who is Spirit and inhabits eternity. Because that God lives and oversees our lives, the Bible's words are full of dynamic powers, if we believe them and use them. They will guide us to become like the eternal, spiritual God.

It is impossible to be formed into the image of Jesus Christ without His Word in us because we must voluntarily cooperate with God in His purpose in order for Him to do the forming. The forming must be accompanied by our knowing and understanding His will. We must never forget that Jesus says that truth sets free (John 8:32). God's truths set us free—free from ignorance of God and His purpose; free from the power of evil; free from the wiles of Satan; free from human nature.

The Second Fruit, Humility

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is foundational to Christian life because, as we move through a life lived by faith, we must firmly, even absolutely, know where we stand in relation to Him and His

purpose, or our human nature will rise up and resist conforming to His will. We must know that He is close, that He is love, that He is wisdom, and that He has power over every situation in our lives. God says through Moses in Deuteronomy 8:3:

So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

Notice how God's supplying of manna—symbolic of food and therefore implying eating—shows a spiritual need met in the wilderness. God's Word is just as essential to spiritual life as food is to physical life. Just as one must discipline himself to provide and eat physical food, so must one exercise discipline to seek, provide, and ingest spiritual food. If one will not do this, just as physical health will decline without adequate food, an inadequate spiritual diet will lead to spiritual weakness and disease.

God provides the Bible to promote righteous living and to motivate us to subjugate our carnal natures to His will. A major effect of seeking God and grasping His sovereignty, then, is that it promotes humility by means of the admiration and appreciation gained from comparing our puny lives and characters to His.

It is a reality that there is an inseparable connection between belief and practice. Proverbs 23:7 reads, "As he thinks in his heart so is he." If divine truth is in our heart because of our exercising ourselves to seek God, then godly, Christian character should result. The issue of God's sovereignty covers much more ground than just the exercise of His governmental power. In the fullness of its breadth and depth, it actually indicates His Godhood over all the creation in addition to His character and all of His attributes.

The Scriptures tell us that His power is so great and glorious that no one can look upon Him and live. Some have experienced a glimpse of His glory and lived to report on it, but the rest of us must gather a semblance of the greatness of His sovereignty from the reports those few have left us of their reactions.

As the book of Job concludes, Job is listening to God proclaim a small portion of His glory. How does Job react? "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). Job abased himself before the Almighty. Why? Job recognized God's glorious sovereignty over all creation and all circumstances.

Isaiah 6:5 records the prophet seeing God and His throne with seraphim above crying out, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts." What does Isaiah do? He cries out, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips living in the midst of a people of unclean lips." He felt filthy and like nothing in the presence of pure holiness.

In Daniel 10:5-9, Daniel sees a vision of God, and he immediately faints dead away. He is awakened, apparently by Gabriel, and given a message from God. There was no verbal reaction, but obviously, Daniel is stunned, his sense of equilibrium overwhelmed by what he saw.

These examples contain a clear lesson for us as to what happens as we come to "see" God, even though we do not literally see Him with our bodily eyes. As we come to grasp His reality, we are drawn to fear Him. This is of great value because our sense of personal worth is greatly and positively disturbed when we compare ourselves with Him.

Proverbs 1:7 proclaims, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Proverbs 4:7 adds: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding." Thus, the path to the effects of grasping God's sovereignty is that, as God becomes greater in the eyes of our understanding, it paves the way and begins removing the barriers for the growth of godly knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, all of which work to produce the character trait of humility. This is very good for knowing God.

Breaking Pride's Enslavement

In Romans 3, Paul vividly describes why things are the way they are on planet Earth, and he ends with a general statement of the root cause. Romans 3:10 begins a striking nine-verse description of the evil heart and conduct of mankind, writing, "There is none righteous, no not one." Verse 18 provides the basic reason why things are as they are: "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The fear needed is not a servile, cringing, and enslaving terror, but a mixture of love, admiration, and respect for what He is. He is a Father who pities His children; a Ruler who looks on the one who is poor and of a contrite heart; a Physician who heals the body, cleanses the spirit, mercifully forgives, and gives sound counsel so that His children can work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

When the fear of God enters a man's evil heart, godly knowledge, understanding, and wisdom can begin to grow. Why? Because in making better choices, the person begins to break his enslavement to his own evil heart, from which comes all the defiling corruption that leads to death, as Jesus shows in Matthew 15:18-20:

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.

