

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

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If we are going to meet our overall responsibilities of living by faith and glorifying God by our lives in this world, it is vital that we fully accept the sovereignty of God. This focus centers on our personal witness and growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. We most certainly cannot do well in meeting these responsibilities unless we know God.

John 17:3 reminds us that eternal life is to know God: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." The word "know" does not merely indicate knowledge about Him, but rather it suggests an intimate and personal knowledge of Him obtained by experience with Him in the daily matters of living life together.

This knowing of God is not general knowledge that He truly lives, that He is the Creator, or that He resides in heaven, but rather it is specific knowledge of His character, attitudes, patterns of thinking, and the depths of His loving kindness and grace. Knowledge of His trustworthiness and patience are very important, as is conviction of His awareness of us as individuals. These elements and many more are exceedingly significant to two individuals who plan to marry each other and commit their lives to each other for eternity.

Our drawing close to Him faces many challenges from this world as devised by Satan and from our own human nature that remains alive within following conversion. However, Hebrews 11:27 provides us with a sound example of how one prominent biblical figure accomplished it: "By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible." This succinct statement illustrates what made the difference between those who succeeded in living by faith and entered the Promised Land and those who left Egypt but died during the pilgrimage: Those who succeeded "saw" God.

This is perhaps the simplest and clearest explanation of the nature of faith in the entire Bible. Hebrews is written to a group of people undergoing severe trials, and the author encourages and counsels them to persevere through them and remain on track for the Kingdom of God. At this point, Moses is the specific illustration of living by faith. In his relationship with God, he is described as being sustained in perseverance as if he literally saw God with His bodily eyes.

Hebrews 11:1 explains, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." The author is saying that faith is the confident conviction that, like the foundation of a building, stands under and supports a life lived by faith in the invisible God. This brings up an important question: How can a person live by faith if he does not have sufficient knowledge of the sovereign greatness, closeness, and awesome grace of God? In the mercy that He has already given, God has shown enough of Himself to allow us to begin a relationship with Him. Of course, we need more to come to know Him and fear Him as He desires.

A recent Barna poll reported that over 80% of Americans believe God exists. Yet, how is their level of knowledge about Him affecting their conduct? Clearly, it is not supporting moral living to any

great extent. This fact triggers the thought that the great immorality of the American people reveals that they are not very concerned about being answerable to Him. They have heard of Him but do not know Him.

### **A Sobering Reality**

Paul writes in II Timothy 2:11-13, "This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself."

We need only to grasp Paul's overall point here. Jesus Christ, our Example and Savior, will never deviate from His character; He "is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The apostle gives this admonition directly to God's children: Despite how we may personally relate to God as shown by how we live, our Savior will always be faithful to God and His purpose. He will live and act as He truly is regardless of what we personally think or how we live our lives. This is what we, too, must strive to do. Thus, two applications to our lives follow: God loves and mercifully and generously gives to His children, but He also judges, requiring His children to live up to standards that glorify Him and His Family.

On Friday evening during the 2012 Feast of Tabernacles, we viewed a video that showed that others besides the church of God are watching what is happening in and to the United States. The pastor featured in the video primarily expounded Isaiah 9:10. We, however, will take a broader view of the God-given warning to Israel contained within the entire paragraph so that we can grasp God's focus as applied to us personally.

The Lord sent a word against Jacob, and it has fallen on Israel. All the people will know—Ephraim and the inhabitant of Samaria—who say in pride and arrogance of heart: "The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will replace them with cedars." Therefore the Lord shall set up the adversaries of Rezin against him, and spur his enemies on, the Syrians before and the Philistines behind; and they shall devour Israel with an open mouth. (Isaiah 9:8-12)

Though this is an accusation and warning to Israel, it is also a warning to God's children, and it affects us because we live in an Israelite nation. He warns that, because of our national arrogance, shown by our refusal to take His correction, He will turn nations against us, one after another, in such a manner that we will lose our lofty status in the world and be devoured as a nation. Our strength will be sapped from us until we are helpless. This is already in process, and we are living right in the midst of it!

"Do You See God?" has been the major theme underlying much of my preaching since about 1990. I cannot remember a particular moment this theme began growing in my mind because it did not strike my mind like a lightning bolt. The mental picture came from another pastor's sermon though he did not use the phrase. It was the question that I formed in my own mind from what he was describing. The concept began to take shape during the time I was pastoring the Glendale and North Hollywood, California, congregations and continued to build after moving to Charlotte, North Carolina. The concept did not "hit" my mind as a fully developed theme; rather, it was more like a planted seed that very slowly, in "real" time, grew.

