

The Necessity of Secondary Means

Acts

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One aspect about the teaching of the Heritage Baptist Church is that we strongly believe that God has determined all things that come to pass, that anything that happens, happens because in eternity past God said it would happen.

We, as a church are a confessional church and our confession, the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 has a chapter, Chapter III, dealing with God's decrees. I want to read to you some of the portions of this paragraph from the Confession, portions of this chapter.

God hath decreed in Himself from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things whatsoever comes to pass

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace; while others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of his glorious justice.

These angels and men who are thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and so definite, that it cannot be either increased nor diminished.¹

Now I want you to get a feeling or an idea of what it is that this Confession, our church Confession, is teaching. This Confession is not the Word of God, but we hold it forth as the best summary of the doctrines of God's Word. And it is saying that first and foremost that God was not forced to do so, but from all eternity by his own wise and holy character, his own wise and holy counsel, unchangeably said this is what is going to happen so that whatever happens, happens exactly according to what God decreed.

He has decreed some to eternal life and some to eternal damnation. And, furthermore, the number of those who are ordained to life or damnation are so designed—unchangeably designed is what the Confession says—that the number of those who are

¹ London Baptist Confession of 1689, Chapter III, paragraphs 1, 3, 4.

going to go to heaven and those who are going to go to hell is definite and it cannot be increased or diminished.

Here is the group of those who are elect. Here is the group of those who are not elect. And this group over here, there is a certain fixed number. And this group has a certain fixed number and their number is absolutely definite. Nothing can be done to increase or diminish either number.

No effort of man will produce more elect than God has elected. No effort of man will diminish the number of those who are not elect that God has not decreed to be elect.

God has decreed, unchangeably, all things whatsoever come to pass.

That statement in itself is a thorn and at the same time a tremendous comfort. It is a thorn to our intellect and a comfort to our souls. The best minds of all western civilization and Christian history have tried to wrap their brains around just how it is that God can ordain all things whatsoever come to pass.

And what does that mean for us if he does?

Unfortunately, the easiest and one of the worst reactions to this doctrine are those who either accuse us of saying or some who actually fall into this idea that since God has determined all things it doesn't really matter what we do. It doesn't make any difference whether I evangelize or don't evangelize. The number of elect is certain. Whether I pray or don't pray, whether I go to church or don't go to church. Everything God has decreed is going to happen and if I just sit at home and watch the Cowboys lose then God must have decreed for me to sit at home and watch the Cowboys lose.

There are some who have adopted that viewpoint in Church history. And most, certainly, we who do not believe that are accused of believing that.

Acts chapter 27 is unusual in that in story form, in narrative form, we have God giving a statement about the future and yet we also see in history how that is worked out. God has promised Paul that there will not be one among those sailors and soldiers and of all who are on the boat, there will not be one who loses his life. And yet as you go through the chapter there are several things that arise.

Paul, for example, encourages the men when they have not been eating for 14 days that they must eat. This is for their survival he says.

You have a situation where the soldiers are planning to kill the prisoners. That definitely would rule out God's decree, right, because God said all of them on the ship are going to be saved. And if all of the prisoners get killed, that would contradict what God said. And yet the centurion stands up and he protects the soldiers because he wants to protect the prisoners because he wants to protect Paul.

There are several ways in this chapter where God said, “This is what is going to happen,” and you see the means by which it is brought about. One of the most interesting ones is the sailors who try to escape from the ship.

Let’s go back to verse 30, if you would, please, of this chapter. They have put out four anchors from the stern because they realize at night that they are approaching some land and they don’t want to run aground on the rocks and so they are praying for day to come.

And verse 30.

As the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretense of putting out anchors from the prow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."²

Now this is probably one of the more clear statements of Paul and one of the more clear events as the means by which God brings about his purpose. Here are the soldiers who are escorting the prisoners and then here are the sailors who are running the ship. So the army and the navy are still going at it even in 60 AD. And the sailors are about to escape from the ship and Paul says, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”³

The last several chapters of the book of Acts are all about God’s sovereignty getting Paul to his mission.

