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## **God's Sovereignty and Everyday Life**

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### **Introduction**

In the pews of most churches today, the sovereignty of God is a concept as much accepted as it is ignored. At best, believers gain a general sense of comfort from the idea. At worst, Christians use the idea as justification to blame God for hardship, suffering, tragedy, natural disaster, sickness, or evil in general; or one's own sin,

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shortcomings, or failures. More mature Christians tend to fall somewhere in the middle of those extremes, but the sovereignty of God is a concept writ large throughout the Scriptures. As one of the most important doctrines to the Christian faith, how can it be made accessible and practical to the Christian's everyday life?

Some Christians walk head down, so focused solely on the task at hand that they lose sight of the big picture. They wonder whether anything they do is of any consequence at all. Others run around at an almost maniacal pace, filling their days with Christian activity, but so often they forget to step back and see where they fit in God's sovereign plan of redemption. God is sovereignly writing history, and He wants to include every one of His children in it.

The sovereignty of God, stated in simple terms, is the biblical doctrine that God is in control of all things and directs all things for His good purposes. Passages that teach God's sovereignty include:

The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and **his kingdom rules over all**. (*Psalm 103:19*)

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. **He does as he pleases** with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" (*Daniel 4:35*)

And we know that **in all things God works for the good** of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (*Romans 8:28*)

He is before all things, and **in him all things hold together**. (*Colossians 1:17*)

God's sovereignty can also be couched in the language of redemption. The Bible is redemptive history—God's story of redemption. Ever since that fateful day in the Garden of Eden, God has been constantly, relentlessly redeeming mankind and creation, all under the auspices of His sovereignty. In the language of postmodernism, it's the ultimate metanarrative.

Taught as clearly as the doctrine of God's sovereignty in the Scriptures is that of man's responsibility. God is sovereign in such a way that man's choices are real and that he is responsible for those choices. Passages teaching this include:

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. (*James 1:13*)

But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a man, and whoever offers a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like

one who presents pig's blood, and whoever burns memorial incense, like one who worships an idol. **They have chosen their own ways**, and their souls delight in their abominations; so I also will choose harsh treatment for them and will bring upon them what they dread. For when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened. They did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me." (*Isaiah 66:3-4*)

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (*Romans 9:19-20*)

These passages show clearly that man is responsible for his choices. If man was not able to make real choices of his own, it would be unjust of God to hold him responsible for those choices.

Doing justice to the dynamic between God's sovereignty and human responsibility is beyond the scope of this article. Simply put (if that is possible), God sovereignly ordains the ends (everything will work out the way He has planned), but He also sovereignly ordains the means (our everyday choices are eminently meaningful in His plans). Returning to the language of redemption, God has been writing His story of redemption throughout history and continues to do so. All of us have a story, and God wants to include every one of us in His story. God is redeeming every believer and wants to use every believer, through his or her everyday life, to redeem the universe.

### **Romans 8: The Redemption of Creation and of God's Children**

The interweaving of God's sovereignty as displayed in redemptive history and the everyday life of a believer can be seen clearly in Romans 8:19-29:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit

intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (*Romans 8:19-29*)

The first four chapters of Romans (1-4) can be summarized as teaching the doctrine of justification (i.e. the process of God giving birth to His children). The next four chapters (5-8) are primarily about glorification (i.e. the process of God making every believer like Christ, until eventually s/he is sinless like Him), which includes sanctification. It can be said that the book of Romans is about redemption (both how God is sovereignly accomplishing redemption as well as our part in redemption). In Romans 8:19-29, Paul ruminates on redemption as he describes three types of groaning in the universe.

### **The First Groaning: Creation**

First, Paul says that creation is groaning—he personifies creation as a frustrated being. In verses 20-21, he describes creation as being “subjected to frustration” and in “bondage to decay.”

