

The LORD's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

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[0 : 00] It's Proverbs chapter 16, verses 1 to 15. For its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord. Be assured he will not go unpunished. By steadfast love and faithfulness, iniquity is atoned for. And by the fear of the Lord, one turns away from evil. When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. An oracle is on the lip of a king. His mouth does not sin in judgment.

A just balance and scales are the Lord's. All the weights in the bag are his work. It is an abomination to kings to do evil. For the throne is established by righteousness.

[1 : 29] Righteous lips are the delight of a king. And he loves him who speaks what is right. A king's wrath is a messenger of death. And a wise man will appease it.

In the light of a king's face there is life. And his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. This is God's holy and authoritative word. Is that better?

Is that better? Yeah, that should be better. Basically. Oh no. It's hot.

Whether it's schools canceled due to COVID-19 or wedding plans postponed.

Or a sudden move of a friend. An unexpected job loss. A surprising pregnancy. Or a death of a loved one. We've all experienced what it's like to have our carefully laid plans derailed.

[2 : 43] By the unexpected circumstances of life. And these experiences can be unsettling. Because they remind us of just how little control we actually have over our lives.

But this passage reminds us that there's someone who does have control over our lives. And by putting the Lord's sovereignty and the human responsibility side by side.

Solomon teaches us that we should live with a posture of humble submission under the sovereign Lord. And this passage is divided into two main sections.

Which are clearly marked by the repetition of the word Lord in verses 1 to 9. And the word King in verses 10 to 15. So verses 1 to 9 is about the sovereign rule of the Lord.

And verses 10 to 15 are about the intermediate rule of a king. So first let's look at the sovereign rule of the Lord in verses 1 to 9. These verses are bracketed by verse 1 and verse 9.

[3 : 41] Which sound a similar theme. Verse 1 says, The plans of the heart belong to man. But the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. Verse 9 says, The heart of man plans his way.

But the Lord establishes his steps. So these verses relate and contrast divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is our responsibility as humans to make plans.

The plans of the heart belong to man. The heart of man plans his way. But though man gets the first word in these verses, God gets the last word.

The answer of the tongue is from the Lord. We might plan one thing, but the answer we get, the outcome is determined by the Lord.

Men devise their plans, but God decides. Man proposes, but God disposes. The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

[4 : 47] And the steps we take, the ways we walk, they are not in ourselves, but in the God who directs our steps. So the notion that we are masters of our own faith is ultimately an illusion.

And this truth is first of all humbling for us. Being in Cambridge, many of you are, by the world standards, incredibly successful. But it would be presumptuous to think that we are responsible for

that success.

Even if you worked diligently to earn your degrees and land your jobs, all that we have ultimately comes from God's hand. We were all born with a certain genetic makeup.

We were all born in a certain zip code. We were all born with certain parents. We were all given certain opportunities. In fact, there is nothing we have ever done for which we can take sole credit. For this reason, we should live with a posture of humble submission under the sovereignty of the Lord. And this truth is not only humbling, it is also liberating. Because we should expect the unexpected.

[5 : 57] We should plan to have our plans fall through. Uncertainty is certain. We should not imagine that we are in control, that everything is up to us.

People who live with such delusions live harried and always hurried lives like frantic mice scurrying about after their winter nest is destroyed. The 18th century Scottish poet Robert Burns penned this famous line after reflecting on such mice scurrying about after their winter nest was destroyed.

And he said, The best late schemes of mice and men often go awry. But if we live with a posture of humble submission under the sovereignty of the Lord, we can rest.

We can trust. We can have peace. We can have, in the midst of uncertainty, the certainty that God provides. In the midst of our insecurities, we can know God's security.

We need not live with fear and anxiety. We can live in the quietness of trust if we live with humble submission to God. So verse 2 continues that theme of the Lord's sovereignty over the hearts of men.

[7 : 08] It says, All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the Spirit. We think that we are justified in all that we do, because if we didn't think so, then we wouldn't do it.

We think that we are right in all that we believe, because if we didn't think so, we wouldn't believe them. In this way, we are all self-justified.