“Paul, you are going to speak at Rome. You are going to preach before Caesar. You are going to bear witness to me at Rome just like you have at Jerusalem.”

And a mob has tried to kill him, the Jewish Sanhedrin almost tears him in pieces. Forty men or more have vowed that they will neither eat nor drink until Paul is dead and they lot his assassination. He is imprisoned for two years under a crooked Roman governor and then he is imprisoned for another two years under some sort of a scheming Roman governor. He is put on a ship that is tossed about by this storm and before it is all over he is going to be snake bit.

And God has said, “Paul, you are going to get to Rome.”

And the tension and the marvellous teaching of this last part of Acts is that Paul gets to Rome.

This particular incident gives us an insight as to how God goes about accomplishing his eternal decrees. Acts 27 presents us with what I call a two sided look at God’s sovereignty. Often in Scripture we are presented with a teaching of man’s responsibility or a teaching of God’s sovereignty. But here in history, in a narrative description, both of them are interwoven with each other to accomplish God’s predestined result.

² Acts 27:30-31.

³ Acts 27:31.

But it is because this is narrative that this passage also becomes somewhat controversial. Let me very quickly give you the background story, the context, again, of what is going on and set the stage and then we will get into some doctrinal wrangling and understanding of this passage.

This chapter describes the ship voyage of the apostle Paul. Again, ships in those days are not like, you know, the Carnival Cruise Lines of today or the navy ships where, you know, you just launch out, straight course, straight across the Mediterranean. They were more like giant Viking boats than anything else and you tended to hug the coast line. You might get 50 miles off the coast or 40 miles, but generally ships kind of followed the coast lines.

And so you can read Paul as he goes up the coastline of Palestine and as he starts to kind of wrap his way around under Cypress and then docks port. They change ships. And he gets out and they kind of follow the coast line and get underneath another island, Cypress. And then they are making their way on over and they are trying to stay close to land.

They have made it to a safe port and it is the time of year when it is not safe to travel anymore. And for some reason the sailors say, “You know, there is a better port on the other side of this island. It is only 50 miles away. We can make it.”

And while they are just trying to travel that last 50 miles or so the storm arises and they are tossed all over the Mediterranean. They don't have a motor. They don't have a Mercury, you know, 50 horse power on the back here. And they have a choice. They can either keep the sail up and hope the storm doesn't break the mast and he ship to pieces, or they can strike sail and be tossed about like a cork on the ocean. And that is what they choose to do. And wherever that storm goes, that is where they are going to go. For the next several weeks that is exactly what happens.

In verses 21 through 24 Paul recites to the men that God has given him a promise. We read, again, “After long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me...’”⁴ Again, nobody likes to hear that, but in this case it is important for them to hear it.

You should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.’⁵

⁴ Acts 27:21.

⁵ Acts 27:21-24.

I don't know if it is the greater miracle that the angel appeared to the apostle Paul or if it is the greater miracle that Julius the centurion finally believed him. But for the rest of this chapter, this hardened Roman soldier of the elite Augustan band listened to the apostle Paul.

And so Paul acts in accordance with what God has said. God has said all of them will be saved and so when the event arises that some men are trying to leave the ship, Paul says, "No. If they leave you cannot be saved."

When some of the men are faint and he knows they are going to be run aground on an island he encourages them to eat. Why? Because they have got to swim to this island when they run aground.

All of Paul's actions show that he believed God's Word and that he was going to act accordingly.

The results, we are told in verse 44, at the very last, "And so it was that they all escaped safely to land."⁶

And if there is anything about this passage, the main point is this. God said all of them would be saved and they were all safe.

However, in the realm of doctrine and theology there are some who take this chapter, this event and try to turn it into a doctrinal statement that shows that in order for God's will to be done, man must cooperate with God. They try to take this event, especially Paul in verse 31, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."⁷ And they try to create out of this narrative a doctrine that says, "Yes, God makes his decrees, but unless man cooperates with God it won't happen."

