

SERIES ON THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE
Scripture: Psalm 103

Sermon #2
January 29, 1984

GOD'S MANIFOLD SOVEREIGNTY

L. Dwight Custis

I am turning aside for a few weeks from our series on 1 Corinthians to consider with you the doctrines that are known as the doctrines of grace. These are doctrines that have to do with our salvation from sin and our deliverance from the eternal judgment of God. But they are doctrines which in recent years in the church have been either neglected altogether, or the teaching has been in such a watered-down fashion that no one would recognize them from the way they are taught in many, many places. Consequently, many of the Lord's people have never heard the Biblical doctrines of grace. We can thank the Lord that they are preached in many places, and it seems from what the Lord is doing throughout our nation, and really throughout the world, that the Lord is bringing His people back to the realization of what these truths are. But when they are proclaimed, it is very interesting to see the reaction of people toward them. I think the natural inclination is to reject them. Some people get mad about it. This is because the doctrines of grace are so foreign to what they have been taught, and so completely different from what man usually thinks about when he considers God's way of salvation.

About 2700 years ago the prophet Isaiah wrote two verses that you have heard from me many, many times, and I want to read them again to you this morning because we forget them when we think about the way of salvation. You see, when we think about the ways of God and the works of God, we automatically think that God is going to do things the way we would do them. And yet the person who is instructed in the truth knows that there is all the difference in the world between the way we would do things as compared with the way God does things. The verses to which I am referring are found in Isaiah 55, verses 8 and 9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

If you were to walk into our living room, you would see these two verses on the wall. Our daughter did them for us in cross-stitch. I never see them enough. I feel that we need to be reminded of them continually. God's thoughts and God's ways are different from our thoughts and ways. So when you and I think that God ought to do something in a certain way, the way we would work if we were in His place, we are often disappointed, and sometimes have a feeling of rebellion against Him because His ways are so different. And yet God has told us very clearly in His

Word that His thoughts and His ways are different from our thoughts and our ways-- and they always will be!

Pride is so dominant in our hearts that we are always inclined to make a great deal of ourselves. And this gets into our interpretation of Scripture. We find it very, very difficult to believe that there is not some little part that we can have in our salvation. And the part that we usually reserve to ourselves is our faith. We have been taught that we exercise our faith when we are persuaded in some way or another to exercise our will in that direction. But, when you turn to the Word of God, you find that in man's relationship to God and salvation, his will is not free. Man is in bondage, hopelessly in bondage, because of his sin. And you will also find when you look at the Scriptures that, though man exercises faith, his faith does not originate with him. Faith is a gift from God. It comes from God through our Lord Jesus Christ who, as the Scriptures say, is "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). And it always comes through the way in which the Lord uses His Word.

I am sure most of you are familiar with those words in Romans 10:17: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." As the Word of God is being preached, God uses this Word as it pleases Him, according to Isaiah, chapter 55, and it is through the Word of God that we come to faith. It is through the Word of God that we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And, therefore, in preaching the Gospel, the important thing is not for us to try to use all of the persuasive powers that we have, thinking that our persuasive powers are going to be that which will convince others to receive the Lord Jesus Christ. I may exhort people to receive Christ, I may plead with them, and I may present all kinds of arguments to get them to receive Christ, but, you see, the important thing is that they get the Word of God because it is through the Word of God that they are going to come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. People must believe in order to be saved. But the question is, Where does our faith come from? And the answer is: It comes from God! And the exercise of that faith comes not from our so-called free will, because the Bible does not teach that man has a free will. Our faith comes as a result of what God does in our hearts using His Word. "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

Now the doctrines of grace show us beyond any doubt that salvation is from the Lord, from start to finish. But perhaps somebody says this morning, "What are you talking about when you speak about the doctrines of grace?"

Someone--and I do not know who it was, and I do not know that anyone knows where it originated--but someone back in history put these doctrines in an acrostic form to make them easier for us to remember. The headings that are used in this acrostic form may not be the best, but we want to use them because they will help us to remember what the doctrines of grace are.

As most of you know, this acrostic is built on the word, "tulip." Now if you are making notes, you might write the word tulip, not across your page, but down the side of your page--"T," and then under it, "U," and then under it, "L," and then under it, "I," and then the "P." We want to use these letters in this order to list the five doctrines of grace. Let me give them to you although I know that most of you are acquainted with them. I want all of us to be together in this.

