

Living By Faith And God's Sovereignty

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Forerunner, "Personal," July-August 2011

Recently, an email containing an article from *The Atlantic Monthly* appeared in my computer, declaring in a bold headline, "Gay Is the New Normal." What motivated this headline is a recent poll that found a clear majority of Americans now view homosexuality as morally acceptable. The history of poll-taking on this subject shows that Americans opposed it until 2008. In that year, the people of this nation were for the first time equally split: 48% for, 48% against. In 2010, a majority of 52% approved; 43% still disapproved; and 5% were undecided.

In one generation, beginning in 1962 when Bibles were banned from public schools, the nation has apparently accepted a sin that the Bible consistently condemns. With same-sex marriage also gaining acceptability, will we soon see challenges to state bans against polygamy?

The casual and careless acceptance of this evil has been accomplished largely through in-your-face public-intimidation tactics. Major assistance has come from compliant liberal politicians, who see homosexuals as a large voting-block, and liberal judges, who blind their eyes to the social damages that these sins inflict, calling them insignificant. God has altogether different thoughts, as recorded in Jeremiah 3:1-3:

"They say, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again?' Would not the land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to Me," says the Lord. "Lift up your eyes to the desolate heights and see; where have you not lain with men? By the road you have sat for them like an Arabian in the wilderness; and you have polluted the land with your harlotries and your wickedness. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there has been no latter rain, you have had a harlot's forehead; you refused to be ashamed."

Zephaniah 3:1-5 adds to this sordid picture:

Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city! She has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the Lord, she has not drawn near to her God. Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning. Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law. The Lord is righteous in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, but the unjust knows no shame.

Amos 6:3-6 fills out this picture still more:

Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near; who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst; who sing idly to the sounds of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.

These passages all have a similar context: They were written just prior to the fall and scattering of either Israel to the north or Judah to the south. Each shows a wealthy people unblinkingly focused on their pleasure. Giving no thought to God, they are casually uninterested in the moral welfare of their nation that is crashing into utter depravity. Shame for sin has disappeared. *The Interpreter's Commentary of the Bible* states that the Bible shows that, in the period before these nations fell, their societies show significant breakdowns in two vital areas: in political and business leadership and in family life, with specific blame falling on women.

In these passages, the following characteristics are either directly named or strongly implied: rebellion, obstinacy, betrayal, distrust, shamelessness, and greed, comprising an audacious self-centeredness against God and fellow man. These are not the characteristics of a nation that would bring honor to God. At one time in the history of this nation, the overwhelming majority of people expressed a strong sense of shame when they sinned. Sin was an ugly thing, and due to this sense of shame, they did whatever they could to hide their moral flaws from others.

Some of that still exists. The period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, was probably the beginning of the end of that attitude. Sin gradually carried less of a stigma, and the sense of shame was slowly replaced by a growing boldness of attitude, a flaunting of sin. Much of that sense of shame has disappeared from the American psyche. Some remains in a small percentage of the population, yet increasingly, bold immorality has become the way of life so that sin is now blatantly committed.

Civility is becoming a thing of the past. Rudeness and open, brazen misconduct is becoming the normal way of doing things. Consider former President Clinton's well-advertised conduct right in the White House! Our current President lies through his teeth about governmental issues.

This is the kind of conduct the "whore's forehead" pictures. It represents the blatant, audacious sin of the streetwalker who is out in public, openly displaying what she is, promoting herself, and tempting others to engage in sin with her. The whore's forehead represents obdurate practice of sin done overtly with no attempt to camouflage. It is the attitude that is reminiscent of the story of righteous Lot dealing with the homosexuals in Sodom just before God dropped the fire and brimstone on the people of that vile city (Genesis 19). We must be very careful to guard ourselves from succumbing to the temptation of being drawn into the same casual approach. It is our responsibility to overcome.