For **the creation was subjected to frustration**, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from **its bondage to decay** and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (*Romans 8:20-21*)

The Second Law of Thermodynamics is a restatement of the truth found in this verse: everything in the universe is decaying. This is happening within God's sovereign plan, and it will continue this way until He sovereignly redeems creation one day. Creation is in bondage to decay, and it is waiting to be freed from this bondage.

Next Paul explains that creation's freedom is contingent on a very important event. Creation will experience freedom from its bondage once God's children experience their own liberation.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. (*Romans 8:19*)

... that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (*Romans 8:21*)

In other words, creation is waiting for the children of God to experience their freedom, because that is what is keeping it from experiencing freedom itself. We might imagine creation crying out,

“Hurry, children of God! I’m waiting for you to be liberated, so I myself can be free!”

Paul then draws a parallel between the groaning of creation and the pains of childbirth. I believe he was thinking about Genesis 3, when creation first began to groan.

16 To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase **your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.** Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” 17 To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ **Cursed is the ground because of you;** through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. 18 **It will produce thorns and thistles for you.**” (*Genesis 3:16-18*)

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they were cursed. The curse given to Eve (and to all women) was greatly increased pain in childbearing. It can be said that this pain was not limited to birth pain; it was to encompass the whole arena of relationships: relational pain. In a similar way, Adam’s curse (and that of all men) was specifically related to his work (the ground was cursed and would produce thorns and thistles), but in a broader sense, it resulted in vocational pain. These two curses of relational and vocational pain point to the entire effect of sin on mankind and the world.

In the Garden of Eden, God put man in charge of the world, which was obedient to him. Man was ruler of the world in behalf of God, under God. When man disobeyed God, the universe followed suit and disobeyed man (including water, animals, cells, the ground, etc.). *The evil nature of nature* began in the Garden that day. All natural disasters—earthquakes, which shake the very ground; hurricanes, which have the power to move oceans; tornadoes, droughts, epidemics, diseases, accidents—stem from man’s rebellion against God. Sin can be categorized in two ways: (sinful) human beings and natural disasters (used here in a broad sense; i.e. any non-human thing, event, or being affected by sin).

However, it is important to note that God sovereignly allowed creation to rebel; it was a part of His plan to redeem mankind. God revoked the power of man, seen in the obedient nature of nature, in order to show what man’s rebellious heart was like. When we see our own fallen nature reflected in the fallen nature of creation, it can be a wakeup call. The rebellion of creation is a living illustration of how we treat God. God intends for us to look at the fallen nature of

creation, then as a result see our rebellious nature within, and in turn, return to Him.

This is the reason Adam and Eve did not immediately die after their transgression. Although they deserved to die at once for their treason, they did not. In fact, they lived for quite some time longer (930 years in Adam's case). Why did God allow them to live? *His motive was redemption*. The duration of time Adam and Eve were given to live represented God's gracious patience (as is the case for the years of life given to every human being); He was giving them a chance to return to Him. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that God is gracious and compassionate, waiting for one more soul to return to Him. Thus, the question mankind should be asking is not, "Why must we die?" Rather it should be, "Why are we allowed to live?"

I believe that the twenty-first century view of God is affected by its view of man. According to this view, mankind is basically good at heart, so people deserve good things to happen to them. In turn, God is seen as a Santa Claus-type, grandfather figure. And when bad things happen to "good" people, they question God's existence, care, or sovereignty.

The Bible clearly teaches that God is gracious and compassionate. But it also instructs us that He is perfectly just and holy. The juxtaposition of those two statements (i.e. He loves sinners but must punish sin) is the reason God sent His only Son to die on the cross. By trusting in Christ, any sinful human being can join the family of God. Every death of every being; every act of rebellion by every criminal, child, baby, parent, student, teacher, employee, or boss; every natural disaster in every part of this world—every one of these is a reflection of man's rebellious heart. It is a reminder of our need to repent and return to the Lord. In turn, we can be a part of God's sovereign plan to redeem the universe.

