

Sovereignty And Its Fruit: Part Ten

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," July 2000

The time has come for this series to begin drawing some conclusions, especially on the practical application of the truths revealed in God's Word about His sovereignty over His creation and its purpose. I fervently hope that what we have learned does not merely satisfy our idle curiosity but edify our faith and inspire practical applications. This series should not be construed as merely explaining John Ritenbaugh's rationale of God's government.

A true recognition of God's sovereignty should humble us—perhaps stun or shock us—into a far greater, more intense submission. This will lead us to relinquish our self-will and actually take delight in the right kind of resignation, knowing that our life, our destiny, is being shaped by the ever-living, ever-watchful, most intelligent, most powerful and kindest Being that exists. Without this, we cannot really be at peace, believe, exercise trust, overcome fear and grow into the image of God. Without it, the self and the around-and-about will constantly intrude, shoving God's purpose and calling from their place of highest priority in our lives.

It is good to understand that God's sovereignty includes more than just His exercise of governmental authority. It includes everything that makes Him God, His very being. Its presence in the Bible is so pervasive that, once we become aware of its expression, we see it throughout God's Word.

According to *The Origins of English Words* by Joseph Shipley, "sovereign" came into English from the French language. At its root are two words meaning "super or supreme" and "to exercise authority , dominate." Together, they mean "of the most exalted kind, superlative in quality, undisputed ascendancy, unlimited in extent, dominant, free." Sovereignty is the state of being in those conditions, having supreme power and excellence. Its antonym is a familiar word, "subject." God, our Creator and heavenly Father, is not subject to anybody or anything.

It is revealing to see the reaction of some of the foremost personalities of the Bible when forced to face this issue up close. God says of Job that "there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). Indeed, Ezekiel 14:13-14 names him among the most righteous men who ever lived. Job is an unusual man, closer to God by far than most. In Job 42:1-6, however, we see what happens to him when God personally and powerfully reveals to him a measure of His sovereignty.

Then Job answered the LORD and said: "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."

In this case, it is not the brilliant, luminous glory of God's appearance that humbles Job but God's power, intelligence and wisdom revealed in the creation. This, combined with His right to do with it as He pleases, brings Job to understand how ignorant, puny and base he is by comparison.

Isaiah 6:1-5 shows a different approach to another servant of God, but the effect is the same.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

Isaiah is overwhelmed by God's sovereignty displayed by radiant purity and a feeling of terrifying but controlled power. It makes him feel dirty beyond anything but simple expression, helplessly weak and feeling that he is doomed. Like Job, he is thoroughly humbled.

It is highly unlikely that God will confront any of us in such dramatic fashion. However, we are confronted by His sovereignty as revealed in the Bible and His creation. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, it should produce effects in us similar to these two illustrations. These vignettes end with the men being humbled, but should any other qualities or characteristics develop from facing God's sovereignty? Should other virtues arise after we recognize His very Being, godhead, power, intelligence and glory? Yes, and they are qualities important to our spiritual, moral and ethical growth.

The Fear of God

At least four qualities are essential to growth in our relationship with God. One could perhaps think of others and arrange them differently, but first on my list is the fear of God.

Why are people lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God? Why are people so indifferent to the state of their spiritual well-being? Why has the Bible been relegated to little more than a coffee table display? Why are people so defiant toward heaven and so little concerned about sin? Romans 3:18, following a long list of sins prominent among men, says in summation, "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Do today's churches of this world teach the fear of God, or has their teaching turned Him into a divine, snugly teddy bear, a benign but doddering grandfather, or maybe an absentee landlord busy doing other things? God's Word says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7), adding later, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (9:10). These two verses, even without any other confirmation, reveal that the fear of God is very important, yet so frequently the ministry of this world tries to blunt the force of the word "fear." Nevertheless, it means in Hebrew exactly what it means in English, encompassing everything from a faint but grudging respect to outright terror.

However, neither outright terror nor faint respect produce a good relationship. Neither will win another's heart. God wants more from us, more than a mere healthy respect. He wants us to have a deep, abiding and reverential awe for Him. Being all-powerful, holy, just, good, kind, careful, encouraging, inspiring, merciful, patient, loving, forgiving and wise, He is far more than One we should simply respect.

Americans, especially, have been taught to be familiar and casual in our attitudes toward others, and this carries over into our attitude toward and relationship with God. It is a form of the "I'm just as good as you, and you will just have to accept me just as I am" approach. A disrespectful and sometimes even defiant attitude is born. But what is the Bible's counsel? Paul tells us that even among ourselves, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Philippians 2:3). What about familiarity with God? Peter tells us to honor all people, love the brotherhood, and honor the king—but we are to fear God (I Peter 2:17). Do we hear much teaching that will incline us to revere God's majesty?