The "T" stands for TOTAL DEPRAVITY. (I will not try to explain these doctrines in detail this morning

because that is what we are going to be doing in the coming days.) "U" stands for UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION. "L" is LIMITED ATONEMENT. "I" is IRRESISTIBLE GRACE. And "P" is the PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS. Total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints. These are the doctrines of grace. When you hear people referring to the doctrines of grace, these are the truths that they have in mind.

Now there are other doctrines that are related to the doctrines of grace, and today I want to discuss one of them. In fact, the doctrine that I am going to be discussing today is really the foundation for all of these other doctrines. It is the grandest and most obvious doctrine which you will find in all of Scripture. I am speaking of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God.

But to say that you are going to speak on the sovereignty of God is like saying that you are going to preach on the whole Bible. There is not a book in the Bible that does not teach this, that does not have evidence of the fact that God is sovereign.

But again, let me explain what we are talking about because this is a word that we do not use every day. What do we mean by sovereignty?

You will notice in the English word that it contains the word reign. A sovereign is one who reigns. A person who is sovereign is one who is supreme. When we speak of the sovereignty of God, we mean that He is supreme in His position over all of creation, over all creatures, over all history, over all nations, over all events. And, now listen carefully: He is sovereign over all that has to do with our salvation! To say that God is sovereign means that He is independent of everyone else, and that He is not limited by anyone in anything that He intends to do.

Now I want you to look at the nineteenth verse in Psalm 103. The nineteenth verse is a verse that gives us a great statement of the sovereignty of God: "The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all." Now this is the sovereignty of God. Most Christians will agree that God is sovereign in their lives. We are continually saying, aren't we, particularly if we are going through a time of trial, "Well, I do not know what the Lord has for me in this, but I know that He is in control. I know that He works all things together for good." And this is a source of great comfort to us. We know that we are dependent upon God from day to day. And we might even believe that God is sovereign in salvation up to a point. But the point at which we are inclined to eliminate the sovereignty of God is when it comes to the question of what causes people to accept Christ. Then we are inclined to say, "God sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ died to provide salvation for all men, and so God has gone as far as He can go. Now it is entirely up to people to decide whether or not they want to be saved." And so we get involved in all kinds of humanistic statements, and we do not realize what we are actually saying. Most people have never really thought these things through. They are saying that, in the final analysis, it is not God who decides who is going to be saved and who is not going to be saved, but it is man who decides this. This means that, to that extent, man is sovereign because he is the one who determines whether or not he is going to let God save him. Thus we may believe in the sovereignty of God in everything except concerning who is going to be saved, and who is not going to be saved.

Now, of course, this dispute which has been in the Church all through the history of the Church is not to be decided by who is on one side and who is on the other, nor by how many are on one side as compared with how many are on the other side. The dispute is to be settled by what God has told us in His Word. The

Bible teaches us that God is sovereign in all things, and that God is sovereign in salvation as well. And so I hope that you will be able to see from this that, if we are to understand the doctrine of salvation, then it is important for us to understand God, to understand what His attributes are, especially to see that He is sovereign. There is really no doctrine in Scripture that we can understand as we should unless we realize the importance of seeing God, first of all, and realizing that He is sovereign in all of these things. But what will the doctrines of grace do for us? I want to whet your appetite a little bit this morning and remind you, possibly, of some things that you have experienced in your own heart, that you have known before. But I also want to bring everybody along as much as I can because I realize that there may be some to whom the doctrines of grace are new, and to whom the sovereignty of God is new.

We live in such a humanistic time, don't we? When we go to church, so often we hear man exalted, we hear what man can do, we are reminded of the virtues, and so on, of man. But when we come to the Word of God we find, as we do here in Psalm 103, that David was occupied with the Lord, and concerned about worshipping the Lord. That is exactly what we need to do, and nothing will help us more to achieve that goal than believing in the doctrines of grace.

Let me mention some of the things that the doctrines of grace will do for you.