This relaxed and careless public acceptability of sin did not happen overnight. It gradually became tolerated over decades. Its growth was significantly aided by a so-called Christian church that abandoned its responsibility to "cry aloud and spare not" and show God's people their sins (Isaiah 58: 1).

This article will lay a foundation for building perspectives and attitudes that will help us truly live our lives by faith regardless of what others around us in the world are doing. We most certainly do not want to be casual about sin in any form whatever!

Doing this will require more than one article. The subjects will be woven together in such a way as to impress upon us that each is a necessary part of the whole and that they are linked in such a way that a clear picture emerges to guide us in glorifying God through living by faith.

Who Is Running Things on Earth?

In this world, especially in this Western world of high technology and its accompanying sophistication, the spirit of the time's influence is ever toward the deification of the created—meaning man, ourselves—rather than the glorification of the Creator. When we add the constant influence of this nation's secular liberalism flowing from every means of electronic communication, newspapers, magazines, and entertainment, plus from academia and religion, this evil deification of mankind is rapidly permeating the whole of our world.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 10:1-3:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

What we observe in the world around us confirms that end-time Israel is following the same spiritual pattern that our ancestors established anciently. Human nature does not change. These verses verify that some knowledge of God remains within the Israelitish nations.

However, theirs is not an enlightened, discerning, and intelligent zeal for God. Rather, God says in Hosea 4:6 that His people—in this case meaning ancient Israel—are destroyed for a lack of true knowledge. God then lays the greater blame on the teachers for their failure to teach truth. *The Interpreter's Commentary* says that "ignorant" in Romans 10:3 can correctly be translated as "ignoring," revealing a deliberate disregarding of God's righteousness.

The broader history of Old Testament Israel shows that God's Word was available, but the people did not access it to seek God. Thus, their ignorance was not completely the teacher's fault; the people should have studied the Bible on their own. Paul explains in Romans 1:18-21 that man is without excuse before Him because knowledge of God is available. The contrast Paul provides in Romans 10:1-3 indicates that the teaching the Israelites received produced at best a vague, superficial base of knowledge about God. This is not a foundation of true knowledge that will work to produce a good relationship between God and man.

We can see an example of this kind of teaching in our time. Most of us have seen what is happening in so many churches these days, most especially in the mega-churches. Their services come across as superficial entertainment that gives people an upbeat social experience that contains some religious instruction. They come up short in teaching high-quality biblical truths to enhance people's relationships with God. It has produced a people who believe that they are saved and going to heaven immediately after death, and who think God's laws are done away. They keep Christmas and Easter, which are obviously pagan holidays, and at the same time fail to keep the Sabbaths, which both Jesus and Paul clearly kept.

How can they be following Christ when they do not do what He did and in fact do what pagans do? Where is God in the minds of those who conduct their lives like this? In truth, what they think about Him is nowhere near the truth because neither they nor their teachers make the effort to know Him.

They know some things *about* Him, but they do not know Him. If they did, they would be seeking Him, and He would be revealing truth. Where should they be seeking Him? They must begin in the

Scriptures. In them, two things are beyond dispute: first, that God is the Supreme Sovereign over His creation, His purpose for creating it, and His plan for fulfilling it; and second, that man is responsible to this awesome Creator.

Who Should Be Feared?

Psalm 34:11 enlightens us about an important spiritual reality. King David writes, "Come you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord." Notice that the fear of God does not come naturally; it must be learned. We are not born with it already existing within. It is a vital quality given through contact with God and someone qualified to teach it, as David surely was.

If we study and meditate on Him, the Scriptures will reveal that God is supreme in everything, including in qualities like love, power, wisdom, forgiveness, mercy, patience, kindness, etc. God is sovereign over all. These virtues alone provide multiple reasons for fearing Him.

In this church, the overwhelming majority of our messages address our responsibilities to the Creator, for this is always a need that must be filled in us. However, what about God? Has He no rights to be a solidly entrenched reality in our minds, always serving as the guide to our lives?