Do we unconsciously think that the fear of God is something only the unconverted need? Since Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom," and since wisdom in its simplest form is skill or right application, who needs wisdom more than God's children? Reverential awe is wisdom's foundation, because it moves us to obedience, and God gives His Spirit to those who obey Him. Paul writes in Philippians 2:12, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out you own salvation with fear and trembling."

We need this quality more than anybody does because our eternal life is on the line. It used to be that someone known to believe in God was referred to as "God-fearing." This was obvious to others because they knew the person obeyed God and was very concerned about what God said. It marked his relationship with God and set him apart from others. Fearing not only makes a great witness before others, it also pays great dividends, as Psalm 103:13 shows. "As a father pities His children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him." We all want God to be compassionate toward us.

In I Peter 2:21, the apostle instructs us to follow Christ's steps, suggesting that He is the model after whom we must pattern our lives. Did He fear God? "[Jesus], in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear" (Hebrews 5:7). Notice especially the link connecting His being saved from death and being heard because He feared. Christ acknowledged God's sovereignty through a deeply held reverential awe, showing that answered prayer, eternal life and the fear of God are intertwined.

This is true because the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is right application, and right application is obedience. Jesus Christ obeyed God perfectly. His fear was not an occasional burst of deep respect—as ours so often is—but sustained and built throughout His entire life. It had to be this way because His trials intensified as He aged, and His need of godly fear became ever more urgent.

Implicit Obedience

The correct perception of God's sovereignty produces godly fear, in turn producing implicit obedience. However, human nature always pulls us toward an exaggerated sense of our own importance. Pride invariably leads to disobedience and sometimes outright rebellion. We will exalt either God or ourselves; we will live either to serve Him or ourselves. Yet no man can serve two masters. To correct this, we must honestly and without self-deception see ourselves in relation to God. However, we cannot do this without admitting knowledge that will dispel self-deception and, at the same time, truly reveal God's sovereignty.

Exodus 5:1-2 illustrates an aspect of this need:

Afterward Moses and Aaron went in and told Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel; 'Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.'" And Pharaoh said, "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."

To Pharaoh, Moses' God is only one among many gods, a powerless entity that he need not fear. His disrespect and irreverence are clearly products of his ignorance, and these produce his disobedience. Since irreverence produces disobedience, then true reverence will produce and promote obedience. This clarifies why growing to know God is so essential: The fear of God is a major step toward practical godliness. The Bible and God's Spirit are the major elements that promote the knowledge of His mind and will.

Psalms 119:33-34 says, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart." Perhaps above all others, this psalm makes multiple direct connections between the knowledge of God and obedience.

We will grow more profoundly if we learn to study the Bible as if it were written for us individually. It is self-defeating for us to pick and choose favorite scriptures while leaving others entirely alone. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, saying we should live by *every* word of God. All of it reveals Him—and our nature as well. The more we know of Him and ourselves, the greater the chance of obedience. Ignorance begets irreverence that in turn begets disobedience. Truth believed begets reverence that in turn begets obedience.

Was the Captain of our salvation and Forerunner, Jesus Christ, known for His submission to God's will? The testimony in Philippians 2:8 is that His obedience was to "death, even the death of the cross"! According to John 10:17-18, His obedience was a conscious, intelligent submission:

Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.

This is further confirmed by John 6:38: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." Our Savior was neither an emotional, wild-eyed fanatic, nor a zombie woodenly and unfeelingly playing a part like some kind of android.

We can learn much of Jesus' submission to the Father from His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His crucifixion: "Father, if it is Your will, remove this cup from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). This comes from the heart of a man described as meek and lowly of heart. His words paint a vivid picture of what was going through His mind. Sometime during His life, He had likely witnessed a crucifixion, but even if He had not, He certainly had heard one described. As quick of mind as He was, He could clearly envision what lay before Him. Undoubtedly, He anticipated great bodily pain, understanding Isaiah 52:14 to predict He would suffer pain as nobody else ever had. In addition, He had to bear the pressure of resisting the urge to break faith and sin under the burden of the guilt of all mankind's sins that would come upon Him.

He also knew He would have the embarrassment of all the indignities heaped upon Him, knowing full well He was innocent. He had to battle demons throughout His ordeal. Perhaps the most dreaded burden of all was knowing that He would be cut off from God and have to bear everything alone. Yet

He did it! Jesus—by faith—consciously chose to submit to the Father based on His knowledge of the Most High.