And here is their reasoning. See, here are these men who are getting ready to leave the ship. If Paul doesn't say anything, if the soldiers don't believe him or their centurion doesn't believe him, if these sailors get out of the ship and escape away, then what God has said is going to happen won't happen. And so therefore Paul and the centurion and the soldiers and the sailors all have to cooperate in order for what God said would happen to happen. Therefore, if man does not cooperate with God, God's will can be thwarted.

And that is the false understanding that is sometimes attributed to this passage of Scripture.

Let me give you some problems with seeing this passage of Scripture this way. I am going to list three of them.

First of all, that is not what the passage says. Just straight out, nowhere do you get that teaching directly from this passage. It doesn't say it at all. In fact, the passage ends with

⁶ Acts 27:44.

⁷ Acts 27:31.

the statement that everything happened exactly as God said it would, so that the main point of the passage is that God is sovereign and what he said would happen, happened.

The point of the passage or the chapter is not: Oh, God is on the verge of being proven wrong. And somehow man cooperates and somehow magically chooses the right thing and God just happens to be proven right. Phew, that was close.

The passage nowhere teaches this. The real point of the passage is that God is sovereign even over the decisions of men so that when he says this is what is going to happen, if in order for that to happen certain men must make certain decisions, they will make those decisions because God is sovereign even over the will of men.

Secondly, there is a realm of study that if you are going to go into the ministry you are going to be put through in seminary. And notice how I phrase that. It is called hermeneutics. It has got nothing to do with some guy named Herman. It actually has to do with a guy named Hermes who was the... what was that? The Roman god, Greek god, one of those, of messenger boy. Basically Hermes was the messenger boy to the gods.

Hermeneutics is the study of how to correctly interpret messages or passages of Scripture. And one of the hermeneutical principles is that you let a clear passage interpret the less clear passages. And this is especially true when you deal with narrative, pure narrative. Pure narrative that just gives you the events requires the rest of Scripture's principles to tell you how to interpret it. You don't want to get involved with the history and try to draw some moral lesson from the history without running that through the grid of the rest of clear teaching of Scripture.

You all are familiar with the joke of the young man who thought he could gain direction from God by, you know, pointing out passages of the Scripture. And so he opens his Bible and points out and he lands in the middle of the narrative where Judas goes and hangs himself. So then he does it again and the next passage is, "Go, though and do likewise."

Well, ok, I admit the "Go thou and do likewise," if you were just reading the narrative of where Judas hangs himself, ok, you wouldn't want to draw the moral lesson that somehow suicide was a good thing to do. I know that is an extreme example.

Well, how do you know that is not what that passage is teaching? How do you know that maybe there aren't some good situations where suicide would be the good thing to do? Because the rest of the Scripture condemns murder. It is obvious.

And then later on when they comment on it, you know, the later teaching about Judas, the whole thing is negative in tone. You let the rest of the Scripture, especially in regards to pure narrative.

So what does the rest of Scripture teach about God's sovereignty, particularly as it relates to man's will?

I hope these are familiar passages of Scripture to you. Turn to Daniel chapter four, one of my favorites.

Nebuchadnezzar is emperor of the most powerful empire on the face of the earth at this time and he is a proud man. Can God change a man? What if he doesn't want to be changed? Can God still change him? Oh, yes. God knows exactly what it takes to humble a man and bring him to his knees. And this is what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. For seven years he runs out like some wild animal and lives in the fields.

Verse 33. "That very hour the word was fulfilled concerning Nebuchadnezzar; he was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws."⁸

You were a proud man, Nebuchadnezzar. God says, "This is what I can do to you. I can make you live like an animal, like the worst of the animals for seven years, you proud, arrogant emperor."

Verse 34. "And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High."⁹

You have to understand. This chapter starts with Nebuchadnezzar blessing himself and here he blesses the most high. Who is the most high? Not him. It is God.

....and [I]praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?"¹⁰

That's pretty plain, isn't it? God does whatever he wants to, not just with the angels, but with all the inhabitants of the men of the earth, women of the earth, too. Anything he wants he does. And God doesn't look at the inhabitants of the earth and go, "Oh, my. You know, I value their freedom so much. They are so lofty in my eyes. I value their human spirit so much. I just can't violate..." No. "All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing,"¹¹ before him. We are clay in the potter's hands.

