

# SOVEREIGN

## *When the Sovereignty of God and the Will of Humans Intersect*

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This paper is addressed to those who are studying or have studied *Live a Praying Life*.

It builds on the truths presented in the study. **It fits into the information FOLLOWING Week 3.**

As we progress in our understanding of prayer, we return again and again to the centerpiece, the cornerstone and foundational truth upon which every prayer principle rests: the sovereignty of God. This is the nucleus around which all truth orbits. This is the gravitational force that holds all the pieces together. God is sovereign.

We recognize that the power of prayer lies in this: IT RELEASES THE POWER OF GOD TO ACCOMPLISH THE PURPOSES OF GOD. This brings the thinking person to an apparent dilemma. If prayer always releases all the power of God, opening the way for Him to accomplish all of His purpose in His way and in His time, then how do we understand the free will of human beings as it pertains to prayer? In spite of prayer, couldn't a human choose not to cooperate with God and so frustrate the will of God in any given circumstance?

It's important to understand this because in nearly all cases a human being's choices and actions are involved in the answer. If we believe that a human being can thwart or resist God's plan, then prayer will seem futile and it will be impossible to pray with complete confidence.

The answer to every question is in the Word of God. It does no good to speculate or postulate. If we can come to the Word having laid aside all of our preconceived ideas and the answers we expect to find and let the living, active Word of God speak, we will find answers that are both intellectually and spiritually satisfying.

God makes this promise to those who seek out truth from Him:

My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will discern the fear of the Lord And discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding (Prov. 2:1-6).

From years of crying out for discernment and lifting my voice for understanding on this topic, I have reached some conclusions that I fully believe to be consistent with the whole counsel of God. I humbly present them to you in the following paragraphs, asking that the precious Spirit would take all that is of Jesus and make it known to us (John 16:14-15).

Let me state clearly what we are addressing in this paper. **How does the sovereignty of God operate when the will of a human being is involved in the answer to prayer?**

Here are the points we will examine from Scripture, building the case that God is always sovereign and His purpose is never thwarted if His power is being released through prayer.

The Lord of hosts has sworn saying, ‘Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand,... For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?’ (Isa.14:24-27).

## UNBELIEVERS

1. Unbelievers are not free, but are in bondage to Satan.
2. Satan's freedom is limited by God's sovereignty. Satan is only free to act if his actions will set the stage for God's purpose to be accomplished.
  - a. Does God have the power and does He ever restrain an unbeliever from committing a particular sin in a particular moment?
  - b. Does God ever intentionally allow unbelievers to commit sinful acts in order to bring about His own ends?
  - c. Does God ever take the initiative to stir up the imagination of unbelievers so that they act in ways consistent with their own nature, yet bringing about God's purpose?
  - d. Does God ever cause an unbeliever to act in ways that are contrary to his own inclinations?

## BELIEVERS

1. God promises supernatural spiritual wisdom to those seeking Him. Can a believer who is seeking God's will accidentally act outside His will?
2. Does God ever allow a believer to operate *intentionally* in his or her flesh because the results that will be produced will serve God's purposes and bring about situations that set the stage for the next step in His plan?
3. Does God ever use this intervening power to stop a believer who is determined to act in his or her flesh?

You notice that in making the points, my question is "Does God ever...?" This is why I am looking at these points from that view: If He EVER acts in a given way, then we know that (1) it is in His power to do so; (2) it is a way that He does use His power. Therefore, if He does not act in that way in a given situation, He has not acted in that way INTENTIONALLY. In other words, if He ever keeps evil from happening, then when He doesn't prevent evil it is the deliberate exercise of His will NOT to prevent it.

## UNBELIEVERS

### **I. Unbelievers are not free, but are in bondage to Satan.**

What is the condition of a lost person? How does the Scripture define lostness?

#### *Blind*

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

First we see that, to an unsaved person ON HIS OWN—apart from the direct moving of the Spirit—the gospel is “veiled.” The word “veil” means covering. The first mention of “veil” with spiritual significance is in reference to the building of the tabernacle. “You shall hang up the veil under the clasps, and shall bring in the ark of the testimony there within the veil; and *the veil shall serve for you as a partition between the holy place and the holy of holies*” (Ex. 26:33, italics added). The veil in the tabernacle and later the Temple separated humans from the direct presence of God. It hid God from mankind’s view.