The nucleus, the "seed," is the belief drawn largely from my own struggles, as well as from my dealings with my brethren in Christ, that though we sincerely believe God exists, we may have no truly strong conviction that He and His Son are personally involved with us—a conviction that we might have if we could literally see Him.

My emphasis is on the words "personally involved." In Luke 18:8, Jesus asks His followers, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" This searching question implies that He believes living, saving faith will be in short supply. However, the answer is "Yes," because if there were no faith, no one would be saved at that time. Yet, two unspoken questions remain: "What level of faith?" and "Is the faith truly being lived?"

## **An Overview of Why Israel Failed**

Hebrews 3:12 succinctly reveals why Israel failed: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God." We know the overall story of Israel's failure in the wilderness. Of all the people who began the journey, only a handful actually entered the Promised Land. This reality is intended to illustrate how much the personal relationship with God means to our salvation. By and large, the Israelites of old had no personal relationship with Him.

This is the broad answer as to why this great mass of people failed. They did not believe God. The author really drives this point home by emphasizing it as an "evil heart of unbelief." It was evil because it would not permit them to faithfully submit to Him; it caused a struggle within them and led them to disobey. Israel's failure, despite God's many works in their behalf, illustrates that just believing that God exists is not sufficient for salvation.

This weakness of faith is not unique to them. The extensive coverage given in the Bible to the Israelites' release from Egyptian slavery and their subsequent failure in the wilderness is fully intended for our learning. Their failure followed their symbolic calling from the world, baptism in the Red Sea, receipt of the law, and acceptance of the covenant at Mount Sinai.

Their failure occurred at a time equivalent to our doing so after conversion. They failed to grow, overcome, and remain faithful during their testing in the wilderness. Are we not now making our spiritual wilderness journey? Have not a large number of people who fellowshiped with us in the Worldwide Church of God stopped walking with us?

I firmly believe that the current scattered condition of the church was deliberately caused and executed by God, not Satan. Why? To test and to build our faith. Being in the Worldwide Church of God with its large congregations was deceptively comfortable. Such a circumstance tends to produce complacency, as Christ's message to the Laodiceans shows. But over the past 15-20 years, the practical day-to-day faith of those in the church of God has been seriously challenged.

Many have departed from fellowshiping with their brethren. Consider the use of the term "departing" in Hebrews 3:12. As seen from God's point of view, this is a strong warning, since He considers their hearts to have been "evil." The translators smoothed over the Greek term, *aphistemi*, underlying "departing from." *Strong's Concordance* says that it means "remove," "instigate," "revolt," "desert." The historical context indicates a stronger wording, "rebelled against," more clearly seen when compared with the faithfulness of both Christ and Moses, as extolled in verses 1-3.

In *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Hebrews*, commentator William Barclay translates this verse, "Have a care, brothers, lest an evil and disobedient heart be in any of you in a *state of rebellion* against the living God" (p. 32, emphasis ours). That is how God sees the destruction of their relationship with Him. When viewed within the context of the entire book of Hebrews, which extolls the greatness of Jesus Christ, our sovereign God, the rebellion that Paul is warning against is the turning away from a living, dynamic Person, not merely from some vague belief in a distant God.

It is very difficult to believe that the Israelites did not believe God exists after all the powerful witnesses they were given at the Red Sea and Mount Sinai. They had the same human nature that we do. Their problem was trusting Him, being faithful to Him in the daily activities of life, as one should be in a marriage. They had this problem because they really did not know Him, and they did not know Him because they did not seek Him.

### **A More Modern Comparison**

When this nation was founded, a number of the Founding Fathers were Deists. A Deist is a person who bears the reputation of being "religious." He usually attended church regularly and had a fair amount of knowledge about God. He may have been able to quote a number of scriptures and been quite moral, especially when judged against today's standards. Yet, what set them apart from other religious folk is that, though he believed in God's existence and that humanity is answerable to Him to some degree, he did not believe that God is actively involved in the operations of His creation. Simply said, a Deist believes that God created and then stepped away to observe His creation operate by natural law.

In other words, a Deist believes that God is not actively governing His creation by directly intervening and guiding the activities of men in a purposeful direction. The Israelites in the wilderness had a strong strain of this concept in them. They did not really "see" God in their mind's eye, as Jesus confirms in John 3:3, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The Israelites had a problem with accepting His personal interest and involvement in their individual lives on a day-to-day basis as they made their pilgrimage.

Experience teaches that we, too, must often be reminded of this fact, as Hebrews 3:13 does, "Exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today.'" Verses 7 and 15 focus on "today," meaning "right now"—the subject must not be put off. In this way, "Today," injects a sense of urgency as well as the thought of "as long as the opportunity exists," implying that now is our time of salvation. It must not be wasted because God calls one only once.