Let me just read some others to you.

Psalm 115 and verse three. "Our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases."¹²

⁸ Daniel 4:33.

⁹ Daniel 4:34.

¹⁰ Daniel 4:34-35.

¹¹ Daniel 4:35.

¹² Psalm 115:3.

Psalm 135. “Whatever the LORD pleases He does, In heaven and in earth.”¹³

Proverbs 21 verse one. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.”¹⁴

Isaiah 14 verse 24 and 27. “The LORD of hosts has sworn, saying, “Surely, as I have thought, so it shall come to pass, And as I have purposed, so it shall stand... For the LORD of hosts has purposed, And who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, And who will turn it back?”¹⁵

The answer is: Well, no one.

Ephesians 1:11. You knew Ephesians one would come up, right? “In [Christ] also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His own will.”¹⁶

What does God do? He works everything. On what basis? Our suggestions? Does he work all things on the basis of the vote of the United Nations? Congress? The council of his own will. God only takes advice from himself and he does whatever he thinks best so that this... And I could go on, dozens of others, perhaps, of verses clearly teach that God not only decrees, but that what he decrees happens and it happens regardless of what men do or think.

So that, first of all, the passage does not teach the necessity of our somehow cooperating with God’s decrees or they won’t happen. Furthermore, that kind of teaching or that kind of idea taken out of this passage would contradict other very clear passages of Scripture. And, third, in order to gain this kind of an idea from this passage—to say that what Acts 27 is teaching is that unless we do our part God’s decrees don’t happen—to get that kind of a teaching, your logic has to run something like this. Follow it through.

If Paul had not said anything to the centurion and if they centurion had not believed Paul and if the soldiers had not obeyed the centurion, then God’s Word would not have been fulfilled, therefore we conclude it is possible for men’s decisions to thwart God’s decrees.

Well, I want you to notice that this kind of reasoning focuses on what did not happen. In other words, it focuses in on things that are theoretically possible, not things that have actually happened. And this is one of the dark spots on the reasoning of our age. We sit there and say, “Oh, something will never, ever, every happen, but theoretically it could.”

Do you realize the complete insanity of that kind of a statement?

¹³ Psalm 135:6.

¹⁴ Proverbs 21:1.

¹⁵ Isaiah 14:24, 27.

¹⁶ Ephesians 1:11.

“Oh, no, no, no. It would never happen. But theoretically, you know, hypothetically speaking...”

And we deal in hypotheticals and theoretics of unreal things and then derive our doctrine out of it.

Let me borrow an illustration. It is in a different area of theology, but it is an important one. I was looking to see if David Pauley was here this morning. David Pauley wrote his master’s thesis on whether or not Jesus Christ in the days of his incarnation on earth could have sinned. And there is a mass opinion out there in evangelicalism that says, “Well, yes, he could have.”

Oh, really? Well, under what circumstances would he have done that?

“Oh, no, no, no. He never would have. Never, never, never would he have done it, but theoretically speaking he could have.”

That is like saying, “I can jump from here to the moon. Oh, it will never happen, but theoretically.”

If something nothing ever, ever, ever, ever happens there is no theoretical, hypothetical: It might happen. That is nonsense.

If an unsaved, unregenerate, totally depraved person will never choose God unless their heart is renewed first, then there is no hypothetical ability on the part of man. Our age insists on creating hypotheticals where none exists.

And so this kind of reasoning says, “No, it didn’t happen that way, but theoretically it might have.”

Secondly, it assumes, in logic, that Paul and the centurion and the soldiers and the sailors acted a certain way out of their own autonomous choosing and they never once considered this possibility, that God who decreed the end that all of them would be saved, also decreed that Paul would say what he said, also decreed that the centurion would believe Paul, also decreed that the soldiers would obey the centurion, also decreed that the sailors would not have gotten away already and were brought back into the boat and then also finally decreed all of these things to wind up with the desired end which is all of them being saved.