In 1 Corinthians 3:14-16 we read: “But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” Not only is this referring to Jews, but to all unbelievers, as made clear in ensuing passages (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:3-4). The truth is there for all to see, but not all can see it. To some it is veiled. A veil is covering the mind and understanding of an unbeliever.

One thing that Scripture tells us about an unsaved person is that he or she is blind—*cannot* see. He is being blinded by “the god of this world.” There is an active and intentional strategy in play that blinds the mind of the unbeliever.

### ***Spiritually Dead***

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience(Eph. 2:1-2).

When you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive with Him (Col. 2:13).

What does it mean to be dead? It means to be unresponsive to your environment. If my body were dead, although there would still be light, my body would be unresponsive to it. My dead body CANNOT interact with the physical world. My body cannot feel or respond to anything in the physical world. If my body were dead, it would not feel hunger or thirst. It would not feel too hot or too cold. It would not feel need of any kind.

An unsaved person is spiritually dead. This person cannot respond to anything in the spiritual realm He cannot comprehend spiritual truth. “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14).

To further complicate matters, the prince of the power of the air is “now working” in the unbeliever to keep him in his state of death. The word translated “working” in this verse is the Greek word *energeo*. It means to work fervently, with energy, and to be effective and powerful. It is the same word used of God’s work in the believer. The enemy’s forces are actively and efficiently operating in the unbeliever to keep him or her from the truth.

While the spiritual faculty is dead, every other faculty is alive. He is alive toward sin, but dead toward God. Therefore, sin rules unchallenged. Everything about this person that was created to be an “instrument of righteousness” is instead an “instrument of unrighteousness.” Sin is master over him. (Rom. 6:13-14) Satan’s forces are actively, aggressively, and effectively enslaving him, but at the same time are creating in him the illusion that he is free.

### *Slaves*

Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin’ (John 8:34).

In this passage (John 8:31-47), Jesus makes clear that unbelievers are slaves. He does not bother to say so diplomatically. He says it clearly and without equivocation. The unbelievers who were debating Him at that moment give us meaningful insight into the mind of an unbeliever. They are outraged and offended that Jesus said they were not free. They insist that they are free. Jesus insists that they are not free. He says that, unwittingly, they are doing the will of the devil. Believing themselves to be free, they are carrying out Satan’s agenda. Stop and read this passage. I want you to see how open this is. There is no couched language, no subtext.

According to Jesus, freedom can come only one way: “If the Son makes you free, then you will be free indeed” (v. 36).

Unbelievers are captives, but are deluded as to their condition. “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19).

**II. Satan's freedom is limited by God's sovereignty. Satan is only free to act if his actions will set the stage for God's purpose to be accomplished.**

The matter about which you are praying will require an unbeliever to be influenced by God to do His will. Since this person has no relationship with God, how can we believe that through prayer his or her mind will be responsive to God's power?

We have already established that this unbeliever is not acting freely, but is acting in response to the spirit of rebellion now at work in him. But *Satan's freedom to operate is limited by God's sovereignty*. Satan's plans and schemes only come to fruition if they will set the stage for God's purpose to be accomplished. Let's first clearly establish this fact from Scripture.

Consider the dialogue between God and Satan in reference to Job (Job 1:6-12). How did Satan know that God had placed a protective hedge around Job and all his possessions (Job 1:10)? He knew because of the countless times he had tried to penetrate it. Until God gave permission, Satan was helpless and unable to breach God's hedge. God only allowed Satan to touch Job under the strictest guidelines. Why did God call Job to Satan's attention? Why did God goad Satan into targeting Job? I believe that Satan had given up on Job. I believe that Satan considered Job a lost cause. God opened the way for Satan to reach into Job's life because God wanted to accomplish something in Job that would require adversity. In order for Job to come to the deepest possible understanding of who God is and in order for God to produce in Job an "eternal weight of glory," Job had to be stripped of everything he prized so that the pride that had crept into his heart, the sense that he was deserving of his position, could be exposed. Through this process Job became more, not less. Satan was God's tool. Until God was ready to make use of Satan's plans (in a limited form), Satan could not touch Job. When Satan touched Job, it set the stage for God's purpose.