How can we possibly live by a truly vital faith if a strong and true awareness of the reality of His oversight and presence is not our guide in every aspect of life each day? After all, who is regulating affairs on planet earth today—God or the Devil? Intellectually, a person will quickly concede that God reigns supreme in heaven, but that He does so over the world is almost universally denied. How is this denied? Titus 1:15-16 provides the answer:

To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Despite their claims to be Christian, people's consistent disobedience discloses the falsehood that they are truly Christians and that God is a reality in their lives.

In our time, because of the influence of evolution in education and the weakness of religious teaching in the churches, it is not only commonly denied that God created everything by personal and direct action, but few also believe, as proved by their conduct, that He has any immediate concern about regulating the works of His own hands. Everything is assumed to be ordered according to the impersonal and abstract laws of nature.

The churches contain many members who are either outright Deists or incipient ones. A Deist believes God created the world and then stepped away, taking no interest in its operations. *Incipient* means "just beginning to appear." We must not allow ourselves to have this attitude. We have to know and obey what we know—that is our responsibility as a Christian.

II Timothy 3:1-5 is a general but nonetheless vivid picture of our world. Notice especially verses 4-5: ". . . traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away." Paul uses these phrases as an overall assessment of the cause of the horrible conduct he describes.

The root cause is that a true relationship with God is missing. Despite having some knowledge of God, people are not living by faith. They are ignoring Him and feel free to pursue their own desires, on which they place a higher priority than on what God says. Their pleasure is what they desire in terms of conduct, and the behaviors that Paul lists reveal the lack of godly fear. He is simply not an all-the-time reality to them.

Do we do any better? News reports indicate that the pillars of our culture are crumbling and are clearly out of joint (Psalm 11:3). We know from Bible prophecy that living conditions are going to get worse. With that witness so apparent before our eyes, whom do we believe is regulating affairs on this earth—God or the Devil?

Consider an example that is especially close to many of us. As our former church fellowship blew apart, many said Satan did it. Did he? No, he did not. Saying that Satan did it is nothing more than an easy escape from the reality that we may have had a part in causing its breakup. It is more likely that our Father in heaven took us to the woodshed.

Our perspective on this might simply be ignorance of biblical reality. To anyone who understands what the Bible says, only one Person could do such a thing, and that is our sovereign God. Who scattered Israel? Did Satan? The Bible barely mentions him in this context. God boldly takes credit for scattering Israel directly and the church in symbol in Lamentations 2 and many other places. Notice how He makes this principle clear:

How the *Lord* has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! *He* has cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool in the day of His anger. The *Lord* has swallowed up and has not pitied all the habitations of Jacob. *He* has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; *He* has brought them down to the ground; *He* has profaned the kingdom and its princes. *He* has cut off in fierce anger every horn of Israel; *He* has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy, *He* has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire which devours all around. (Lamentations 2:1-3, emphasis ours)

Despite this vivid chapter's impressively detailed description of God's personal involvement, does it not appear that, because the world is so evil, Satan has far more to do with affairs on earth than God? Countering that, though, is that God's Word shows Satan has a tight-enough leash on him that he can do only what God permits. The reality is that, despite appearances, God is in *complete* control.

"Faith Comes by Hearing"

How can we know this for certain? It depends on whether we are walking by faith or by sight. What does walking by faith signify? It means that our thoughts about life's events and the circumstances they create and our conduct are regulated and carried out based on the Word of God. It is literally and truly our guide.

Understanding Romans 10:17 helps to confirm this: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The King James Version's and the New King James Version's wording is a bit awkward for our modern ears unless we carefully follow Paul's line of thought from the beginning of the chapter. Isaiah, whom Paul quotes, is saying *the* faith exists when people hear the message, believe it, and then obey it. Three modern versions help to clarify this:

The Revised English Bible: "So then faith does come from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." This helps to show that this verse is a concluding statement, an appeal to believe the facts and the logical reasoning that preceded it.