Creation is groaning for its redemption. Continuing the metaphor, if you're sitting under a tree, sharing the gospel with a friend, that tree is groaning for your friend to be saved, because then it would be one step closer to redemption. To put it bluntly, all of creation is frustrated with us. It is groaning, because our dallying is keeping it from experiencing redemption. God is sovereignly redeeming the universe, and all of us are called to be a part of that redemption in our everyday lives.

### The Second Groaning: God's Children

Paul describes another type of groaning, that of God's children.

Not only so, but **we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly** as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (*Romans 8:23*)

The phrase, *firstfruits of the Spirit*, is an allusion to a concept most first century readers would be familiar with. After the harvest, the Israelites would bring as an offering to the Lord some of the fruits that ripened first. It was an expression of gratitude and a symbol of their devotion to Him. In essence they were saying to God, “All of this is from You, God. We give you these firstfruits as an acknowledgment that everything comes from You, and also as a symbol that we offer you the rest of our lives as well.”

But consider another perspective. The firstfruits represented hope in God's faithfulness: the firstfruits were an indication from God that much more was on the way. Similarly, the phrase, *firstfruits of the Spirit*, means that we have been given the “firstfruits” of the Spirit (justification and spiritual birth), but more is on the way (glorification and spiritual growth)!

An aspect of this dynamic can be seen in an experience almost every Christian can identify with. Even when we are spiritually dry, there is always seems to be at least a flicker of desire for God—that's the Spirit in us. Also, even when we are sinning, there is a part of us that wants to cry out to God—that desire is given by the Holy Spirit. That should be a great encouragement to us in our daily Christian life. It's as if God is saying to us, “The rest is coming! Trust Me. Press on.” In other words, the Spirit in us is a guarantee that God will sovereignly finish the work of salvation He started in us (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:22).

This idea is bolstered by Paul's use of the word *groan* in verse 23. *Stenazomen* is a causal participle, which means that the Spirit is the reason we groan. From the perspective of our sinful nature, why do we groan and get frustrated? Because we're not getting what we want. But from the perspective of our Spirit's nature, why do we groan and get frustrated? Because we aren't more like Christ, or because that person isn't trusting in Christ, or because someone somewhere isn't glorifying God. The cause of the type of groaning in this verse is the Holy Spirit in us.



As previously mentioned, believers groan when they sin. Groaning in the midst of sin is a sign that the Spirit is in one's heart. Every believer has the firstfruits of the Spirit. Our groaning is a sign that God is sovereignly working out salvation in our lives, even in the midst of sin. Our groaning is also a means for us to work out our salvation, because when we groan, our Spirit's nature grows.

As a practical example, this is why making commitments is important in the Christian life. Some believers refrain from making commitments, reasoning that it's useless since they always fail to keep them. But our main goal shouldn't be to keep our commitment; our main goal is to grow in Christ-likeness. The benefit of a commitment does not come from keeping it for all time; it comes from the period in which the commitment is kept. We may have failed in the end, but we grew in the meantime. As we "groan" to keep our commitments, we grow in Christ-likeness. This is an example of how God's sovereignty and everyday life are tied together—the Spirit in us, causing us to groan, is a sign of His sovereign promises to us, and our groaning (through practical means such as making commitments) is a means of those sovereign promises being fulfilled.

Paul then connects our groaning and frustration to a certain hope.

For **in this hope** we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (*Romans 8:24-25*)

Paul says our hope is in "our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." The ultimate hope of every believer is heaven, where we will be fully redeemed, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But as we look at ourselves and around us, we see that is not the case. Our hope remains unfulfilled. We aren't glorifying God as we should, and there are many people who do not know our Savior. It will happen one day, according to God's sovereign will, but it's not yet happening, so we groan and are frustrated.