The following paragraphs are from *Riches Stored In Secret Places*:

God knows the thoughts of all people, even those who are hostile to Him. "[Jesus] did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:25). He is able to use even the thoughts and plans in the heart of a person--both believers and unbelievers--to bring about His divine purposes.

Have you ever thought about how detailed and exactly timed the arrest, trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus was? The exact timing had been established before the world began. God gave an elaborate and explicit picture of the timing when He established the feasts in the Old Covenant, generations before the event occurred in history. Jesus had to be on the cross and dead by sundown on Passover because He is the paschal lamb. The exact incident had to occur by twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month, the month of Nisan. He had to be in the ground before 6 p.m. because He is the whole burnt offering sacrifice for the nation. He had to be in the ground three days and three nights because He was prophesied to by Jonah in the belly of the whale. He had to be resurrected on the third day, the day following the Sabbath, the Feast of Firstfruits, because He is the Firstfruits of the Spirit. He had to be resurrected after sunset and before sunrise. Every detail of His ordeal was laid out in the beginning. God's timetable was exact. He did not deviate from it at all.

However, look at the events that put everything on this timetable. "Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching and chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people" (Luke 22:1-2). At exactly the right moment, Jesus' enemies began to act on their festering hatred and fear of Him. Until that moment, Jesus had always said, "My time is not yet come." Because of their impatience to finish the deed before the Sabbath, they called an unusual meeting of the Sanhedrin,

then they woke Pilate, then Herod (who just happened to be in Jerusalem at that time), and finally Pilate again. What should have taken several days at least was railroaded through by enemies of God. Because of their manipulation of events, every event occurred exactly on God's predetermined timetable, the timetable He had planned from the beginning of time and announced early in Israel's history.

"God works out everything for his own ends--even the wicked for the day of judgement" (Prov. 16:4 ). Satan is nothing more than a pawn in God's hands. Between the temptation of Jesus and His crucifixion, Satan was watching for a perfect time to carry out his own agenda. "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him *until an opportune time*" (Luke 4:13). Now--at this exact moment--Satan sees his opportunity. "Satan entered Judas,... And Judas went to the chief priest and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. ...He...*watched for an opportunity* to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present" (Luke 22:3-5). Satan had found the opportune time for which he had been watching. The irony is that it was God's opportune time, not Satan's.

Through every page of scripture God shows us His ways. He uses everything to work out His own purposes. His purpose will prevail no matter what plans are in the hearts of men. Every one of God's enemies, though they plotted and fought against His people, became the means to His end. You and I, His children who are in covenant relationship with Him, are never at the mercy of any person or any circumstance. God is never taken by surprise at any person's decisions or actions. He has already factored them in to His purpose and plan for us.

God is completely in control. Satan is acting only as God permits him to act. If the answer to your prayer will require an unbeliever to be responsive to God, remember: (1) an unbeliever is under Satan's power; (2) Satan is under God's power. Therefore, even an unbeliever is under God's power.

Now let's continue by posing some questions about how God has shown Himself capable and willing to act in regards to unbelievers.

**a. Does God have the power and does He ever restrain an unbeliever from committing a particular sin in a particular moment?**

Consider the story of Joseph. Joseph's evil brothers with evil intent, who were not attuned to God nor interested in His guidance, made a masterful, intricate plan to kill Joseph and hide their culpability. The Bible gives a condensed account. Imagine how many long and involved conversations and how much individual thought must have gone into such a scheme. Imagine the brainstorming sessions as they created their plot, considering and then rejecting several options; finally settling on one that seemed to have no loopholes. Evil, evil, evil. Plotting scheming, fine-tuning the idea until they had ironed out all the wrinkles; deciding who would do what; laying the trap.<sup>1</sup> Their opportunity serendipitously presents itself when Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers. The Bible leaves no room to speculate on their intent:

...they plotted against him to put him to death. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer! Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, "A wild beast devoured him"'(Gen. 37:18-20).