By nature, man is focused on his sense of self-importance, so pride dominates his attitudes and therefore his choices. The corrective is something that will humble, and it begins with him being able to compare himself appropriately with the greatness of God. Man will live either to serve himself or to seek to serve and please God. It will be one or the other because no man can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

When Moses goes before Pharaoh in Exodus 5:2, he says, "Let my people go." What is Pharaoh's defiant response? "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go." That was his problem, and it remains a major hurdle for us too. We must come to know the Lord. From this, a simple truth arises: Not knowing God promotes irreverence of God, as Pharaoh clearly shows. Thus, not knowing God promotes disobedience. Knowing God, on the other hand, promotes the fear of God and humility before Him and thus obedience.

Knowing God in His sovereignty works to remove every ground for man to rely on himself and boast. Salvation is of the Lord; it is by His grace through faith. Man wants to think that he is contributing greatly to his redemption and salvation, but John tells us we are born, not of the will of the flesh, but of God (John 1:13). If we understand God's sovereignty, it leads us to praise Him for the glory of what He is: He is our salvation! In addition, we desire salvation for the very purpose of humbling ourselves before Him that we might glorify Him. This means that we can wisely turn only one way: We must choose to submit to His will. Peter gives us wise counsel:

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. (I Peter 5:5-8)

The exercise, the actual use, of humility in daily life is a choice. Once we know what God's will is, we must still deal with choosing to use humility by submitting to it. Each time we submit to God's instruction, we are humbling ourselves before Him. Is that not what God says in Deuteronomy 30:19, that we must choose life rather than death? "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live." Fully accepting God's sovereignty provides us the proper comparisons so that we can wisely make right choices.

The Third Fruit, Obedience

What hinders a person from submitting in obedience to God? Most frequently, we answer that it is human nature. While this is correct, it is also very general. Often, it is sheer ignorance; we simply do not know any better because we do not know God or what He specifically requires. More often, we know what God requires to some degree, but we do not understand how important to our sense of well-being submitting to Him is. At other times, perhaps most often, it is sheer stubbornness, born of innate pride, that drives us not to care about Him and His purpose. Our momentary desires overwhelm feelings of concern about conforming to His will.

However, as God calls us and our awareness of His importance to our life begins growing—and most especially as the sovereignty of the Author of the Word is truly understood and accepted—it should no longer be as difficult a matter of choosing what meets with our approval because much of the confusion will be dissipated. Why? Because as we come to "see" God, His Word will be seen as the only standard that truly meets our approval.

This is, of course, not something that happens immediately and without resistance from our deeply entrenched carnal nature. However, with the addition of humility to our character, gradually supplanting our proud resistance derived from Satan and his world, we now have more than a fighting chance to submit in obedience.

Being enabled to "see" God leads to an awareness of our littleness, indeed our practical nothingness, compared to Him. It gradually creates a childlike attitude, a sense of dependency that opens the eyes of our mind about how much we need contact with Him. Without contact with Him and without submission to Him and His purpose and plan, there is no salvation. It dawns on us that we must give our whole-hearted submission to Him.

Matthew 18:1-5 reminds us of this requirement:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me."

Suppose we were asked, "Who are the greatest people in your town?" What would we turn to as qualities that exemplify greatness? Would it be money, prestige, learning, or military conquest? Just before this incident, the disciples were arguing about which of them would be greatest among them (Mark 9:33-37). Jesus responds to the disciple's question by using a child.

He is not saying that heaven is populated by little children. He means that a child's attitudes of easy dependence, trust, unpretentiousness, awareness of weakness, lack of knowledge, and submission to parents illustrate what we as converted adults must become toward God. Jesus is not saying every child is like His illustration; He is using one to illustrate an ideal. It is essential that we grasp that we must turn, change, to become like the ideal.

By seeking God through the Scriptures, we will find the ideals exemplified by the Father Himself and by Jesus Christ as He walked among the disciples, teaching them. Jesus was perfectly submissive to His Father in heaven in every experience of His life as a man. The Scripture is a revelation from the Most High, communicating His mind and defining His will to us as we move toward lives of greater godliness.