Some people wonder if there will be sex or other such activities in heaven. We don't know what heaven will be like exactly, but we do know that in heaven we will experience pleasure. That's the main issue, not the means through which that pleasure is experienced. So if we think about what gives us pleasure now, although those same



means might not exist in heaven, we will surely experience that pleasure, multiplied and purified.

Hell is the opposite. People in hell will still have desires for pleasure; however, they will experience not a hint of satisfaction. Jesus described a rich man in hell (Luke 16:19-31) who longed for one drop of water to quench his excruciating thirst. People in hell will want water, sex, drugs, air, but will have absolutely no satisfaction. They will groan as well, but for a very different reason. In hell, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12).

Jonathan Edwards pictured our reward in heaven like a bowl. In heaven, we will each be holding a bowl, and God will be raining Himself down like rain. Our bowl represents how much of God's presence we will enjoy in heaven; it's our capacity to enjoy Him and being in heaven. Everyone will enjoy being in heaven, of course, but some will experience more pleasure than others. The size of our bowl will depend on how much we have groaned in this life, how much we have tried to love God. Heavenly reward is not money or a mansion, for what good would that be in heaven? Heavenly reward is pleasure and joy. In heaven, we will get everything we want, because the only thing we will want is to exalt Christ.

Our hope is the glory of God. Our hope is more glorious, more beautiful, and more worthy than anything in this world—Christ Himself. One day we will receive this hope and pleasure; God sovereignly plans it. We groan in anticipation until that day.

### **The Third Groaning: The Holy Spirit**

Paul describes a third type of groaning, that of the Holy Spirit.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (*Romans 8:26-27*)

I believe Paul is saying that the Spirit helps us to groan. He mentions earlier in the same chapter another way that the Spirit helps us to pray.

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." (*Romans 8:15*)

In that passage, the Spirit works in such a way that *we* cry, “Abba, Father.” Similarly, the Spirit helps us cry out like He does. God’s heart becomes our heart; His emotion becomes our emotion. The Spirit interceding for us means that when God sees lost souls, He cries, and when we see lost souls, we cry as well. As we grow to be more like Christ, the gospel is seen more clearly through us. We become a presentation of the gospel, not merely limited to what we utter with our lips.

This is incredibly encouraging, for Paul then reminds us that we have been sovereignly ordained to be more like Christ:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (*Romans 8:28-29*)

God’s sovereign will is that we become like Christ. He is continuously transforming us into the likeness of Christ. When people see us, they are catching a glimpse of Christ. GPS (Global Positioning System) units reflect a bit of God’s sovereign grace. GPS units are very forgiving. When one makes a mistake or misses a turn, it simply says, “Recalculating...” Imagine if it said, “You made another wrong turn! I told you to turn right! You will never get to your goal. You are doomed to the wrong destination forever! In fact, turn me off immediately! Put me in someone else’s car!” God isn’t like that. When we make mistakes, He simply says, “Recalculating.” He is leading us on the path of justification and glorification. The Israelites, traveling from Egypt to the land of Canaan, had a divine GPS unit of sorts, a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. They certainly made many mistakes, but God sovereignly led them to the Promised Land. God isn’t through with us yet; He will finish the work He started in all of us.

### **The Process of Redemption: Daily Practice**

Romans 8:20-29 is a befitting passage from which to glean an understanding of the interplay between God’s sovereignty and everyday life. At this point, it might also be beneficial to look at five main arenas, which taken together provide a comprehensive summary of Christian life, from the perspective of God’s sovereignty and daily life: sin and repentance, the Great Commission, the church, calling,

and culture. Each section will be concluded with brief applications to everyday life.

### **Grace/Sin and Repentance**

To recap, sin has resulted both in the evil nature of people and in the evil nature of nature. The curse and suffering have been sovereignly ordained by God as a means of His grace to bring us to repentance. Our repentance leads to the redemption of the universe. This in turn leads to God being glorified through us.

Application: We receive His enabling grace daily through repentance and through faith in His promises. This is one helpful way to define *spirituality*. To be spiritual means that our daily interactions with people are infused with supernatural power from the Holy Spirit.