Resignation to God's Will

Comprehending God's sovereignty should begin to produce another necessary yet difficult quality: complete resignation to God's will. We Israelites have gained quite a reputation with God for being unwilling to accept life without griping. However, Philippians 2:14-15 says, "Do all things without murmuring and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world." Peter adds, "Be hospitable to one another without grumbling" (I Peter 4:9). "Murmuring" in Philippians and "grumbling" in I Peter are translations of the same Greek word.

Human nature naturally complains when it feels it has been deprived of what it had its heart set on. We think that our possessions are ours unconditionally. We feel that we are entitled to success when we have done something well. We believe that, when we work hard and competently, we deserve to keep what we have accumulated. We hold that, when surrounded by our happy family, no power may enter our beloved circle and strike down a loved one. We can even think that we should be immune from bankruptcy because God must honor our obedience!

However, understanding and accepting God's sovereignty includes His right to do or allow anything He wills. Notice Luke 14:26-27: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." A reason that a minister goes over these verses with a person seeking baptism is to affirm this very point. He must count the cost: to forsake all he has to bear his cross.

Baptism is a public declaration that we accept the blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and have decided to be absolutely loyal to Him. Everything else is to be secondary; we have renounced our will, and everything we have is subordinate to His will. Will we be loyal in every situation as Jesus was, or will we be loyal only in the good times? If He chooses to send or allow poverty or sickness or even death, will we say with Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). Doing this will not be without struggle. We are, after all, human, and even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane struggled with this before saying, "Thy will be done."

Besides Jesus, a number of men met this crisis and, as far as we can see, passed it with flying colors. Notice Eli's reply to God's sentence against him and his sons in I Samuel 3:18: "It is the LORD. Let Him do what seems good to Him." Like most of us, Eli was a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. His latter lay in failing to restrain the excesses of his sons. When God pronounces His sentence, though Eli was likely in anguish, he does not justify himself or murmur of unfairness. He accepts it without reservation.

Eli certainly felt terribly for his sons, even though they were undoubtedly a great disappointment to him. Cut off by God's judgment, they were utterly unprepared for death. There seems no possibility they died in what we would call "in the Lord." It must have been a difficult burden for Eli to accept this shocking news.

Leviticus 10:1-7 reveals another example of a godly man humbly accepting God's shocking sentence. God strikes two of Aaron's sons to death, and at Moses' counsel, Aaron holds his peace:

And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, "Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the LORD has kindled. You shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you." And they did according to the word of Moses. (verses 6-7)

He counsels Aaron and his remaining sons to accept God's judgment before the people lest they bring reproach upon God—as though He were guilty of wrongdoing.

God praises Job highly, saying that no one on earth was like him, "a blameless and upright man" (Job 1:8). Surely, he has every right to expect God to bless him continually throughout his life. God indeed prospers him until he is the richest man in his area. Suddenly, however, devastating disasters obscure his bright future. In one day, Sabceans and Chaldeans raid his ranches and take everything, lightning destroys his crops, and a tornado kills his ten children! What is Job's response? "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (verse 21).

Job looks beyond these devastating events—truly mind-numbing realities—that could never have occurred without God's permission. Beyond them he sees the Creator, whose rule extends over all peoples and things—some of which He had allowed to devastate Job's life. Job clearly recognizes God's sovereignty, even managing to rejoice somewhat in it. No wonder God says no one on earth was like him!

James 4:13-15 says:

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."

Once we give ourselves over to Him in baptism, recognizing God's sovereignty causes us to subject our plans to His will. It makes us recognize that, as the Potter, He has absolute power over the clay, molding it according to His pleasure.

Overall, it is for Him to say where we live and in what condition: whether in poverty or wealth, sickness or health, cut down in the flower of youth or living three score and ten. To learn this lesson is to attain very high marks in God's school. Accepting His will in all things and in the right attitude is among the most difficult of all lessons in life. It is one that, when we think we have a handle on it, something comes up, and we discover we have to learn all over again!

On the other hand, unwillingness to accept God's will in all things produces in us a resistance to obey accompanied by complaining. If this resistance to accepting what God has dealt to us were not there, we would have no reason to complain. Murmuring and disobedience go together, and murmuring is sin.

In Matthew 11:29, Jesus describes Himself in an interesting way: "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Both "lowly" and

"gentle" imply nonresistance, suggesting someone who is submissive, yielding, and long-suffering in contrast to an assertive, aggressive, arrogant, obstinate and haughty person.

He goes even further, however, to describe His approach to God. David, a type of Christ, writes in Psalm 22:6, "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people." God uses animals and insects to describe human traits. A worm is not only lowly but it also has no power to resist anything. Because Jesus never resisted God, He could honestly say, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me" (John 4:34). Those who, without murmuring, subject themselves to the will of God benefit from His almighty rule over all.

