

The Last Word

Proverbs 16:1-5, 33

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“A person proposes, but God disposes.”

So goes the old saying that is very much at home in our Reformed tradition, a tradition that values the doctrine of God’s sovereignty.

Saying -

That God is ultimate ruler, supreme authority.

That the final word belongs to Him.

That nothing so much as even a hair can fall from our head without the will of our father in heaven.

The big events of earthquakes, volcanoes and thunderstorms.

The tiny events of a sparrow flying to the feeder in my backyard.

- all come under the gaze of his all-seeing eye.

Nothing is too big for Him.

And no one is too small.

No detail in your life is too insignificant.

No circumstance that you’ll face this year is too big.

As Psalm 113 celebrates,

His glory is above the heavens.

He sits enthroned on high.

He stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth.

He raises the poor from the dust,

and lifts the needy from the ash heap.

A person proposes, but God disposes.

Proverbs 16:1 -

The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

“Plans” is a Hebrew word which means “preparation, arrangement.” The verb form of this word means “to arrange in order, to compare; to value or estimate.”

“The plans of the mind” talks about how a person can assume responsibilities, look at various issues, weigh options, extrapolate to potential consequences and then decide on a course of action.

For creatures made in the image of God, agents charged with the stewardship and development of creation, called to be creative and active in the footsteps of the One whose image they carry, this is a legitimate activity.

We are called, charged, even **expected** to plan.

But in a context.

Hence the next words of our text -

But the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

The tongue symbolizes the speech and actions by which we carry out our plans. Proverbs is saying that when the time comes to speak and to act, no matter how much we talk it up or work it out, God reserves the last word for Himself. He alone will utter the final command, issue the final pronouncement.

His word is soundest.

His plan is best.

His power is ultimate.

Hence the echo of v.1, found in v.9:

The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.

Human planning happens under God’s sovereign gaze.

This doctrine of sovereignty is a robust doctrine.

And it, like the teaching on election, that is meant as one that comforts, one that frees, one that empowers, rather than

– as it is often pictures –

leaves people cowering fear, or throwing their hands up in despair.

Ultimately, the sovereignty of God is a doctrine that we will remain unable to fully comprehend. Yet - comprehend it, or not - it is one that impacts how we live. How? By reminding me that

*I am not my own,
but belong – body and soul,
in life and in death –
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.
He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.
He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven:
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.*

*Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on
to live for him.* (Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 1)

In that confidence, we go ahead and plan.

In that confidence, we step out and act.

And, as we plan and act, we heed the advice of Proverbs 16 -

First, we keep our eyes open, and our minds alert, looking for indicators of God's working around us.

And as we see it, seek to line up our human plans with His indicated divine will.

Sometimes, as we look and pray for direction, it will come in very specific ways, sending us down one-way streets.

And sometimes God presents us a veritable cornucopia from which we may choose. He leaves us with options, all of which meet with His approval.

Secondly, as we plan and act we seek to do so in a pure way, desiring to walk along God's assigned pathways, in purity. Giving priority to what His Word shows to be good and right. Working hard to avoid evil.

And third, very consciously submit everything to His final control. Remembering that He retains the divine right to change anything and everything. Remembering that **we** remain accountable to Him... not Him to us.

And that is sometimes the hardest.

I visited one of our senior members for a birthday some time ago. Walking in I said, "*congratulations!*" She gave me a disapproving stare and said, "*No, pastor.*" I panicked - had I missed the date? Was it too late? "*No, pastor - today is only Tuesday. My birthday is not till Friday. There is much that can happen between now and Friday.*"

We laughed together.

But deep down she meant it.

And she is RIGHT.

She, in a very real way, sought to honour God having the final word on her every day and every action.

She lived by that great phrase, *deo volente - if the Lord will.*

Directly opposed to the soul that submits itself to the sovereignty of God, and lives with active security in that sovereign strength,

polar opposite of that

is the proud, the arrogant, the haughty one.