### **The Great Commission**

Again, the overarching story of the redemption of the universe is contingent upon God’s children first being redeemed. A phrase that summarizes well this idea is the *Great Commission*, of which Matthew 28:18-20 is the most well-known iteration:

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (*Matthew 28:18-20*)

The Great Commission has been analyzed quite often, and to great benefit, from a grammatical perspective. However, it is also helpful to consider it from a different point of view, a more contextual one. The Great Commission can be divided into two parts, the idea of evangelism in verse 19 and that of discipleship in verse 20. In verse 19 Jesus says, “Go ... all nations,” implying people who do not know Christ. “Make disciples” is not about discipleship in the most commonly considered sense; it’s about making disciples (followers of Christ) out of those who are not yet disciples. “Baptizing” means, again, bringing people into the body of Christ.

On the other hand, verse 20 is about discipleship. “Teaching them” comes after baptizing them, which implies discipleship. “To obey” is, of course, more than just about information; discipleship involves influencing the person’s entire life. “Everything” means that the goal of discipleship is a lofty one—to help people become like

Christ. "...I have commanded you" includes making disciples, which means that disciples should be capable of making disciples themselves.

Taken together, we can categorize ministry into two main parts: evangelism and discipleship. This chart highlights the differences between the two. It is important to remember that Jesus did not state that one side was better or more important than the other; both sides are vital to the Great Commission.

Unbelievers	Believers
Evangelism	Discipleship
Justification	Sanctification/Glorification
Church-planting	Church-reviving
Birth of God's Children	Growth of God's Children
Width	Depth

Seeing the Great Commission this way, as two important parts, can help in evaluating oneself personally, in evaluating churches on a systemic level, and in evaluating entire missiological strategies. On a personal level, believers often lean either toward evangelism or toward discipleship. Knowing which side is your strength can be helpful in evaluating yourself and the way you potentially spend your time. People who have more of an evangelistic bent sometimes criticize those who are more interested in discipleship (e.g. "Why aren't they reaching out to the lost?"). On the other hand, those involved with discipleship might criticize people who are focused on evangelism (e.g. "They aren't helping people grow spiritually."). But it can be helpful to take a step back and see the big picture. We're all working together to fulfill the Great Commission. Of course, all of us are called to both (and this should not be used as an excuse to avoid one side or the other), but our strengths, personality, passion, experience, etc. might cause us to lean more toward one side than the other.

On an ecclesiastical level, some churches are stronger at evangelism; others are more gifted at discipleship. We must remember that we are all working together. There is often unfounded criticism leveled from one church at another based on its perceived weaknesses in this area. Again, each church needs to constantly

develop its weaknesses, but we must remember that we're all laboring for the same goal of building the kingdom of God. It's not only about one specific church and its vision; it's about every church working together to accomplish God's plan of redemption.

On a missiological level, both evangelism and discipleship are important. Unfortunately some missions organizations and missionaries think that missions is about focusing solely on the unreached. But from this perspective of evangelism and discipleship, working with the reached is also an integral part of missions. For example, training a pastor in a reached country that is adjacent to an unreached one can be strategic, because that pastor can then teach and disciple believers who can in turn reach out to unreached people in their same culture.

Application: It can be helpful to ask ourselves where we fit on the map of the Great Commission, and consequently, redemption. God is sovereignly fulfilling the Great Commission; how can we fit our lives into what He is doing? Perhaps when we are at home with unbelieving family members, we are in "verse 19." Or if we live in a Christian household, perhaps we are in "verse 20" at home. Knowing where we fit in the big picture can help us act accordingly in our daily lives.