The truth is, however, we do not see everything rightly, because our knowledge is partial. But God, on the other hand, sees everything and knows everything.

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the Spirit. The Spirit refers to a person's inner life, the invisible center of one's motives.

And the image of weighing a Spirit, which also is translated sometimes as wind, is intentionally paradoxical. Spirit, wind, it's weightless.

[8 : 09] It is invisible. We human beings cannot weigh the Spirit, but the Lord weighs the Spirit. We human beings cannot peer into the hearts of people, but the Lord sees the invisible, sees the hearts of men and women in the world.

And this reality should, again, make us live with the posture of humble submission under the sovereignty of the Lord. So then, instead of becoming complacent in our delusion that we are right and justified about everything, we should regularly examine ourselves under the searching light of Scripture.

We should pay attention to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We should invite rather than spurn the advice and accountability of the church community. We should pray as it says in Psalm 139, 23-24, Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting. Knowing that all our ways are pure in our own eyes, and knowing that only the Lord weighs the Spirit, we should seek to align our plans with God's and entrust our works to Him.

And that's what verse 3 is talking about. Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. The word commit means literally to roll over. It means to turn it over to God and to leave it there.

[9 : 39] To entrust it to Him. Psalm 37, verse 5, conveys the same idea. Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in Him, and He will act. To commit your work to the Lord doesn't merely mean to do whatever you want and then ask God to bless it.

Rather, it means to seek to do what God blesses. It means to align our wills with the will of the Lord. To lean toward Him. To roll our ways over to Him.

And leave them there. And when we do that, it says, our plans will be established. The word established is repeated in verse 9. The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes His steps.

The way to make sure that our steps will be established then is to plan the ways of the Lord. To align our purposes and priorities with His. This is how we should engage all of our endeavors. Our summer internships. Our jobs. Our business. Our marriage. Our parenting. Our studies. We should commit our ways.

[10:46] Our works. To the Lord. Lord, I want to do what You want me to do. In the way You want me to do it. Lord, Your will, not my will, be done.

And to commit our work to the Lord is to pray what John Wesley once prayed. Quote, I am no longer my own, but Yours. Put me to what You will.

Rank me with whom You will. Put me to doing. Put me to suffering. Let me be employed for You, or laid aside for You. Exalted for You, or brought low for You.

Let me be full. Let me be empty. Let me have all things, and let me have nothing. I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal. And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You are mine, and I am Yours.

So be it. That's what it means to commit our works to the Lord. This doesn't mean, however, that when we do that, everything will go smoothly for us from that point on.

[11:51] As we have seen over and over again throughout this book, the book of Proverbs, in this world, we see both God's good order and man's sinful subversion of that order.

For this reason, while it's generally true that honest hard work leads to prosperity, sometimes the fruit of honest hard labor is swept away by injustice.

Similarly, the plans of the righteous do not always prevail, but are sometimes spoiled by the plans of the wicked. But verses 4 to 5 teach us that we need not fret the presence of the wicked.

It says, The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord.

Be assured, he will not go unpunished. The Lord has made everything for its purpose. The word purpose is literally answer. It's the same word that was used in verse 1.

[12:55] The answer of the tongue is from the Lord. So then everything in life, without any exception, has its answer from the Lord. God has a purpose, an answer to everything in the world, including the things that you find the most difficult to explain, including even the wicked who appear to flaunt the will of God.

Think of it this way. If I were foolhardy enough to challenge Magnus Carlsen, the current world chess champion, to a chess match, I will surely capture some of his pieces, thinking that my plan is working.

But in the end, I will learn to my humiliation that all of my moves, in fact, played right into his hands. All the pieces I took would have been sacrificed by design, all playing a part in the Grand Master's plan.

Similarly, in an infinitely more significant, an infinitely more transcendent way, all evildoers who oppose God play right into his hands.

They might think that they are getting their way. They might think that they are defying God. But in the end, they are pawns on His chessboard.

[14:21] They are being prepared for the day of trouble. They will not go unpunished. And verse 5 emphasizes that God particularly despises everyone who is arrogant in heart.