The New Testament in Modern English, better known as the "Phillips' Translation": "Belief, you see, can *only* come from hearing the message, and the message is the word of Christ." (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Moffat: "You see, faith *must* come from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ."

Biblical faith, a very specific faith, comes from a person knowing, believing, and using what God says in His Word strongly enough to make it a constant part of his life.

Of concern to this faith is where is the information that is entering our minds and guiding our conduct coming from? Never has mankind lived in a time when powerful and frequent communication is so easily available and seemingly limitless in quantity. Radio, television, the Internet, movies, cell phones, iPads, etc., pound our eyes and ears almost incessantly. Perhaps the most powerful influence is the general attitude of the people and the events in which our lives are immersed within the culture. Few people in the world seriously care any longer about what God says in His Word. This can subtly and silently affect our attitudes and conduct in daily life.

Are we living our lives by *the* faith? Those who have some respect for God are overwhelmed in our culture's civic life, thus public reference to God has been removed from schools, courts, universities, and governments. The secularism of mankind dominates. The result is abortion, homosexuality, lesbianism, and same-sex marriage as acceptable practices. Thus, it may appear even to those who do care as though Satan has overwhelmed God and is dominating life on earth. We must understand that those not living by *the* faith set the world's spirit, fashions, novels, movie themes, and music in this culture. We must resist being drawn in.

Disrespect of God

Jude 8, 10 reads: "Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries. . . . But these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves." *Dignitaries* literally means "glorious ones," and it refers to the apostles. However, the indignity does not end there because to disrespect them is to also disrespect the One who sent them, as Jesus reveals in Matthew 10:40.

This evil is covered in Exodus 22:28: "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people." II Peter 3:3 alerts us "that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts." Today, the disrespect is boldly, openly, and directly aimed at God. These vile people not only disrespect God verbally, but they also do so in their public, influential conduct.

On the surface, God's sovereignty appears to have been eclipsed, but we must not think this. God is in absolute and complete control. Though it may appear that Satan and his evil influences are in control, it is not the reality. We can be deceived if we allow this line of thinking to continue.

What does the Bible say to the mind of faith? I Timothy 6:15-16 proclaims who is God and who is in control! "[W]hich He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the

King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power." This is He about whom they speak evil and at whom they scoff. His time is coming, and we appear to be on its cusp.

Never has there been such a universal irreverence for our Creator since the period before the Flood. The worst offenders in this nation are those who are younger and who have been thoroughly schooled in liberalism's concepts. What is our responsibility?

All Things According to His Will

Daniel 11:32 is of great importance to us in these tumultuous times: "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." We would do well to notice the context of this verse. This prophecy is made of Antiochus IV Epiphanies, whom just about every commentator mentions is a type of the end-time Beast. The Beast appears to be rising in our time, so we should pay attention because we may be implied here.

This verse's final fulfillment will be in "the time of Jacob's trouble," a time that Jeremiah 30:7 says will be unlike any other that has ever been on earth. Nevertheless, "the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." Note that those who *know their God* will do these things. Despite what they can plainly see happening, these people know by faith that the unseen and almighty sovereign God is still on His throne, overseeing everything that is going on, and knowing that His will *will* be done, regardless of what those living by sight think.

How do they know that His will will be done? Because they *know* Him intimately as a result of their relationship with Him. For a good part of their lives, they have walked with Him and talked with Him, and He has talked with them through His Word. By faith, they "see" God. They have submitted to Him, and He has reciprocated their attentions by blessing them in ways they know were from Him because, by faith, they were thinking spiritually.

Ephesians 1:11 reminds us, ". . . in Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will." God does not work a few things or even many things but *all* things according to His will. This "all things" must be qualified, since at least one thing is always excluded from it: God never ordains any of His children to sin. We are always to choose life, not death through sin (Deuteronomy 30:19). When we sin, it is our fault; we should know better. God has already evaluated the situation (I Corinthians 10:13). Do we have any doubt about His power to know what is going on and to make judgments?