Although the brothers had every intention of killing Joseph, God did not allow it. First, God uses Rueben to restrain them. "Let's don't kill him," Rueben suggests. "Let's don't shed any blood. Let's just throw him in this pit out in the wilderness instead." Now here comes the good part. The brothers, having thrown Joseph into the pit, sat down to eat a

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<sup>1</sup> This is my imagination. The Bible states it as though they saw Joseph in the distance and came up with a plan to kill him. This is often how a story is told in the Old Testament. Based on our own knowledge of human nature and our own experiences, we can rightly imagine some of the details of an event. For example, when the story of Abraham being called on to sacrifice Isaac is recorded in Genesis 22, verse 2 tells us that God told Abraham take his son Isaac and sacrifice him. Verse 3 says, "So Abraham rose early

meal "...and behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead...on their way... down to Egypt" (Gen. 37:25). What a coincidence! Behold! Just at that moment a band of traders pass by that very spot on their way to Egypt—right where God wants Joseph. Only then did the brothers decide not to kill Joseph.

Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers listened to him (Gen. 37:26-27).

What if the band of traders had come along earlier or later than they did? What if they had been taking another route or if the brothers had been eating their meal at another spot? What if the traders had been headed somewhere other than Egypt? What if they were of some occupation other than traders, one not disposed to buying and selling? Behold! Everything came together in a single moment to move God's plan forward. And notice—neither the brothers nor the Ishmaelite traders were seeking God' direction.

Notice further, Reuben was the brother who initially kept Joseph from being killed. His plan was to sneak back to the pit and rescue Joseph and return him to their father. That seems like a good and noble plan, doesn't it? But, you see, it was Reuben's plan. Well-intentioned though it was, it was not God's plan. Reuben's plan would not have accomplished God's plan. God needed Joseph in Egypt. Not only did God override overtly evil plans and substitute His own plan, He also prevented a well-meaning but flesh-born plan from being carried out. Only His plan would prevail. "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails (Prov. 19:21, NIV). "The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps" (Prov. 16:9).

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in the morning and saddled his donkey and... went to the place of which God had told him." You know that between verses 2 and 3 lay along, agonizing night of struggle. It is left to us to imagine.

In Psalm 105 we learn that while the Hebrew nation was "...only a few men in number, a very few..." while they were wandering unprotected in the land that would one day be theirs, "He permitted no man to oppress them." (Psalm 105: 11-15).

In Exodus 34, God instructs that three times a year the men of Israel are to "...appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel." He promises them that while they are absent from their land three times a year, "...no man shall covet your land when you go up three times a year to appear before the Lord your God" (Ex. 34:23-24).

Finally, look at Jesus during the time that He was limited to an earth-bound frame. No matter how His enemies plotted and schemed, they were prevented from acting until the appointed time.

So they were seeking to seize Him; and no man laid his hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come (John 7:30).

These words He spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come (John 8:20).

Does God have the power and does He ever restrain an unbeliever from committing a particular sin in a particular moment? The Bible is clear that the answer is yes. If God *can*, but *does not*, then He **intentionally** does not restrain the unbeliever's behavior. It is not out of God's helplessness that an unbeliever acts in his sin, but in God's providence.

**b. Does God ever intentionally allow unbelievers to commit sinful acts in order to bring about His own ends?**

If He has the power to restrain unbelievers, then it is clear that many times He allows unbelievers to act seemingly without restraint. This is only so when the unbeliever's actions will set the stage for the next step in the working out of God's purpose. The actions of an unbeliever are always, always being harnessed and held in check by God.

They are never acting without restraint. The full-scale plan of the enemy is never fully being carried out.

Let's look at Joseph again. Some of his brothers' evil plans succeeded, but what did those actions set in motion?

Brother's treachery ⇒ Ishmaelite traders ⇒ Egypt ⇒ Potiphar ⇒ Potiphar's wife ⇒ prison ⇒ meeting with cup bearer and baker ⇒ audience with Pharaoh ⇒ promotion in Egypt ⇒ provision for Israel ⇒ Israel in Egypt ⇒ Moses ⇒ Passover ⇒ ⇒⇒⇒ Jesus.  
One thing leads to the next. Each event sets the stage for the next step.