When you understand the doctrines of God's sovereign grace, they will make you love God, and love the Lord Jesus Christ, and love the Holy Spirit, more than ever before. I do not know of anything that is going to revive your soul any more than to understand these wonderful truths. You will just be amazed at the goodness and the grace of God. Once you see what the sovereignty of God is in salvation, your heart is just going to be overwhelmed with love to God. The Word of God is going to take on a new dimension. You are going to delight in the Word. You are going to see things beginning to open up to you in the Word of God that you have never been able to understand. I do not know of anything, any emphasis in the Word of God, that will give you greater assurance of your salvation. You see, if you believe that salvation is a kind of a joint operation between you and God, there is always the possibility that you are going to fall down on your side of the bargain. Then the whole thing may be called off. You will never have any assurance with that interpretation of the Word of God. But when you see that salvation is of the Lord, then you know that though you may fail and do things that are displeasing to God, even though you may not want to do them, you know that God has His hand upon you, and God is not going to let you go. Consequently, the doctrines of grace bring great peace and joy.

In addition, you are going to see that they will create in your heart a greater desire to be holy. They will humble you when you see what God in His marvelous grace has done for you, a sinner who is deserving of nothing but the judgment of God.

You know, sometimes preachers get their tongues twisted up and slip the wrong word in. Possibly I have done it already this morning. I do it occasionally, but always unintentionally. I heard a man on the radio this past week who was talking about the grace of God. I really was enjoying what he had to say because he was putting man down and he was exalting the Lord. But he started to quote verses from hymns, and one of the verses he quoted was this: "Oh, to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be." But instead of using the word "debtor," he said, "Oh, to grace how great a sinner, daily I'm constrained to be." I know that he did not mean it. I do not think he even realized how he quoted that verse. The congregation he was talking to chuckled a little bit. But, you know, when you see what the heart of man is as it is pictured in the Word of God, that we are sinners by nature, and so often sinners by choice, and sinners by habit, my, what

a humbling truth, what a humbling truth! There is not a one of us here this morning who deserves salvation. And that is the reason that salvation has to be by grace. These are the doctrines of the grace of God. And so it will not only make you holy to know of these truths, but it will make you humble to understand these.

And then I would mention one other thing because I have experienced this in my own heart through these years. And that is that understanding the doctrines of grace will burden you as never before to see other people saved. People often say, "Well, if you believe in election, if you believe that God is the One Who decides who is going to be saved, then you are not going to be concerned about the souls of men." You know, they say the same thing about believing that once you are saved you are always saved--that if you believe that once you are saved you are always saved, then you will go out and live any way you want to live, you will sin to your heart's content. But it does not work that way, does it? It does not work that way. The person who knows that he is saved, the person who is assured of his salvation, is the person who is inclined to be most concerned about the holiness of his life. And the person who knows that God has chosen people to be saved is the person who has the greatest reason and the greatest burden to go out and preach the Gospel. If you know anything about the human heart, you know that if God had not chosen us, and if God had not moved upon our hearts, the preaching of the Gospel would be an absolutely hopeless ministry because no person on his own is ever going to turn to Christ. God has to work in us to draw us to Christ. And, consequently, when you understand this, you see that the preaching of the Gospel is a ministry with tremendous possibilities. Here in the city of Portland this morning we know from the Word of God there are people appointed to salvation, people who must be reached with the Gospel. And God has raised us up here in this place, not only for the purpose of coming together to enjoy the Word, as we are this morning, but to go out with the message of salvation, believing that God has a work to accomplish, and that He is going to accomplish that work as He moves upon the hearts of those whom He has eternally appointed for salvation, drawing them to Himself. We do not have anything to contribute to our salvation. And if God left us alone, we would go merrily on our way to hell. But it is because of His grace that He has turned us around. The doctrines of grace glorify God; they give us hope, and they give us peace. And let us be praying as we consider these together that the Lord will open our hearts to what He has in His Word.

The Bible does not teach that the success of the Lord's work depends ultimately upon man's willingness to let God do what He wants to do. It does not teach that man has the power to resist God. It teaches just exactly the opposite. God does whatever He has ordained that He shall do. God is God! He is a sovereign God!

Doctrines of Grace -- #2

Page 6

And if He is not sovereign, then, of course, He cannot be God. May God enable us to understand this great truth of Scripture.