God's purpose will stand, and nothing will stop Him from doing His pleasure. He is no distant spectator. Yes, He has given power to Satan, as well as to mankind, but God is all-powerful while Satan and man are but creatures. The Creator is greater than the sum total of all that He has made through Jesus Christ. Yes, God has created what we consider to be natural laws, and much of the material world is to some degree regulated by them, but God "upholds all things by the word of His power" (Hebrews 1:3).

Life is difficult, and few seem to make it through the entirety of life without becoming shell-shocked. Most muddle their way through, but we would do well to heed what the apostle Peter writes in II Peter 1:19: "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The

prophetic word has been confirmed to us. What are we to take heed of specifically? That God's counsel shall stand! He will do all His pleasure, and His pleasure is written in His Book, that is, what He has prophesied will happen.

Consider God First

Therefore, instead of looking at all the problems on planet earth and then turning to God, we must begin our thinking with God because the Word, which is now ours too, came from Him, and He has the will and the power to carry out what He has said He will do. What does His Word say that in general covers the dangerous, even life-threatening evils that we see so clearly displayed today? Here is a summary.

Because God is holy and just, His Word says that His anger burns against sin. Because He is righteous, His judgment will fall on those who rebel against Him. Because He is faithful, the threats of His Word will be fulfilled. Because He is omnipotent, no one can successfully resist Him and overthrow what He wills to do. Because He is omniscient and omnipresent, no problem can escape His eye, and no difficulty can master Him and baffle His wisdom.

Let us make this all-important issue as logically clear as possible since it is of absolute importance to living by faith: There is no middle ground; God is either God or He is not. If He is God, then *He* does as *He* pleases—only as *He* pleases and always as *He* pleases. It is difficult for us to keep this in mind because we are so oriented to the visible world in which we live and move and have our being. However, a right appreciation of God's sovereignty promotes humility, inspires deeper worship of Him, motivates more frequent obedience, and rouses greater zeal for service.

This does not give us an easy answer for all the mysteries of life. When we were children, we did not understand why our parents acted as they did. We failed to understand simply because we had not lived long enough and lacked experience. Isaiah 55:8-9 shows that same inexperience is working in our relationship with God. "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.'" We are just not competent enough to form a proper, complete understanding of God's mind. It is simply beyond us. His mind is so far above ours that there is no comparison at all in terms of purpose and wisdom.

Thus, when we speak of the sovereignty of God, what do we mean? Sovereignty implies His supremacy over all that is of importance to His purpose. How far do His attentions and supremacy extend?

John 6:44 reminds, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." Are we not important to His purpose? Were we not important when He personally and individually called us? Was He not present when we were baptized? Did He not personally give us His Spirit? Notice what David says to those important to His purpose, which should provide comforting assurance:

O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You comprehend my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot

attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You. (Psalm 139:1-12)

He is aware of everything regarding our lives. Not even a thought can be hidden from Him regardless of where we are, regardless of what justifications we might give for what we decide to do. So, when it comes down to the issue of sovereignty, do we allow God to be sovereign in our lives? One of His names, *Yahweh Shammah*, means "The Lord Is There." Since we are His children, wherever we are, He is. If we allow ourselves to entertain ideas that He is unconcerned about us, we are gravely mistaken.

God's supremacy is so great that He can keep track of all that is happening across the entire expanse of what He has made. Therefore, He is allowing what is occurring in the world. He is permitting it to occur and even directly causing some of the calamitous events to happen. He is not detached from what is going on—in fact, everything is under control. He who sees every sparrow fall also has His eyes on us for our good.

Whatever we do, we must not allow Him to slip from our thoughts. Every thought of those who live by faith should begin with Him and His will.