Do you see? By allowing Joseph's brothers to act out some part of their evil, God was advancing His plan. All along the way there were moments when it appeared that Joseph's enemies were acting without restraint. Yet not one single step was a false step. Every event led straight to God's goal.

Several generations before Joseph, God told Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved, but, at a specified time, would be returned to Canaan. This you will find in Genesis 15:12-16. In the course of His disclosures to Abraham, God says, "Then in the fourth generation they (Israelites) will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." The Amorites were the major inhabitants of Canaan. God said that He was allowing their iniquity to reach a certain measure, one He had determined, and then they would be overthrown. He was in control of how far their iniquity went. I think this is because sin must sometimes be played all the way out for the consequences to become obvious. In the middle, sin can still appear to be pleasant and easy. God would allow the Amorites to engage in their iniquity until they began to reap the results. They would be at their weakest and most vulnerable and Israel would conquer them. Sometimes God allows a sin to be complete, reach its fullness, before He turns it around and uses it for His purpose. But He is always in control of how far it will go.

Look again at Jesus while He was in an earth-body. As He approached His crucifixion and had every appearance of being a victim of evil, He said to Pilate: ““You would have no authority over Me unless it had been given you from above”” (John 19:11). Do you see that Pilate was carrying out Satan’s agenda, but only because Satan was unwittingly advancing God’s agenda. In Acts 2:23 we read, “...this man, delivered over by the pre-determined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross *by the hands of godless men* and put Him to death.” God allowed godless men to carry out their plans. Why? Because it would accomplish His purpose!

If a situation about which you are praying seems to take a wrong turn—if an unbeliever seems to be thwarting God’s work—step back and get a look at the big picture. Take into account that God is managing the entire situation and that He is a micro-manager. Not one small detail is lost to Him. What God is doing is, at the moment, in the invisible realm. But count on it—He is in control. Walk by faith and not by sight.

**c. Does God ever take the initiative to stir up the imagination of unbelievers so that they act in ways consistent with their own nature, yet bringing about God’s purpose?**

Does God ever initiate and create and direct the actions of unbelievers? Does He ever use their natural inclinations to set them on a particular course that will bring about His purposes?

In Exodus 1:7-10 we read how the Hebrew nation went from being a protected people in Egypt to being slaves in Egypt.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us,

and fight against us and depart from the land.” So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor (Ex. 1:8-11).

In Psalm 105:24-25 we read about the same event, this time told from heaven’s perspective rather than earth’s.

And He caused His people to be very fruitful, And made them stronger than their adversaries. *He turned their heart* (the Egyptians) to hate His people, To deal craftily with His servants (Ps. 105:24-25, italics and parenthesis added).

God turned their heart against His people. God was working out an eternal agenda and He used the evil inclinations of the pharaoh’s heart, steering him in a direction that would move events toward God’s objective. “The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases (Prov 21:1, NIV).

Some 400 years later when Moses led the Israelites out from Egypt, at the last minute the pharaoh changed his mind and decided to pursue the Israelites to bring them back. God says it happened like this: “Thus I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army,...As for Me, behold I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them” (Ex. 14:4, 31).

God was setting the stage for the display of His power. The Egyptians would act in ways consistent with their character; God would not turn them from being righteous to being evil, but He would use their own mindset and inclinations and move them to take action that would provide Him with the platform He wanted.

Years passed. The Israelites entered the Promised Land under Joshua’s leadership. Forty years earlier God had promised the Israelites that they would conquer the land. Now He was making good on His promise.

There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle. *For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts*, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as the Lord had commanded Moses (Josh. 11:19-20).

It was the Lord's doing that caused the inhabitants of the land to meet Israel in battle. Why? So that Joshua could utterly destroy them. God did not want His people making compromises with their enemies. He was laying out in picture form His plan for dealing with Satan and his forces. No peace treaties. No reaching an understanding. Utter, total destruction. But in order for Israel to overcome the inhabitants, they had to meet them in battle. God engineered it.