The word heart is repeated three times in this passage, verse 1, verse 5, verse 9. There is a focus on the heart, what man plans in his own heart.

And it says, everyone who is arrogant in heart, literally high or exalted in heart, is an abomination to the Lord. Whoever has an overweening heart, a heart that contends with God, a heart that says, I am in charge, a heart that says, I am the master of my fate, a heart that says, God does not see, a heart that says, God will not hold me to account.

Such a person is an abomination to the Lord and will surely be punished. Verses 6 to 8 then give us a picture of the righteous that contrasts with this portrait of the sinful wicked, the prideful wicked.

It says in verse 6, by steadfast love and faithfulness, iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord, one turns away from evil. The first half of verse 6 prescribes the remedy for past sins, and the second half presents the preventative for future sins.

[15:45] Steadfast love and faithfulness, as we saw in chapter 14, verse 22, they're two of the most commonly mentioned attributes of God in Scripture. And when describing God as having steadfast love and faithfulness, they're together referring to God's unmerited favor and His

unchanging, unwavering commitment toward His people.

But this particular verse does not have God's steadfast love and faithfulness in mind. Instead, it has our response to God's steadfast love and faithfulness in view.

We know this because it's paralleled by the fear of the Lord. Then by our steadfast love and faithfulness, iniquity is atoned for. By our fear of the Lord, we turn away from evil.

How is it that our steadfast love and faithfulness leads to the atonement or cleansing or covering up of our sins? Our covenant loyalty to God, our repentance and faith in Him, our aligning ourselves, pledging allegiance to God, to Christ, that's what makes God graciously pardon our sins.

And likewise, it's the fear of the Lord living in humble submission before the watchful eyes of God that makes us turn away from evil. Our love and faithfulness are the remedy for sins.

[17:07] Our fear of God is the preventative for sins. And when we live like this, God's blessings naturally follow. It says in verse 7, when a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

But as Proverbs often does, it juxtaposes verses that qualify one another. So verse 8 qualifies verses 5 to 7. It says in verse 8, Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.

Living in a manner that pleases God will lead to peace and prosperity and the wicked will ultimately be punished. But this is not guaranteed in this life because we live in an upside down world.

Nevertheless, verse 8 reminds us, Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice. In this upside down world, some wicked people will enjoy great revenues with injustice.

And, in contrast, in this upside down world, some righteous people will have little. But having little with righteousness is better than having great revenues with injustice.

[18:26] Interestingly, verse 8 is the only verse in this first section, verses 1 to 9, that does not mention the Lord. Perhaps to convey the sense of the seeming absence of God when the wicked prosper.

But we can rest assured that God is not absent. As verse 9 concludes, The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. As verse 4 says, The Lord has made everything for its purposes, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

And this is why we should live in a posture of humble submission under the sovereignty of the Lord. Having addressed the sovereign rule of the Lord in verses 1 to 9, Solomon turns to the intermediate rule of a king in verses 10 to 15.

God sovereignly rules over all, but in this world he also rules through an intermediary, through a human king or governing authorities. That's what verses 10 to 15 are about.

Verse 10 begins, An oracle is on the lips of a king. His mouth does not sin in judgment. An oracle refers to revelation that a prophet receives from the Lord.

[19:41] This doesn't mean that the king also has to be a prophet, but it's conveying the truth that the king's judgments should be consistent with the Lord's judgments. The king does not rule by fiat.

He does not get to pass laws and sentences according to his whim because he is ultimately accountable to God. He is God's mouthpiece, God's servant.

He is no God. This is why Israel never resorted to the teaching common among their neighboring nations that kings are divine. Deuteronomy 17 verses 18 to 19 make clear the fact that king is accountable to the Lord.

It says, And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, referring to a human king, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, that's the scriptures, approved by the Levitical priests, and he shall be with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them.

The kings of Israel ruled at God's behest, and they were God's intermediaries between God and his people. If prophets represented God to the people, kings represented the people to God.

[21:06] And now verse 10 is not saying that the kings are infallible, that governing authorities are infallible. If we look at the history of Israel's kings in the Bible, we learn that invariably they fail.