Our age insists on crazy logic, but it forgets that the God who decrees the end of something can decree the means to accomplish it just as easily. And this is the key or one of the keys to understanding how these things interweave together.

Let me give you some doctrines as to how to properly think about this passage, how to properly think about the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and then give you some applications to work through it.

First, the certainty of an event does not render it improper to use means to obtain it. The certainty of an event does not render it improper to use means to obtain it. God, for example, has decreed that some men are going to be saved. Does that mean it is wrong for us to evangelize? Does that mean that somehow we don't believe God if we pray for the salvation of our relatives? Or does that mean that somehow we are trying to make sure that God doesn't change his mind if we employ means?

God has said that Christians will be sanctified to one degree or another in this life. You will be conformed more and more to the image of Christ. Does that mean it is wrong to attend church, to pray, to read the Scriptures? You know, maybe if we really believe God's promises that we are going to be made holy, maybe what we should do is stay home and watch the Cowboys lose. Of course that might make some of you more holy to have to deal with that.

The certainty of an event, because God has decreed it does not mean that it is wrong to use means to obtain it.

Now, if we try to ascribe some sort of guarantee to our means, that is another story. That is a sin. But Paul is told all of them will be saved. And so what does Paul do? He employs means. He tells the centurion, "These guys can't leave the boat or you won't be saved." He encourages them to eat. He wins the centurion's favor and trust. These are all means Paul employs to bring about what God said is going to happen.

The certainty of an event does not render it improper to use means to obtain it.

Secondly, though the event may already be determined by God, yet the use of means may be indispensable to bringing it about. So if God had determined to elect to salvation Mr. A over here, God may also have created a situation in which he has determined the means. And the means may then become necessary to accomplish the end.

Third, the doctrine of divine purposes or decrees making future events certain does not make the use of man's agency unnecessary or improper. Or, to put it this way—this summarizes everything we have been talking about—God determines the end as well as the means.

Fourth—and I am going to skip a couple for time's sake and move on down—but the fourth one, since you and I are not apostles like Paul, since we are not going to have angels appear to us at night time telling us who is going to be saved or what is going to happen in the future, we can be assured that God ordains all things whatsoever come to pass. Yet we can be equally assured that we do not know what those things are before they happen.

In other words, I want to clarify, there is a certain unique aspect of Acts 27 that doesn't apply to you and me. And what doesn't apply to you and me is we are not going to have an angel tell us ahead of time. Ok? Not going to happen.

Since we do not have such apostolic or prophetic foreknowledge, we can be assured whatever happens is God's decree, but we cannot try to predict or guarantee ourselves what is going to happen until it actually happens.

Now how does this all break out into our ordinary life? This isn't just theoretics. It is theoretics, it is just not just theoretics. There are some very important applications of these ideas. And let me give some to you here.

First, do not make decisions based on a presumption that you know what is going to happen in the future. All throughout Scripture men are condemned for such an action. The parable of the rich man whose fields bring forth abundantly and he decides, here is what I am going to do. I am going to tear down my barns. I am going to build bigger barns. I am going to store up all this food and I am going to take it easy for the next several years of my life and the next several years of my life are going to be one great big grand vacation.

Jesus isn't teaching against retirement. What he is teaching against is that this man was a fool, because what he didn't know was that he was going to die that night. And he was focusing on: I know what is going to happen tomorrow.

No, you don't.

In James the financiers, "We are going to travel to such and such a city. We are going to invest money. We are going to do business and we are going to get this kind of a return."¹⁷

James says, "What you ought to say is if God is willing this will happen, because you don't know the future."¹⁸

Not only in financial matters or matters of life or death, matters of salvation.

When I was in ninth grade one of my classes was one of those social studies classes and we were having evolution just crammed down our throats. I was tired of it. And so I talked with the teacher and gave her some reading material and stuff.

She said, "I don't understand this."

And I thought that was funny that she would believe evolution and not understand it.