At the same time, he is suggesting that the Israelites failed because they did not use their faith as a day-to-day function of life. Faith is not something to be held in reserve for the really big trials of life, but it is the solid foundation of daily living. It is this level of faith that Jesus was concerned about when He asked, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" Living faith motivates every thought meant to produce action, beginning with what God requires before all else. Paul is urging believers to work toward using faith in God as the driving force of everything we do each day.

### **Hearing God Is Urgently Needed**

In regard to faith, we must understand what the Bible means by its frequent admonitions to "hear." Paul writes here in Hebrews 3:15, "Today, if you will *hear* His voice." He is not pressing us to hear the sound of His voice, but to understand what God wants us to learn through what Paul, the preacher, is expounding in his epistle. Paul is urging us to take the time now to "get" it, to "see" or "grasp" what God is teaching.

Hebrews 3:17-18 and 4:2 will help us reach a conclusion about what God intends regarding hearing:

Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? . . . For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

Whether a person physically hears the actual voice of God Himself is of little importance. Whether "hearing" in our personal reading or "hearing" the preaching of a minister, what is critical is that we obey the godly instruction, because unless we actually obey, we have not yet truly heard. If a person continues to sin, he has not really heard, in the biblical sense, what God has taught.

Put in another way, if a person continues to sin because God's Word does not motivate him to obedience to what He teaches, then he, in a worst-case scenario, either does not believe God or at this point his belief is so weak that he cannot bring himself to trust Him. Such are the ones who died in the wilderness. The weakness is not that people do not believe that He exists, but that they do not trust what He says because, in reality, they do not know Him. Thus, in the biblical sense, they have not yet truly heard.

In Hebrews 4:2, Paul uses the Greek word *pistis* for the first time in his letter. He will use it 31 more times. *Pistis* is translated either as "faith" or as "faithfulness." I believe that "faithfulness" is better here because that is what the Israelites lacked. Faithfulness is trusting God in continuous fashion as shown by conduct. God has given us a great deal, but it is our responsibility to hold firmly to His instructions by living them. Living them engrains them into our characters as habits, and this is good. Through habitual use, they become so entrenched in our behavior that we do not even have to call them to mind.

The unbelief that Paul is speaking of here is that our weak trust results in weak Christian living because we do not know and "see" God with the clarity that we should have. It can be rectified, but that is not always easy and at times may seem costly. What follows is an overview of what we must do.

## **We Must Seek God**

Isaiah 55:1-9 charges us with this responsibility:

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen diligently to Me, and hear what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an

everlasting covenant with you—the sure mercies of David. Indeed I have given him as a witness to the people, a leader and commander for the people. Surely you shall call a nation you do not know, and nations who do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you. Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

This paragraph presents an overall and continuous solution to this weakness in the lives of the converted. First, notice that this paragraph is in the form of a command. It is not a mere suggestion but a direct charge from our Creator. As the reference to David indicates, it is addressed to His people, so His audience already knows Him to some degree. The word "return" (verse 7) confirms this, indicating that He and they already have a relationship, but those He is speaking to have lost some resolve and drifting apart has occurred.

The mention of David appears in verses 3-4. When this was written, David had been dead for about 250 years, so this inclusion inserts some symbolism and moves the time-setting, making it a prophecy that fits it into the end time as well as Isaiah's lifetime. David is a type of Jesus Christ in His office as King, which further confirms that God is commanding this of those who already know and have a relationship with Him. Not only have these people drifted away, but they are also not making the effort to "seek" Him to strengthen the relationship.

The responsibility of those who have made the covenant with Him to seek Him is thus not that of striving to find Him in order to establish a relationship as a relationship already exists. Rather, it is seeking Him in order to be like Him and become more fully intimate with His will.

Verses 1-3 remind us that our relationship with Him is not without cost. This paragraph begins with an urgent command: "Come!" The sense is that paying the cost of seeking is obligatory if the relationship is to continue.

We need to understand our position here. God not only loves us, but He also greatly desires us to be in His Kingdom. At the same time, He wants us to show voluntarily that we desire the relationship. In addition, to reinforce our obligation, we must grasp and fully accept that He has every legal right to command us to do this. He symbolically establishes this in Ezekiel 16:8:

"When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you and you became Mine," says the Lord God.

The young woman is involved in a marriage. Within the context, she begins as a type of Jerusalem and gradually expands into a type of all Israel. Within the fullness of the Bible, the symbolism can apply all the way to include the church and the New Covenant. Verse 8 clearly states, "You became Mine."

The statement, "I spread My wing over you," is a symbol of caring protection. It can also imply what Boaz did in accepting Ruth when, at Naomi's bold suggestion, she came to him at night and slept at his feet. Ruth was willing to pay the price of possibly losing her reputation by being perceived as a

prostitute because the community could have interpreted what she did as brazenly throwing herself at Boaz. But Boaz, being a just man (also a type of Christ), took the hint properly and redeemed Ruth to be his wife. "I spread My wing over you" suggests both as a companion in marriage and as a possession.