Now I want you to look with me in the time that remains at this wonderful Psalm. As I said to begin with today, when you talk about the sovereignty of God, there are just hundreds and hundreds of passages of Scripture that you could turn to. You can see many evidences of the sovereignty of God by the way in which God worked in the lives of His people through the Old Testament. Most of us are reading in the book of Exodus right now. And when you see how the people of Israel resisted His will when things did not go right, they were just as stubborn as Pharaoh was in refusing to let the children of Israel go in the first place! But what happened? Did the Lord give up the project? No! God carried out His plan. God worked in the hearts of the people. God opened the doors. And when the Israelites got through the Red Sea and finally saw the Egyptian army destroyed, what did they do? Moses led them in a great anthem of praise. And he did not even mention himself once in that Psalm in Exodus 15, but he gave all of the praise and all of the

glory to God because God was the One Who brought His people out. And you can see that again and again through the Scriptures. If God were not sovereign, the Bible could never have been written.

But now let me just point out evidences of the sovereignty of God in this Psalm-- Psalm 103.

I. GOD IS SOVEREIGN BECAUSE OF WHO HE IS

(Psa. 103:1, 2)

Now the first thing that I want you to see from the Psalm is that we see that God is sovereign because of Who He is--because of His, as we so often say in talking about the Lord, because of His Person. That simply means because He is God.

You have noticed, I am sure, many times, that this Psalm really begins and ends in the same way. No one can read it and fail to notice that David used the word "bless" some seven times in the Psalm. In verse 1, "Bless the Lord," and "bless his holy name. In verse 2, "Bless the Lord." In verse 20, "Bless the Lord, ye his angels." In verse 21, "Bless ye the Lord, all ye his hosts." In verse 22, "Bless the Lord, . . . bless the Lord, O my soul." There you have them, seven times in all. But the point that I want to make with you is that David was calling upon all creation to bless THE LORD! Read it with that emphasis, and you will see the emphasis upon the Person of the Lord. Just a moment ago I referred to the first Psalm in the Bible, which is in Exodus 15, not in Psalm 1. In the course of that great Psalm of praise to the Lord, Moses asked a question. It was this: "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (Ex. 15:11). Now what is the answer to that question? Well, the answer to that question is that there is not anybody like the Lord. No one has ever lived, apart, of course, from our Lord Jesus Christ Himself Who is God, no one has ever lived who has been completely like the Lord. He is Jehovah. Jehovah means that He is the One without beginning, the One Who is without ending, the One Who never changes. He is the One Who is sovereign over all of His people. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He is not only the Creator of the heavens and the earth; He is the Sustainer of the heavens and the earth. No one can withstand this mighty God. He is the Lord; He is Jehovah. So David, who was obviously going through lots of trials and testings because he had a great deal

Doctrines of Grace -- #2

Page 7

to say about the mercy of God, was revelling in the fact that His God, the Lord, was sovereign. Through all of the circumstances, the difficult circumstances of his life, he had seen that God was absolutely faithful, and that God was fulfilling His purposes in every detail.

So, you see, Psalm 1 begins with the Lord. "Bless the Lord, O my soul." He is the only One Who is worthy to be blessed. David was not blessing himself. David was not complimenting himself. David was not complimenting the men who had stood with him. But he looked beyond all of the external circumstances, and said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul."

As we get older, we are inclined to talk to ourselves a little bit more than when we did when we were younger. It may be one of the signs of old age. But remember that it is always spiritually a healthy thing for you to talk to yourself, IF you are talking about blessing the Lord. When David said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," what he meant was, "David, in the depths of your own soul, bless the Lord, and give Him the praise for which He is so worthy. He is the sovereign One.

II. GOD IS SOVEREIGN THROUGH THE BESTOWAL OF HIS BENEFITS

(Psa. 103:3-6)

Now, just briefly, David summarized some of the things that God in His sovereignty has done.

In verses 3 through 6 we see that God is sovereign in the bestowal of His benefits. Look at what God does: "Who forgiveth all thine iniquities." And if God does not forgive your iniquities, they are not going to be forgiven. "Who healeth all thy diseases." God is the One Who ministers to us in our physical need. "Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies." The word "destruction" in the Hebrew is the word, the pit. He delivers us from the pit. He delivers us from hopelessness and despair when it seems like everything is going wrong. He lifts us out of the pit and then He crowns us with kindness and tender mercies. "Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed." These are the gifts which He bestows on us. You can take every detail of your life and put it in those verses. All of the blessing and the help that you need in all of the circumstances of your life always come from God, and only from Him. He is sovereignly working out those purposes. You would stay in the pit if it were not for the Lord. You would be lost in your sin if it were not for the Lord. Health would be impossible if it were not for the Lord. You see, the Lord is the One Who is sovereignly working in all of these things. So, as David said here, do not forget the benefit and the blessing that God has brought in your lives according to His sovereignty.