But I was also talking with a gentleman that sat next to me in class who was a Roman Catholic who also believed evolution. And so we are kind of going back and forth and back and forth and, you know, a little bit of argument and a little bit of debate, but we were fairly good friends. So it stayed that way. And I was telling a friend at church

¹⁷ See James 4:13.

¹⁸ See James 4:15.

about our dialogue and this friend at church responded to me, “Oh, isn’t he Roman Catholic? Don’t bother. You will never get them saved.”

Now, I don’t normally have you all raise your hands. But I am curious. How many of you have a Roman Catholic background, raise your hand? Yeah, you see, you never get those people saved.

What I wish I had said—you know, you are only 14 at the time—but looking back at it what I wish I had said was, “Yes, and I am sure Martin Luther would agree with you, too.”

Sometimes we look at our coworkers, our neighbors, sometimes even our relatives and we say, “Man, they are never going to get saved.”

I submit to you that if a hardened criminal can be brought to God on the day of his execution while dying on the cross next to Christ, that until they breathe their last breath you pray for and bring the gospel to any to whom you have opportunity to do so.

People make presumptions about the future not only regarding salvation, but regarding their personal matters, their family. Some parents have looked at their children who have become hard necked, stiff necked and have just come to the conclusion that I am not even going to try to correct them because if I do they will just rebel all the more and will only get worse. So I am just going to leave them alone and let them do what they want because nothing can be done.

I even have a personal sneaking suspicion that some didn’t exercise their right to vote on the basis of presuming the future.

“Oh, well, we know who is going to win anyway.”

You know, unless you have just become a prophet or an apostle or seen an angel, to make presumptions of the future and then make decisions on that basis is, in essence, taking the place of God, which does not belong to us.

People give up on their children. They give up on their marriages. They give up on their churches. They just simply give up and then use God’s sovereignty as an excuse.

“Well, I know what is going to happen. Nothing is going to fix this. It is all going to... we might as well just give in and quit now.”

Do not make decisions based on presumption of the future either negative or positive ones.

Secondly, do not make decisions from a fatalistic approach.

“Well, whatever God has said is going to happen is going to happen and so it doesn’t matter what I do.”

I think he will be all right with me sharing this with you. Our next Founder’s Conference in September our featured speaker is going to be Dr. Sam Waldron. And I barely knew Dr. Waldron before asking him to come and we have had a little bit of an email exchange and I have found that he has had a good sense of humor like myself and so I kind of began to work with that sense of humor.

And I asked him, “When you come for our Founder’s Conference to speak, will you need chauffer service?”

And he replied back, “Yes, but don’t worry about the Lincoln, the caviar and the champagne.”

To which I replied back, “This is Texas. I was thinking more of a pickup truck, a diet Coke and Ritz and Cheese Whiz.”

To which he replied back, “Sorry. The diet Coke has caffeine which raises my blood pressure.” You know, the pickup truck he can live with and, you know the Ritz and the Cheese Whiz just raise his cholesterol. He says, “I can’t eat anything anymore.”

Well, not to be out done I wrote back. I said, “Why don’t you declare yourself a hyper Calvinist for the three days that you are here. God has already decreed the day of your death. There is nothing you can do to change it, right? So come on down. Eat barbeque brisket, potato salad, pecan pie with whipped cream or whatever and just declare yourself a hyper Calvinist for those three days in regards to death and diet.”

To which he wrote back, “I heartily agree.”

And so you can accuse him of being a hyper Calvinist when you see him eat down here for those three days that he will be here.

If it doesn’t matter, if God has got the day of my death determined, go eat what you want. Put on the pounds. Let the cholesterol go sky high. Right? If God has decreed that I am going to die then I can drive any way I want to, live any way I want to, do anything I want to until one day, the day of your death does come and you get to heaven and you find out that the means God used to bring about your death was your own foolish decision. And you are responsible for those decisions.

Some have made the same logic in regards to their children.

“Well, if God is going to save them, he is going to save them. If he is not, he is not. What difference does it make for me to discipline them now?”

Do not make decisions based on fatalism. God has given us a Word to obey and it is a glorious Word and obedience is our joy.

