

Bible Witness



Sovereignty of God

Sovereignty of God: Infinite, Eternal, and Unchangeable in His Being
A Biblical Perspective of God's Sovereignty
The Sovereign God of World History
The Sovereign God of Redemptive History
The Sovereign God of Church History



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Infinite, Eternal, and Unchangeable IN HIS BEING



Jeffrey Khoo

God is said to be “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable” in seven specified aspects of His subsistence, in His “being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth”.

God’s omnipresence is the meaning of the words, “infinite in his being”. The Scriptures explicitly teach this truth: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee” (Psalm 139:7–12).

The presence of God is spoken of in the Scriptures in absolutely universal terms. “The LORD’s throne is in heaven; his eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men” (Psalm 11:4). “The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry” (Psalm 34:15). “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3). “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?” (1 Kings 8:27). “Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:24).

The Biblical doctrine of prayer argues for the omnipresence of God. That man can pray to God at any time and at any place vividly and naturally assumes the omnipresence of God. Jonah prayed from the belly of the whale (Jonah 2) and the Lord heard him. “The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth” (Psalm 145:18).

The Bible writers clearly teach and always assume the eternity of God’s being. God is always God and will never cease to be God. He never began to be. He never will cease to be.

The eternal being of God is explicitly taught in many passages of Scripture. “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were

brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Psalm 90:1–2). "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever ... Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thy hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: But thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail" (Hebrews 1:8–12; cf. Psalms 45:6–7; 102:25–27). "Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6; cf. Revelation 1:8, 11; 21:6; 22:13).

After the most exalted declaration, "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place" (Isaiah 57:15), God immediately adds, "[I dwell] with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." God's omnipresence assures us that He is not a distant God, but a God who is very near us, and works actively in time and space. God inspires; He never expires.

The immutability of God (i.e. God is unchangeable) is clearly taught in the Scriptures. "I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). By these words, we are instructed that the God of the Bible is most trustworthy for He can never change His mind or His plan. Our salvation is filled with hope because our Saviour is unchangeable and He keeps His promises.

Our unchangeable God is absolutely trustworthy. This truth is clearly taught in Hebrews 6:17–18, "Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us." Hebrews 13:7–9 says, "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace." The constancy of the character of our Lord Jesus Christ is the reason for our confidence in His gospel of salvation.

Many other scriptural verses may be quoted to prove the immutability of God. God is "the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). "The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (Psalm 33:11). "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand" (Proverbs 19:21). "The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (Isaiah 14:24). "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:9–10).



A Biblical Perspective of GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY



Prabhudas Koshy

The LORD God Almighty reigns supreme! In the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, there is a solemn affirmation of God's sovereignty: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (Matthew 6:13). In his prayer, Paul the apostle accorded praises to God as sovereign, saying, "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:17).

God is spoken of as the sovereign king throughout the Bible. He possesses and exercises absolute authority, rule and governance over all things - "The LORD reigneth, he is clothed with majesty; the LORD is clothed with strength, wherewith he hath girded himself: the world also is stablished, that it cannot be moved" (Psalm 93:1; cf. Psalms 96:10; 97:1; 99:1). Psalm 104:1 declares: "...O LORD my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty." He is the highest authority - "Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all" (1 Chronicles 29:11).

God alone is sovereign, in its absolute sense. In the words of Arthur W. Pink, God's sovereignty is "the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the godhood of God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that God is God". According to Charles Hodge, "sovereignty is not a property of the divine nature, but a prerogative arising out of the perfections of the Supreme Being". If God is not sovereign over all things, then He is not God at all.

Basically, God's sovereignty denotes that He is the supreme ruler who governs all the affairs of the universe, even in the minutest details of its existence and function. As the sovereign God, He exercises His absolute authority and infinite power over all His creation.

His sovereignty is absolute

Scripture teaches the absolute sovereignty of God. He rules over everything with absolute power. Revelation 19:6 affirms: "Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth." The total authority of the Lord God Almighty is expressed in these words.

As the absolute sovereign, the LORD does whatsoever pleases Him. "But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased" (Psalm 115:3; cf. Psalm 135:6). He acts according to His own will and pleasure. The apostle Paul says that He "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11).

He is absolutely independent in all His decisions or decrees. As such, He does not consult or depend on any of His creatures for direction. "Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him?" (Isaiah 40:13). "For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?" (Romans 11:34). No one is privy to the purposes and counsels of His will. All His eternal decrees were purposed in Himself and in His Son, and were known only to them and His Spirit, which is in Him. The counsels and plans of God are entirely according to His Sovereign will. He takes no orders from anyone. His sovereignty means that He does whatsoever pleases Him.