They sin in judgment. As verse 12 makes clear, kings do at times do evil and it is an abomination to the Lord when they do. So then verse 10 is expressing God's ideal, his paradigm, not the pattern of human kings.

This is similar to the exhortation that we receive in the New Testament from Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 13 verses 1 to 4. It says, Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,

for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resist what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority?

Then do what is good and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

[22 : 24] We'd be wrong to assume that Paul must have wrote these verses when there was a very benevolent Roman ruler. In fact, the Roman ruler at the time Paul wrote this was Emperor Nero, the same Nero notorious for his reckless extravagance and tyranny, the one known particularly for his callousness and cruelty toward Christians.

Nonetheless, Paul commands Christians to be subject to governing authorities for there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God.

There are times, yes, when we must practice civil disobedience and say as the apostles did in Acts 5.29, we must obey God rather than men. But the apostles, even as they did this, were still subject to the governing authorities.

authorities. They still preserved a sense of deference toward the governing authorities. For example, in Acts chapter 21 verses 1 to 5, when Paul is being tried unfairly by the Sanhedrin and is ordered by the high priest to be struck on the mouth, Paul responds to them by saying, God's going to strike you, you whitewashed wall.

Are you sitting to judge me according to the law and yet contrary to the law, you order me to be struck? It's a pretty vigorous defense and accusation. But when onlookers scold Paul saying, would you revile God's high priest?

[24 : 02] Paul does not say, he who disobeys God's law is no high priest. Paul does not say that. Instead he says, I did not know, my brothers, that he was the high priest.

for it is written, you shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people. This is because there is a sense in which all authority is derived authority from God.

This is why David, even when he was fleeing from Saul who had gone mad and was trying to kill him, even though David knew that he was supposed to be king over Israel, he refused to kill Saul when he had the opportunity saying that Saul is Lord's anointed.

Likewise, we should preserve, even when we disagree with the policies of the governing authorities instituted by God, we should preserve a sense of respect for their office because earthly rulers teach us that we are a people under authority, that we should live with a posture of humble submission under the sovereignty of the Lord ultimately.

And this is the truth that Proverbs 16.10 is expressing and the oracle is on the lips of a king. His mouth does not sin in judgment. Verse 11 continues this train of thought, A just balance and scales are the Lord's.

[25 : 22] All the weights in the bag are his work. The just balance and scales refer to the measuring equipment for commercial activity when you're trading and buying and selling.

And it's here used to illustrate the concept of justice. Equal weights and just scales are the Lord's words. They are his work.

This truth is very emphatic here because every verse in this second half, in verses 10 to 15, has the word king in it. It's about the king, the intermediate rule of a king, except verse 11.

It doesn't have the word king in it. It's the only verse in this second half that has the word Lord in it. In this passage about kings, this verse about the Lord stands out, and it's intended to emphasize that it is not the human king's prerogative to tilt the scales of justice for selfish gain.

The king is not, in the ultimate sense, the arbiter of justice. He's merely the administrator of God's justice. And verse 12 gives the reason why justice is so important.

[26 : 32] It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness. The word establish is the same word that's used in verse 3. Commit your work to the Lord and your plans will be established.

And verse 9, the heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. So then, if the king wants his plans and his steps to be established, he should make sure to eschew evil and embrace righteousness.

He should make sure that his works are committed to the Lord. And this is why even the most depraved rulers try to do some good during their reign.

Because if they don't, and all they encourage is depravity and decadence, society would crumble and their rule itself would be undermined.

Their throne would not be established. The human king rules at God's behest and therefore he should establish his throne by righteousness. Since, as Psalm 89 verse 14 says, righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne.

[27 : 44] And when the king's throne is established by righteousness, he delights in righteousness and detests wickedness. Verses 13 to 14 say this, Righteous lips are the delight of a king and he loves him who speaks what is right.

A king's wrath is a messenger of death and a wise man will appease it. The king who rules in accordance with God's law rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness.