In order to be submissive to Him, we must cry out in appeal to God, as Psalm 119:36, 133 do: "Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness. . . . Direct my steps by Your word, and let no iniquity have dominion over me." One who is being converted by God and who is seeking God will "see" Him in the Holy Scriptures, and out of humble respect, he will submit in obedience to Him.

Therefore understanding God's sovereignty opens the door for a third benefit: implicit obedience. It begets an obedient walk through our pilgrimage with Christ.

The Fourth Fruit, Resignation

Among the truly distinctive biblical terms describing the attitudes of those journeying through the wilderness are forms of the term "murmur." Such words are not used much today, as most would use a form of "complain," "gripe," "grumble," "protest," "criticize," or "whine." In referring to the children of Israel in the wilderness, the King James Version uses a form of "murmur" 24 times.

It is natural to complain against afflictions, losses, and hopeful expectations dashed. We seem to think that our possessions are ours unconditionally, especially those things on which we had set our hearts. We feel that, having worked diligently, we are entitled to success and deserve to enjoy and keep what we have accumulated. In the same way, when we are surrounded by a loving family, no one has a right to break into that circle and strike down a loved one.

We live our lives under the sovereignty of God, whose watchful oversight is on us constantly. How do we react to Him when things are not going well? It is easy to gripe without even thinking of the ever-watchful God who promises to supply our every need. We may find ourselves complaining to Him about our state of affairs, as if He is totally unaware. Have we forgotten that this One, who by His grace has called us into a relationship with Him, has neither afflicted us nor allowed us to be afflicted anywhere near what we truly deserve as the wages of our sinful lives?

Another benefit of fully accepting the sovereignty of God is one that is not always appreciated because its cause and solution are not always understood. Comprehending God's sovereignty brings resignation into our life. In this day, being resigned to something almost seems like a position of defeat, as though at best we have to choose the lesser of two evils rather than forging ahead in confidence to grab life's brass ring.

The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary defines *resignation* as "the quality of being submissive; unresisting acquiescence." *The Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder* defines it as "uncomplaining endurance of a sorrow or difficulty." The mention of endurance is noteworthy because of Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:13 for the need of endurance.

A major benefit of intelligently living by faith, seeking God through His Word, meditating on what we study, and relating everything in life to an awareness of God, looking for His hand in events, is that these activities will gradually produce a much deeper awareness of His loving nearness. It gives us a clearer sense that everything is under control. Recall Jesus' crossing the turbulent Sea of Galilee during a storm. There are huge waves and high winds. The disciples are terrified, but He is sleeping right through it. In fear, they wake Him. He arises and says to the wind and waves, "Peace, be still," and they immediately calm. He then asks His disciples, "Why are you so fearful; how is it that you have no faith?"

When we have a right and true recognition of God's sovereignty, the griping and fears that we are so prone to because human nature is so easily offended can diminish considerably. Understanding God's sovereignty better teaches us that we must know that our lives are in God's hands. He owns us body and soul, we are in His view at all times, and we must bow to His will. Therefore, regardless of circumstances, He can take care of us.

He never afflicts us with more than we deserve nor more than we can bear (I Corinthians 10:13). If He chooses poverty, poor health, or family problems for us, we must understand that He never piles more on us than we deserve. After all, we killed His Son, and besides that, He has great plans for us in His Kingdom for which we need to be prepared.

An upset woman once complained to her minister that church members had heaped much scorn on her and her family by saying derogatory things about them. She asked the minister if anybody else in his memory had had to endure such things. He replied, "Yes, Jesus Christ. All His disciples abandoned Him, and the government put Him, an innocent man, to death. He not only did not complain, He accepted God's will, and before He died, He forgave them all."

There are other examples: Job says, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away." God took away seven sons and three daughters, as well as his wealth and home. As a young boy, Samuel delivered God's

judgments on Eli's two sons. That surely must have stung the old priest, but Eli responded, "Let the Lord do as seems good to Him." Aaron accepted God's verdict of death on his two sons without a murmur.

The resignation issue is why James 4:13-15 is in the Bible:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

As we live by faith, we must never forget God's loving wisdom that we are the clay and He is the Potter, shaping us according to His purpose. Four valuable fruits will be produced by fully accepting God's sovereignty: the fear of God, humility, submissiveness, and uncomplaining endurance.