Thankfulness

Thankfulness is another positive attitude that is created from a good understanding of God's sovereignty. As mentioned previously, Herbert Armstrong said that he usually began his prayers praising and thanking God that He is God and not somebody else. This practice shows he recognized and appreciated what God produces, supplies and works out. Despite the confusion of events as we see them, despite the heaviness of the burdens we bear, everything is in the most capable hands in the universe.

Psalm 103 is a great psalm of praise. It begins, "Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!" Think on this. This psalm praises God's sovereignty over all His creation, yet it also shows His awareness and care of us as individuals! To Him, we are not nameless, faceless blobs in an endless ocean of people. The world likes to claim the incredible promise of Romans 8:28 for itself, but it really applies only to us, "those who love God . . . those who are the called." This is something to be thankful for! Each one of us is in His capable hands! God requires us to give thanks because it is good for *us*. Those convinced that God rules have a distinct advantage over those who believe things happen randomly.

Paul writes in Ephesians 5:20, ". . . giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." For some, this is difficult, and indeed, we all often stumble over it. We can be very grateful to God when things go well. Perhaps, after returning safely from a trip, we are quick to thank God for our successful arrival, as if He were personally responsible for the operations of all who worked to get us home. Suppose, however, that the trip was not so successful. Maybe we were involved in an accident and injured or delayed so that we were late for a meeting, costing a large sale or the loss of a client? Or maybe lightning struck the house, an earthquake damaged it or a burglar broke in and stole valuables?

Do we see God's hand in these circumstances as well? Is God involved only in the "good" things of life? For example, did Job bemoan his "bad luck" or murmur against God? He bowed before Him, even managing to bless Him! Is this just fatalistic acquiescence or blind credulity? No, in people who live by faith it is neither of these because real faith always rejoices in the Lord, knowing He is involved in all aspects of life.

Paul exhorts the Philippian church: "And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:3-4). This is nothing short of a call to faith of those undergoing some sort of heavy trial. If a Christian believes that his life and all its circumstances are in the hands of the sovereign, wise and loving God who is always working for his good, then he can truly rejoice always.

Matthew 11 provides an interesting example of Christ's thankfulness and praise. The context begins with the disappointing breakdown of John the Baptist's faith (verses 2-3) and the people's discontent with both John's solemn message and Christ's more joyous one (verses 16-19). Then follows the stubborn resistance to Christ's preaching in cities highly favored to receive His attention (verses 20-24). It seems as though everything is working against Him, but what is His reaction?

At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight." (Matthew 11:25-26; Luke 10:21)

Jesus rejoiced in a thankful spirit even though, from a human point of view, it did not seem logical and right. In Jesus, God presents submission to us in its purist form. Even though "He made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:2), He thankfully and joyously bowed to the will of the Lord of heaven and earth.

At least four attitudes should grow from a true recognition of God's sovereignty:

1. The fear of God.
2. Implicit obedience.
3. Complete resignation.
4. Thankfulness and praise.

From these an adoring worship should be born. True worship is based upon recognized greatness seen at its highest in the great God, the Creator. His sovereignty is not that of a tyrant but of an infinitely good and wise King—One who cannot err because He is perfectly wise and can never do wrong because He is absolutely righteous.

We could become filled with fear upon understanding that God's will is irresistible. But as we grow to know God and realize that He wills only what is good for us, we can rejoice that this wonderful Being is our Father and say with Christ, "Even so, Father, for so it seems good in your sight."

It might be helpful to contemplate the following poem written by Madame Jeanne-Marie Guyon, who was imprisoned for nearly ten years by Louis XIV of France for her belief and practice of Christianity. In her dungeon far belowground, her only light came from a candle lit at mealtimes. Notice her complete resignation and submission to God's will for her:

A little bird I am,
Shut from the fields of air;
Yet in my cage I sit and sing;
To Him who placed me there—
Well pleased a prisoner to be,
Because, my God, it pleases Thee.

Naught have I else to do;
I sing the whole day long;
And He whom most I love to please
Doth listen to my song.
He caught and bound my wandering wing;
But still He bends to hear me sing.

* * *

My cage confines me round;
Abroad I cannot fly;
But, though my wing is closely bound,
My heart's at liberty;
My prison walls cannot control
The flight, the freedom of the soul.

O, it is good to soar
These bolts and bars above,
To Him whose purpose I adore,
Whose providence I love;
And in Thy mighty will to find
The joy, the freedom of the mind!