Now move with me to Isaiah 10. Israel, stubborn and unresponsive to the prophets' warnings, came under God's judgment. The "rod of [His] anger," the instrument He used to enact judgment, was the pagan nation of Assyria. Isaiah 10:5-15 is how God described His activity.

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger  
And the staff in whose hands is My indignation,  
I send it against a godless nation  
And commission it against the people of My fury (Isa. 10:5-6).

*Assyria is the tool God is using. He is sending them and commissioning them.*

Yet it does not so intend,  
Nor does it plan so in its heart,  
But rather it is its purpose to destroy  
And to cut off many nations (Isa. 10:7).

*Assyria has other plans. Their purpose is to destroy many nations instead of just little Israel.*

*In verses 12-14, the king of Assyria boasts of his victory. God then points out how ludicrous it is for Assyria to boast.*

Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it? Is the saw to exalt itself over the one who wields it? That would be like a club wielding those who lift it, Or like a rod lifting him who is not wood (Isa. 10:15).

God used Assyria for His own purposes. He was in control from beginning to end. Assyria's plans did not come to fruition, but God's plan did.

When the situation about which you are praying seems to be controlled by an unbeliever taking a wrong, rebellious action, God is in control. Wait it out. Watch. When it all comes together you will see—what looked wrong in the moment turned out to be necessary to the process.

**d. Does God ever cause an unbeliever to act in ways that are contrary to his own inclinations?**

Does God have the power and does He ever cause an unbeliever, whose natural inclination would cause him to be hostile to a believer, to be favorable instead? Can God actually impose upon an unbeliever a viewpoint that is sympathetic to and consistent with God's plan?

The story of Joseph, once again, affords us a look into this issue. Acts 7:10 says that God gave Joseph favor in the eyes of Pharaoh. Genesis 39:3-4 tells us that God caused Joseph's master to have favor on Joseph. Genesis 39:21 says, "The Lord gave Joseph favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison."

Look in Ezra 1. The time had come when God wanted his temple rebuilt. God fulfilled His promises to Israel through Jeremiah that the captivity would last only seventy years. When that period ended, He raised up Cyrus the Persian to conquer the Babylonians, who

had captured the Israelites. One of Cyrus' first public acts as the new king of Babylon was to encourage the Jews to return to Palestine to rebuild the ruined house of Jehovah. Cyrus was a pagan king. Although he appeared to believe in Jehovah, he only believed Him to be one of many deities. Yet God inspired this pagan king to encourage the Israelites to rebuild the Temple.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing (Ezra 1:1).

The proclamation called for any Israelites who could to help with rebuilding the Temple and for all Hebrews to contribute any way they could to the construction. God wanted His temple rebuilt. He moved the heart of Cyrus, not only to *desire*, but also to *act* so that the Temple was rebuilt.

Throughout the book of Ezra, though enemies made attempts to stop the work, pagan kings and governors continued to issue decrees allowing the rebuilding of the Temple. Ezra testified over and over that it was because the good hand of the Lord was upon him.

Next came time for the wall around Jerusalem to be rebuilt. Again, God would move through pagan kings to make it possible for His people to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king, received news that the Jews in Jerusalem were under duress and prevented from working on the wall. Nehemiah was devastated. Finally, four months after having received this news, Nehemiah was presented an opportunity to ask King Artaxerxes<sup>2</sup> for permission to leave the king's house and return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah requested also letters from the king to governors and others in authority granting him safe passage and supplies. The king acquiesced to every one of Nehemiah's requests. In fact, it gave him pleasure to do so (Neh. 2:6). How did

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars disagree on whether or not this king was the same Artaxerxes who issued the "stop work" decree in Ezra 4:18-22. Either way, the king's ready agreement to Nehemiah's request was unusual.

Nehemiah explain the king's willingness to help him? "And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me" (Neh. 2:8).

Finally, look at the anti-Christ. All of his evil is laid out by God as His purpose and plan. Although the anti-Christ is pure, unmixed evil, his activities are controlled by God. God has determined when he will be allowed to come on the scene, how far his evil plans will succeed, and the duration of his reign of evil. Even the anti-Christ will bring about God's purposes.