However, a wise man knows how to appease the king when his wrath is provoked. That's what verse 14 says and that was the subject of chapter 14 verse 35.

Chapter 15 verse 1. A servant who deals wisely has the king's favor, but his wrath falls on one who acts shamefully. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

By a soft, timely word, a wise person placates the king's wrath. And if the king's wrath is like a messenger of death, verse 15 describes the king's favor this way.

[28 : 53] It says, In the light of a king's face there is life and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. The light of a king's face is a metaphor for the king's favor.

That's the meaning of the Aaronic blessing in number 625 when it says the Lord make his face shine upon you. It's saying, May the Lord look upon you with favor.

And when the king's face lights upon you with favor, it says it brings life. Similarly, his favor, he says, is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.

The summer harvest depended on the spring rain. So the clouds that bring the spring rain were a welcome sight. The king's favor then is likened to the sun and to the rain clouds, both of which were vital sources of life in the ancient Near East, in this agrarian society.

So then the Lord, the king of kings, rules and gives life to people through kings who are his intermediaries. And so the logic of the passage is that we ought to relate to governing authorities with the posture of humble submission under the sovereignty, the ultimate sovereignty of the Lord.

[30 : 11] But as we know from the Bible's history, Israel's kings were by and large all disappointments. Even the wise king Solomon, who wrote this book, the Proverbs, did not live up to his own teaching in the end.

1 Kings 11 recounts the tragic fall of Solomon. It says he loved foreign women and had 700 wives and 300 concubines who turned away his heart from the Lord and turned his heart after other gods. Solomon fell into idolatry and for this reason the Lord raised up an adversary to oppose Solomon and decreed that the kingdom would be torn away from him and his son in the next generation.

The vast majority of subsequent kings after Solomon were no better. They perverted justice and perpetrated evil. They produced misery and suffering for their subjects.

And for that reason the Israelites were an oppressed people. They were conquered first by the Assyrians, then by the Babylonians, then by the Persians, then by the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and then again finally by the Romans.

[31 : 21] And after over 700 years of subjugation, the long-awaited messianic king, Jesus Christ, came. The king on whose lips will be the oracles of God.

The king who does not sin in judgment. The king whose throne is established by righteousness. The king whose favor, whose grace brings us life.

Unlike the kings who abused and took advantage of their subjects, Jesus gave his life for his people. We were all disloyal subjects.

We had all rebelled against God. We had all rejected God as our king. And his wrath had to be appeased. His justice had to be satisfied.

We were destined to be hounded by the messenger of death that is the king's wrath. But the king, out of his love for us, out of love for his subjects, sent his only son, the heir to the throne, his son Jesus Christ, in order to reconcile us to himself.

[32 : 31] And Jesus made atonement for us. The word atone in verse 6 and the word appease in verse 14 are different translations of the same Hebrew word.

It means to cover. It means to cleanse. And Jesus, the heir, the son who should have ruled in glory, humbled himself and died on that hideous cross to save filthy, feckless traitors like us.

We were alienated from God by our sins and he reconciled us to God by making atonement for our sins. God was alienated from us by his wrath toward our sins.

But the son averted his wrath by bearing the penalty for our treason. And Jesus didn't stay dead. It says in Ephesians 1, 20-23 that God the Father raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

[33 : 59] Jesus is now at the right hand of God the Father above all other rulers and authorities. He is reigning over all. And this truth is our greatest hope.

As citizens of God's kingdom, we have a generous, benevolent king, a just king. It's this truth that enables us to live with a posture of humble submission under the sovereignty of the Lord.

When the nations rage, when peoples plot, Jesus is on the throne. When the kings of the earth set themselves against the Lord and against his anointed, Jesus is on the throne.

When the greatest superpower of the last century appears to be imploding, Jesus is still on the throne. When the pandemic rages, Jesus is on the throne.

When your life seems to be spiraling out of control, Jesus is on the throne. He is in control. And that's the hope for believers, that we have a king who reigns.

[35 : 08] And I pray that God will make us a church in these unusual circumstances that lives with faith-filled dependence and humble submission under the sovereignty of our king.