### **The Church**

It is clear in Scripture that one of the primary means by which God is sovereignly accomplishing redemption is the church. When Matthew included the Great Commission in chapter 28, I believe he was thinking about what Jesus said about the church in Matthew 16 and 18. In other words, as the church of Jesus Christ, we are to fulfill the Great Commission together. The church can be defined in at least two ways: as an organism or people (i.e. the universal church) and as an organization or a place (i.e. the local church). In Matthew 16, Jesus talks about the church as an organism:

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (*Matthew 16:18*)

Jesus tells Peter that He is going to build His church. And then, a few verses later:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (*Matthew 16:24*)

He defines what the church is intended to look like. We can formulate a definition of the church from those two verses. The church is comprised of people who have been called out from a self-centered and self-glorifying life to a Christ-centered and Christ-glorifying life. Jesus is building His universal church through missionaries and workers all over the world.

Two chapters later, in Matthew 18, Jesus talks about the church in a different sense:

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to **the church**; and if he refuses to listen even to **the church**, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (*Matthew 18:15-17*)

Here, we see more of the organizational aspect of the church, the local church. Jesus is addressing the issue of confronting a church member who has wronged another. In verse 17, He instructs us to inform “the church,” which obviously does not have the same meaning as in chapter 16 (He doesn’t expect us to inform everybody in the church around the world). He’s talking about the local church. How is God building the universal church? How is the Great Commission taking place? He’s doing it through the local church.

Application: We should be connected to a local church. This means at the very least that people there know us well enough to speak into our lives (e.g. for Matthew 18:15-17 to apply to us). This in turn connects us to the universal church and what God is doing in redemption.

### Calling

When people hear the word *calling*, they often think it refers to full-time ministry. But calling is not limited to that. We all have a calling (in fact, more than one). The Apostle Paul mentions at least three primary callings of a Christian in chapters 5 and 6 of Ephesians. The entire book of Ephesians is about God redeeming the world through the church of Christ. The first calling is to the local church:

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (*Ephesians 5:19-20*)

This means that when we sing worship songs together, we are strengthened by each other. We are singing to God, but in a sense, we are singing to one another. There is strength that comes when the body of Christ worships together. All of us encourage and strengthen each other in various ways; in fact, we are called to do so. We are called to a local church, whether or not it's a "good" church. That includes tithing, serving, relating to others, and being supportive.

We are also called to our families:

**Wives**, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. (*Ephesians 5:22*)

**Husbands**, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (*Ephesians 5:25*)

**Children**, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. (*Ephesians 6:1*)

**Fathers**, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (*Ephesians 6:4*)

A wife is to submit to her husband, not because the husband is better, but because they have different roles. The wife is to represent the church; the husband is to represent Christ. They have different roles. It's like a pitcher and catcher, a quarterback and wide receiver, Frodo and Sam.

The role of children is to obey their parents (just as God's children are to obey their Heavenly Father). And the role of fathers is to train and disciple their children. The best way to prepare for marriage is to learn to be unselfish; the best way to prepare for parenting is to learn how to teach, disciple, and train others.

The third primary calling of a Christian is to his work:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. (*Ephesians 6:5-6*)

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him. (*Ephesians 6:9*)

The Bible is definitely not pro-slavery. But within the framework of existing sinful systems, the Bible is definitely pro-servanthood. When a Christian is a master, or someone in charge of others, they are to make sure they treat them as they are treated by God. Whether "slave" or "master," we are all called to picture Christ in the workplace.



Adam and Eve had these three callings as well. Together they formed a family and a church, and they worked for God in the Garden. After the Fall, they had the same three callings, but God wanted to redeem what they did in those three areas. It is the same for all of us. As we are faithful to our callings, God is in the process of redeeming those areas and using us to accomplish His plan of redemption in the world.

Application: All of us have these three primary callings. Keeping this in mind can be extremely practical. For example, this can help one determine where to live. Many people think about taking the best job opportunity. But choosing a local church should also be a serious consideration. All three of these callings are crucial. More often than not, people say, “I will take a good job somewhere, then once I get there, I’ll find a good church.” I would challenge people to say instead, “I will find a good church somewhere, then once I get there, I’ll find a good job and raise my family there.”