Third, don't blame past sins on God's sovereignty.

"Well, yes, I know I lived like this and I know I did this, but it was all in God's sovereignty."

What is interesting to me is that the apostle Paul never takes that approach himself. In 1 Timothy chapter one Paul describes himself as a blasphemer and an persecutor of the church, an insolent man.¹⁹ He says, "I obtained mercy for these things because I did them in ignorance, but if you want to look at the chiefest of sinners," Paul says, "Here I am. I am right here."²⁰

Even though it was Paul's persecution of the church that God sovereignly used to save him. Paul never looked back at his sins and says, "Well, you know, that was just part of God's plan," and excuses it.

We have a tendency to excuse our sins after they have been committed with a statement that, "Well, God must have ordained that to happen. Let's just go."

Fourth, do not become bitter over the details of life which have turned out to difficult ends. You remember how all this plays out? God tells Paul, "You are all going to be saved," but Paul has to say something to the centurion, who says something to the soldiers, who keeps the sailors from leaving. And then Paul encourages them to eat so they will have the strength to swim and then the soldiers want to kill the prisoners, but Julius doesn't want them to do that.

And so all of these means are like dominoes that fall down in line to accomplish the end. And we are smart enough to figure that out. And sometimes we look at the dominoes that have already happened in our life and we go, "If I just hadn't done that."

Now that is more than just making the wrong move on a chess board or whatever. There are people whose honest mistakes have put them through terrible, terrible difficulties.

I had a professor in college whose wife ran over one of their children. Can you imagine?

"If I had just looked, if I had just waited a little while longer."

I worked on a bus ministry in a fellow church, in a sister church. And some people that I knew who worked on that bus ministry let a child out. He came back to get his papers. The bus driver was in a hurry, killed that kid.

And you go, "Whoa. What if I just hadn't done that?"

¹⁹ See 1 Timothy 1:13.

²⁰ See 1 Timothy 1:14-15.

We are capable of seeing, after it has happened, how the dominoes fall into line. And we are very capable of sitting here and becoming bitter over the details of life.

Even if those events may have been your fault, you must learn: God is sovereign. That doesn't excuse you from responsibility, but it gives you a reason not to be bitter at God.

So in the end, I leave you with this: Maintain balance in this doctrine of God's sovereignty. Do not become fatalistic, nor do you set about trying to perform unreasonable tasks hoping to accomplish a good outcome or guarantee a good outcome. Don't become fatalistic and don't become multi phobic. Do what the Word says.

I can think of no greater encouragement for the children of God than the doctrine of God's sovereignty properly understood. The God who has decreed all things whatsoever comes to pass is not a stoic, stone statue in the clouds. He is an all wise, all loving Father. He is my Father and all things that he has decreed and the details and the means that accomplish them, the dominoes that knock them all over, has been decreed not by some impassive spirit, but by my Father. My father has decreed whatever has happened in my life. My Father has said, "This is what is best for you." It is my Father who has decreed these things. And therefore it assures us that whatever he has designed for us will come true. If he has promised forgiveness of our sins through our Savior Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven. Our salvation is guaranteed. Our holiness is promised. Our glorification is set in stone. No greater encouragement can be found than the doctrine of God's sovereignty properly understood. Our actions and our decisions have eternal consequences. But in the hands of a loving Father they will be used for the praise and the glory of his grace and his mercy.

Let me close with this. God's sovereignty is a precious doctrine even for those of you who are not saved because it assures you that no matter how wretched you are, God can save. And if the means of his salvation is your repentance and your faith, then I call you this morning to repent and to believe. It is not your job to try to stare into that annals of the heaven and figure out whether your name is written down from all eternity as one of the elect or not. It is your job to see that an all sovereign God holds for to you a promise.

Come and you will not be cast out.

Young children, in particular, you have been raised in this church and you have heard teaching about God's sovereignty in election. Please do not be confused. It is not your job, children, to figure out whether you are elect or not. Come to Christ. Trust in him alone. Repent of your sins. You will be saved.

God is sovereign and he can and will save any and all who come to him.