God has vested His absolute sovereignty in all His decrees, and hence not one of them can be thwarted. The prophet Isaiah asked, "For the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27). The LORD Himself declared, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:10). He does as He will and none can challenge or change it. Man may rebel against God, but His decrees will always remain unhampered. Proverbs 19:21 affirms: "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand."

His sovereignty is universal

Psalm 103:19 declares: "The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all." He immanently and personally rules over everything that there is. In other words, there is nothing that functions outside His divine rule, and nothing takes place without His permission.

He is the "Lord of heaven and earth" (Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21; Acts 17:24; cf. Psalm 47:2, 7). He rules supreme, not only in heaven but also on earth. "Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine" (1 Chronicles 29:11a).

God is also sovereign above all His creatures. His universal reign binds all creatures inexorably to His decrees. No creature can escape His government. The LORD says in Jeremiah 27:5, "I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the ground, by my great power and by my outstretched arm, and have given it unto whom it seemed meet unto me." Even a tiny atom is under His control. "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him" (Colossians 1:16). "The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil" (Proverbs 16:4). "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Romans 11:36). These portions of Scripture and many more show us that the sovereignty of God is universal. His sovereign rule extends over all His creatures, from the visible to the invisible, the largest to the smallest,

and heaven to earth. Nothing escapes His sovereignty.

He is the undisputed King who reigns over all beings, dominions, deeds of man, events and circumstances. Even those who disobey His commandments cannot evade His supremacy over them. "God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness" (Psalm 47:8). In addition, Proverbs 16:4 states that "the LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil." Even the wicked men, who abuse their God-given abilities to rebel against Him, will ultimately become vessels of His great and glorious purposes. Though the wicked will not glorify the Lord, He will glorify Himself over them. He not only turns their rebellious acts to the advancement of His purposes but also declares His power over them by bringing them to judgment on the day of His wrath. So Scripture asks, "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?" (Romans 9:22).

His sovereignty is immutable

The sovereignty of God is unchanging, for He is "an everlasting king" (Jeremiah 10:10). "The LORD is King for ever and ever" (Psalm 10:16). "Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations" (Psalm 145:13; cf. Daniel 4:3, 34; 7:14). "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever" (Psalm 45:6). He is "King eternal" (1 Timothy 1:17).

The Lord's dominion does not depend on the willingness of people to bow to His reign. Nothing outside Him limits or prevents Him from exercising His power. Psalm 33:9-11 testifies, "For he spake, and

it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast. The LORD bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect. The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations." God's plans are not affected by the changing attitudes and actions of unfaithful men. His sovereign power controls and governs all things, that all His plans may be accomplished without any alterations to them.

He will bring to pass all that He has sovereignly determined from before the foundation of the world. The LORD Himself declared: "Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (Isaiah 14:24). "Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him" (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

His unending sovereignty guarantees the immutability of His plans and promises. God does not amend His plans even though people may oppose His will. He keeps all His covenantal promises just as He declared them.

Conclusion

The absolute, perfect sovereignty of God should move our hearts to adore His greatness in humble worship, submitting ourselves to His reign and decrees. It also encourages us to trust Him with full assurance as we know His sovereignty guarantees the fulfilment of all His promises. His sovereignty also affords comfort and courage to all those who serve Him.



The Sovereign God of WORLD HISTORY

Daniel 4:1-37



Paul Ferguson

Daniel chapter four is a unique chapter in Scripture as it seems to be written autobiographically by one of the most unlikely candidates for conversion. It is a “testimony tract” of Nebuchadnezzar’s humbling by the Lord and how he was eventually saved. It is true that “not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Corinthians 1:26), but it does not say that not any mighty or noble is called!

In the context of Daniel 4, it was at a time when Nebuchadnezzar was at the height of his power; reigning over the greatest empire the world had ever known. He had subjugated most of the potential rival threats, had never lost a major battle, and had constructed a mighty and glorious capital city to live in. His place in history was secured, his every whim was indulged and his every command obeyed.

Nebuchadnezzar was a brilliant general, administrator, architect, thinker and politician. He was the undisputed leader of Babylon for around 43 years. Nebuchadnezzar was credited with the rebuilding and adorning of the city of Babylon with: canals, aqueducts, temples and reservoirs. This apparently involved the construction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which was regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The empire he ruled over was the greatest of that generation and he as its greatest leader was the “head of gold” (Daniel 2:38). The glorious city of Babylon was his citadel of power in the empire. A double wall some 15 miles round and at least 85 feet high encircled the city. It had over 100 watchtowers and was reputedly so wide that four chariots could be driven abreast around the tops of the walls. The great Euphrates River ran diagonally through the city, providing adequate water supplies. The leaders of Babylon had a 20-year stockpile of food provisions. The city seemed impregnable.