## **Conclusion**

You can see that God is able to direct the thoughts and intentions of unbelievers. His sovereignty is not limited by man's will. You can be sure that God knows how to put all the pieces in place that will accomplish His will. If, for a period of time during the process, it appears that evil is setting the agenda, you can remember that appearance is not truth. You can know the truth and not be fooled by the appearance.

## **BELIEVERS**

### **I. God promises supernatural wisdom to those who seek Him. Believers who are seeking His wisdom will not accidentally miss it.**

"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Wisdom is promised to believers for the asking. He gives it gladly, generously, no strings attached. When the answer to your prayers will require that a believer who wants to know God's will has wisdom, you can be absolutely sure that it will be so. God knows how to make Himself known to His people. If He can turn the minds of those who are not seeking Him, surely He can and will direct those who long to hear Him.

He has given His people the ability to discern or appraise all things from a spiritual standpoint, which will allow them to know the truth of any situation (1 Cor. 2:15). He can enlighten the eyes of their hearts to see beyond the appearance (Eph. 1:17-19).

**a. Does God ever allow a believer to operate *intentionally* in his or her flesh because the results will serve God's purposes and set the stage for the next step in His plan?**

We are talking here about a believer who is resisting God; who is determined to act in his flesh. We are not talking about a believer who genuinely wants to know and do God's will. God is able to move upon that believer with such irresistible power that the person will be drawn to act in accordance with the Spirit. On the other hand, when He does not do so—when He allows a believer to act in his flesh—it is because the results will serve God's purpose.

‘Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers’ (Luke 22:31-32).

Jesus tells Simon that Satan has asked permission to put him to the test. Obviously, if Satan asked permission, God could have denied him that permission. No doubt, God had denied him permission numerous times. But this time Satan was given permission to tempt Simon. God knew before the event that Simon Peter would be defeated, in the moment, by the test. However, the Father also knew that Peter would repent and turn again. His plan was to use Peter's failure and subsequent repentance and restoration to strengthen believers. Peter's failure and Jesus' response to him would mark Peter for the rest of his life. Through Simon Peter's fall into temptation, God would be able to accomplish and teach things that He could not have had Peter never fallen.

There will be times when God, working out the process of His will, allows a believer to fall. When you are praying about a situation and you see this principle at work, you can be certain that God is in control. You can rest in the fact that He is in the process of working out a great and eternal plan. You can trust that this bump in the road is really His sovereignty in operation.

**b. Does God ever use His intervening power to *stop* a believer who is determined to act in his or her flesh?**

If God, in working out His purposes, sometimes allows a believer to intentionally act in his or her flesh, then does He sometimes stop a believer who is determined to act in his or her flesh? Consider the story of Balaam in Numbers 22:22-35. Read the whole account so you can get this in its proper context.

Balaam is a prophet of the Lord. King of the Moabites, Baalak, wants to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. At the point we take up this story, Balaam has told the men from Baalak that he will retire for the night and see what God will say to him. “God came to Balaam at night and said to him, ‘If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do’ (Num. 22:20). The next morning, Balaam did not wait to see if the men would come to call him. Instead he saddled up his donkey and set out (v. 21). God was angry with him because he was going and sent an angel to intercept him forcefully on his way. “But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him.... The angel of the Lord said to him,... ‘Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me’” (Num.22:25, 32).

God has the power to intervene in the affairs of a believer who is acting in the flesh with such force as to stop him or her in his tracks. If this is what is necessary for putting God’s will into place, then this is exactly what God will do. Otherwise, He is intentionally not intervening to stop the action.

## **Conclusion**

When you pray the prayer of faith under the leadership of the Spirit, do not let your faithstand be shaken when circumstances take a turn that seems wrong to you at the moment. The power of God is fully able to accomplish all that needs to be accomplished to bring about the fitting conclusion. Wait it out. His plans are for good and not for evil. His plans are to give you a future and a hope.

Nothing can keep God from being able to do all that He intends to do. Nothing, except lack of prayer. But, don't worry. He has that covered. He has intercessors on call day and night.

“I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezek 22:30-31).