In v.5 of Proverbs 16 judgement is declared against them. God has no use for that attitude. In fact, Proverbs 6:17 includes this attitude along with the "seven abominations," repugnant to the Lord, such as a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

The sovereignty of God - A strong and **wonderful** scriptural truth.

A central doctrine -

He can put you exactly where he wants you to be.

He can arrange all the details years in advance.
 He can open doors that seem shut tight.
 He can remove any obstacle that stands in your way.
 He can take your choices and fit them into his plan so that you end up at the right place at just the right time.
 He can even take your mistakes and bring good out of them.
 He can take tragedy and use it for your good and his glory.

Sovereignty is the doctrine that God is God and we're not!

When we forget it we can get all worried about what lays ahead.

Or we become paralyzed by fear of possibilities.

When we forget that truth, we think that we're in control of our own life and that everything depends on us. So we obsess, we hyperventilate, we try to control everything and everyone around us, we worry over all our decisions, and we spend hours fussing over the minutiae of life.

And the Lord says, "*Why don't you go to sleep. Leave it with me. I'm going to be up all night anyway.*"

Sovereignty of God -

This doesn't mean that you won't have to make decisions.

And it's not meant to leave us paranoid that, somehow, we wander outside the will of God.

What it does is take the pressure off, because we can trust God to take our decisions and use them to accomplish his will in our life.

It leaves us confident as we move forward in our lives.

It gives us great freedom.

For, you see, if we don't quite get it right, that's OK. Ultimately, the outcome doesn't rest in our hands.

Responsibility for it all doesn't weigh on our shoulders.

Hear me - this is not an endorsement of the deadly sin of sloth.

It is an unleashing to Kingdom creativity. It is the Heavenly Father's permission to plan and practice with abandon under His watchful gaze.

When it comes to evangelism, for example, we can go ahead and share the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, and leave the results to God. We don't have to fret that because our face wasn't quite so, or our posture was off, or our words stumbled somewhat, that the person wasn't converted immediately and will spend eternity in Hell.

Can you imagine what a burden that would be?

Who would then dare witness?

Or myself as a preacher.

I find it a great responsibility to open the Word of God for His people each week - not once, but twice.

What if my interpretation isn't quite spot on?

What if I choose the wrong text for the week?

What if my delivery is off?

What if my application isn't quite sound?

Or worship leading - I'm so grateful to be surrounded by a wonderful team of musicians and singers and planners. I hope you are, too. They do a ton of work not only here up front, but also behind the scenes.

What if the effectiveness of a worship service were all up to them?

Up to them to choose the right music.

Up to them to get the energy levels high enough.

Up to them to make the proper transitions.

Up to them to prepare the correct prayers.

Up to them to grab and hold your attention.

What then?

Who would dare?

A fellow preacher shared recently about meeting a parishoner after a service. The person indicated how blessed they had been by the message that day. My colleague got brave and asked what in the message had been such a blessing. The response came, "Well, you read such and so a passage. When you stopped I kept on reading. What followed was exactly what I needed in my life right now. THANK YOU for pointing me to it."

Hah! Thank God that it is **NOT** up to them, or me, or you!

We plan and we deliver as best we can.

But we leave the results to God.

As will you in the week to come -

with raising your kids

with loving your spouse

with going to work.

So, go ahead and live with confidence.

Live robust, active Christian lives.

Pray, and plan, and practice.

Do so with the sure and secure knowledge that your life is in the hands of the Sovereign One who said -

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. - Matthew 11:28-30

As Psalm 37:5-9 says:

5 Commit your way to the Lord,

Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

6 And He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,

And your judgment as the noonday.

7 Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him;

Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way,

Because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.

8 Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;

Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing.

9 For evildoers will be cut off,

But those who wait for the Lord, they will inherit the land.

Live with the confidence that God's Sovereign grace is at work in your life....

And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. - Philippians 4:7

And so we pray -

"Lord, teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom"(Psalm 90:12).