The Old Covenant was a marriage covenant, and it prefigures the New Covenant, which is also a marriage covenant. Several verses confirm that the church as Christ's Bride is a purchased possession. The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 6:19-20: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (see also I Corinthians 7:22-23; II Peter 2:1). These verses are especially clear regarding the legal realities involved in this relationship. The price of our redemption from slavery to Satan and this world has been paid by Christ when He shed His blood. We legally belong to Him.

In Isaiah 55:1-3, our part in this relationship is clearly not costly in terms of money, but it is in terms of our lives and how we spend them. Our lives must be lived by faith in the One who redeemed us. Paul describes the Christian life as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1).

Notice Isaiah 55's symbolic terminology: thirst, waters, eat, wine, milk, bread, satisfy, listen diligently, incline your ear and come to Me, and hear and live. Within the context, all of these things imply eating spiritually. Jesus states in John 6:51, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." Jesus is the living Word of God. He adds 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."

Thus, the symbolic connection is made between Isaiah 55:1-3 and "eating" of Christ. Sacrificing our lives to do this, through God's grace, leads to our making an everlasting one, to which the phrase "the sure mercies of David" alludes. The original recipients of this prophecy had already made the Old Covenant with God, but as Hebrews 8 proves, the Old Covenant was not an everlasting covenant. Thus, the covenant promised in Isaiah 55 was a future one. He is alluding to the New Covenant made with us, bringing the church directly into this context.

Understand that, even though we have made the New Covenant with God, it is not a completely "done deal" until we are in His Kingdom. This is a stern warning: Completing the agreement depends on whether we, by faith, allow Him to be sovereign over our lives. God has greatly increased our opportunity to enter His Kingdom over what He gave to those under the Old Covenant through the gifts that He provides when we make the New Covenant with Him. These include the forgiveness of sins to justify us, access to Him in prayer, forgiveness of sin after justification, and the great gifts of His Holy Spirit—that is, His continuous grace and enabling to overcome. All are given to help us come to know Him better and be prepared.

### **Ear, Listen, Eat, Hear, and Live**

Each of the terms in the first three verses is an important symbol that has spiritual meaning, but we will focus briefly on only one of them, the symbol of "ear" in verse 3. God adds to that term, "come to Me" and "hear, and . . . live." How important is this concept?

Paul writes in Romans 10:17, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." "So then" marks this statement as a conclusion. If we desire to be in God's Kingdom, hearing is essential. Such a person must live by faith. Salvation is by grace through faith, and faith comes by hearing. Faith is an absolute necessity, and hearing is equally necessary for having faith that saves.

Interestingly, virtually every modern translation of this verse now reads, "So then faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of *Christ*," or the end may be, "the word concerning *Christ*." Why make this change? The entire context of the book of Romans presents us with the knowledge of the spiritual foundation for a life in Christ and living by faith. It teaches us how to have a living relationship with the Father and Son, and it focuses on understanding the preaching of Christ. The translation change brings Christ more sharply into focus.

Matthew 17:5 reads: "While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!'" The One who became Jesus Christ is the same One urging us in Isaiah 55 to seek Him, and a major element in seeking Him is to hear *Him*. Hearing Him is the path to increasing faith and being enabled to live by faith, thus pleasing God.

The first sentence of the first paragraph of the article, "Ear, Hearing," in *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* reads, "In the Bible the ear is synonymous with the heart and mind as an organ of cognition" (p. 223). The placement of this statement helps emphasize the importance of thoroughly understanding what Christ has said. *The Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder Dictionary* defines *cognition* as "knowing, perceiving, or conceiving as an act or faculty distinct from emotion and volition." "Understanding," "grasping," and "getting" are synonyms. To come to know Christ obviously requires effort. Biblically, then, the hearing involved in Isaiah 55:1-3 requires concentrated listening, comparing scripture with scripture, and meditated understanding. These lead to living faith and grasping the sovereignty of God over our lives.

This series of articles began with many descriptions of the greatness of God, showing that His judgments are at times difficult to accept. For clarity's sake, the bar has been set high so that we would have opportunity to grow into full acceptance by truly knowing Him. John 17:3 shows the importance of why we must know Him. The only way to get into that position is to make the best use of the relationship that He has made available to us by seeking Him to be like Him and thus always being in His spiritual presence. Those who have paid the costs of living by faith and who have humbly accepted His judgments regarding their lives will know Him.

Great spiritual benefits derive from exercising faith in Him. We will explore some of these in Part Three.