III. GOD IS SOVEREIGN IN HIS WAYS (Psa. 103:7-12)

From verses 7 through 12 we see that the Lord is sovereign in His ways with us. He made known His ways unto Moses. For 120 years God was teaching Moses His ways, his acts unto the children of Israel.

What about the Lord's ways? Listen to what David wrote: "The LORD is merciful and

Doctrines of Grace -- #2

Page 8

gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us."

Do you know what life would be like here in the city of Portland if it were not for the sovereignty of God? It would be absolutely impossible. The only reason life is possible upon the earth is because of the restraining hand of a sovereign God. But the day is coming when the Lord, at least partially, is going to remove that restraint, and there will be a time of trouble on the earth such as the world has never seen. Do you wonder why things do not blow up? Do you wonder why we are not involved in a nuclear war? Do you wonder why we have any safety at all in the things that we do? It is because of a sovereign God.

Now let me ask you a question from this passage. What if God had dealt with you according to your sins? What if he said, "You did this, so you get this? And you did this other thing, so you get this." None of us would survive under such dealings. Instead of dealing with us in this way David said, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us." If you start traveling east you will never get to a spot on the earth but what you can still go east. And so when David said, "As far as the east is from the west," He meant for us to understand that the Lord has separated us from our sins so far that we will never see them again. Why is it that we are not suffering the full consequences of our sin? There is only one reason. We have a sovereign God who has stepped in and intervened graciously through the

sacrifice, the amazing sacrifice, of His dear Son.

IV. GOD IS SOVEREIGN AS A FATHER (Psa. 103:13-18)

But look! The Lord is sovereign also as a father, according to verses 13 through 18: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust."

Here you have a good picture of man. David used two figures of speech to describe what man is like. One is "dust"; the other is "grass." "He remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more."

You know, every person who has ever been born on the face of the earth is either gone, or going. We are going. This is descriptive of us. If the Lord tarries, we are going to be gone someday. You read about all the great people of history, and yet we must say, "But they are gone." We are here today and may be gone tomorrow. "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; to such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them." But our sovereign God is from everlasting to everlasting, and His mercy endures for ever. And He deals with His people as a father deals with his children, tender and compassionate toward them in spite of their frailty, and is perfectly sufficient generation after generation to meet the needs of His people.

Doctrines of Grace -- #2

Page 9

V. GOD IS SOVEREIGN AS A KING (Psa. 103:19)

Then the Lord is sovereign as a king. I have already mentioned that in verse 19. He is not only a Father, but He is King: "The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all."

Now, what should all this do for us?

I have already mentioned some of the blessings you get from the doctrines of grace, but what did David say here? What do these truths do for us? What did they do to him?

Let me come back to the word "bless." "Bless the LORD." We are to "bless his holy name." And, secondly, we are to "forget not all his benefits."

When you understand the sovereignty of God, you are going to find that your heart will be drawn out to Him and that you are going to want to bless Him. But to bless the Lord, according to the Hebrew word that he used, means basically to kneel down, to humble ourselves before the Lord, and then to worship Him, to adore Him, to thank Him, to praise Him. And now you can see that one reason why people do not like the doctrines of grace is because the truths of the sovereignty of God and the grace of God completely humble us and humiliate us, leaving us with not one reason for glorying in ourselves. They bring us to the place where we have to worship God, and glorify Him, and only Him. Remember that He is the only One Who is worthy of our praise. God is sovereign in all things, even in our salvation. He has determined that there would be salvation. And He has determined how sinners are going to be saved. That also was up to Him. And the Word of God makes it clear that He has also determined--whether we like it or not--the Lord has

determined who is going to be saved. And He has determined how long they are going to be saved-- which is for all eternity.

So when we understand that God is sovereign in all that He has to do for our salvation, we are going to fall to our knees, we are going to bless His holy name, we are going to worship Him, we are going to praise Him, we are going to glorify Him, we are going to thank Him that such a wonderful God as He is would ever be concerned about sinners such as you and I are.

And let us pray that, as we consider these great truths together, the Spirit of God will enable us to understand them so that we will know what David felt in his heart when he said, "Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name."