### **Culture**

The theological term, *the cultural mandate*, means that we are to influence the culture around us for the better. It is an integral part of God’s sovereign plan of redemption. But before we can understand how to do this, it may be helpful first to define culture. An appropriate passage can be found in 1 John.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (*1 John 2:15-17*)

When John uses the word *world*, he is talking about culture. But his definition of culture goes much deeper than the common understanding of it. In this passage, he’s not talking about politics, he’s talking about the politicians themselves. He’s not talking about art, but the hearts of the artists themselves. The Bible doesn’t just examine culture, it examines the hearts of those who create culture.

Culture is created by people, who are spiritual beings. Spiritual beings include God, angels (both good and evil), and men (who can have two natures, good and evil). A spiritual being is someone with freedom with regards to their faculties of emotion, intellect, and will. Culture has been created by people with two natures.

Before Satan came to Adam and Eve, only one culture existed—a culture untainted by sin. After the Fall, evil culture began to grow. Two desires, good and evil, have been at work creating two cultures, good and evil. Throughout history Satan and demons have been indirectly forming culture by influencing human beings. Movies, books, media, and music are created by directors, authors, writers, and artists. As spiritual beings, what is in their hearts and minds determine what comes out in the culture.

Thus, all believers are to be on their guard when engaging the culture. TV, radio, the Internet—every part of culture comes from spiritual beings. When listening to music, a spiritual being is listening to something created by another spiritual being. David played his music and the evil spirit left Saul, showing that music is spiritual. The response should not be to retreat into our churches and have a fortress mentality. We must learn to engage the world, but we must be discerning.

Understanding culture has certain implications for missions strategy, holistic missions in particular. Missions is not only about verbally presenting the gospel. It's also about helping the poor, treating the sick, fighting for social justice. It's important to be involved in those causes, but it's also important to remember where they fit. Some believers get involved in those activities for the sake of those activities. But they are a means for people to experience the love of Christ who might not otherwise. In turn, they join the church, are disciplined, and become disciplers themselves. Jesus was involved in holistic ministry—he fed the hungry and healed the sick. But He did it for a purpose—He didn't heal the sick as an end in itself. He healed the sick, and also expressed supernatural love to them. In modern times, healing is not limited to the miraculous; doctors, nurses, and other medical providers can heal—as well as express the supernatural love of God to people.

Should Christians get involved in politics? Paul addresses this in 1 Timothy.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (*1 Timothy 2:1-4*)

Paul doesn't tell us to what extent we should be involved in politics, but at the very least, we are called to pray for our leaders. The reason is so that 1) Christians can grow spiritually (verse 2; discipleship) and 2) so that people can come to know the Lord (verse 4; evangelism). For example, if a government that prohibits people from freely sharing the gospel and openly worshiping the Lord changes its stance through the prayers of God's people, that will allow the Great Commission to be furthered in that country.

Application: Christians should prayerfully engage the culture, being appropriately discerning, as well as intentionally active in holistic ministry—all for the purpose of the furthering of redemptive history.

### **Conclusion**

God is sovereign. He is slowly but inexorably accomplishing the redemption of the universe. And He desires for every one of us to be a part of it. He is accomplishing redemption in us first, and He is using us to accomplish redemption in those around us and in creation as well. We can participate in the grand plan of redemption by being faithful to our callings everyday, and by trusting His Spirit and His promises for the strength to do so.

1. Daily grace though personal repentance and faith—to rely on the groaning of the Spirit/God/God's heart
2. Be in mind of great commission—God's plan of redemption through one heart at a time-deep and wide
3. Church—Together-groaning of the people expressed organized way
4. Calling—The groaning of the spirit must lead to our groaning expressed in our daily love to others.
5. Culture—Influencing heart/lifestyle/belief/universe-redemption of the universe



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