In Daniel chapter 4, we see man's view of history, and God's view of history vividly illustrated. It should be noted that these are two competing views. Both observe the same factual events. However, one sees history tied up in man whereas the other sees it linked to the sovereign will and purpose of God. Man's view is seen in the words of the unregenerate Nebuchadnezzar, whereas God's view is seen in

the words of Daniel's interpretation of his dream and God's judgment of the proud king. God's view of history will ultimately be vindicated and Nebuchadnezzar would finally acknowledge it as true at the end of the chapter.

Man's view of history

As Nebuchadnezzar was looking out over the splendour and strength of the great city of Babylon, his heart was inflated with pride. He believed that he was responsible for building his great kingdom. We see man's view of history summed up by the declaration of Nebuchadnezzar: "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:30). Nebuchadnezzar saw everything as his possessions, obtained by his power and for the purpose of his glory. That is a classic summary of man's view of history. He sees himself in control and everything working together by his wisdom for his own glory and honour. This is rooted in the sin of pride.

As someone once noted that the centre letter of PRIDE is "I". This is highly appropriate as pride is the exaltation of self. It is the attempt to assert the sovereignty

of self over the sovereignty of God. It is dethroning God and the enthroning of self. As you read the statement of Nebuchadnezzar, the obvious use of the personal pronouns is clear, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?" Nebuchadnezzar is suffering from "I"-dolatry! You see the same self-centred spirit in the devil from the beginning (cf. Isaiah 14:12-14).

The spirit of the serpent has invaded fallen man. Augustine observed this: "It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as 'angels'." Pride can creep into our lives almost without our awareness. It seems to particularly affect leaders, whether in the business or political world. Great monuments are erected to exalt their names in the present and for future generations.

The polar opposite to pride is the virtue of humility. James exhorts us: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10). The key to humility is to see yourself "in the sight of the Lord". That infinite comparison will lead you to see how insignificant and helpless



you are. Then you will start to give God the glory for any good in your life. This is God's spiritual elevator, for up is down and down is up in God's kingdom! The greatest man is the one who thinks the least of himself. Andrew Bonar always remarked that he could discern the growth in the life of a believer in proportion to his elevation of the Master and his reduction of self in his conversation. This is the spirit of John the Baptist who cried of Christ, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

God's view of history

Daniel's interpretation of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar will draw the sharp contrast of God's view of world history. Daniel does not try to be evasive or ambiguous in his interpretation. He makes it clear also that a judgment is coming on the king as "the decree of the most High" (v. 24). The king will learn that it is Jehovah who is truly the Sovereign Ruler of this world, including Babylon. God is trying to teach the king a certain lesson: "till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (v. 25) and "after that thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule" (v. 26).

Not only the dream's interpretation itself but also its fulfilment gives further evidence to God's view of history. Right at the beginning of the narrative of this judgment, we are reminded that God always keeps His Word: "All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar" (v. 28). There are many things that you cannot rely on in this world, but God's promises can always be trusted. Time does not erode confidence in their fulfilment. God is never in a hurry but He is always on time! Moses

reminded Joshua, "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19). Joshua learned the truth of this personally. He passed on the same counsel to Israel as he looked back over his long pilgrimage (cf. Joshua 23:14-15).

Sometimes, God's judgments are delayed but they are always certain. In this instance, God's judgment is immediate and fully executed, just like it was with Herod in Acts 12. Nebuchadnezzar would discover who really was in control. Instead of ruling men, he "was driven from men" (v. 33). The mighty tree was cut down instantly to a stump. Pride is a form of insanity as it causes us to lose touch with reality. We then live in an unreal world rather than sanely seeing the universe through theo-centric spectacles.

This is not the end of the story. God's Word concerning a limited judgment was perfectly executed because "at the end of the days" (v. 34a), the ordained time was up. God is never early and never late! Grace gave Nebuchadnezzar another chance when God intervened again so "mine understanding returned unto me". Nebuchadnezzar did not waste this opportunity but testified: "I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever" (v. 34). The king's problems began with his concentration on self but later his focus was heavenward on "the most High". Lifting his eyes towards heaven is Nebuchadnezzar's way of acknowledging that God in heaven is sovereign.

The chastened monarch then gave one of the most profound and wonderful confessions of the sovereignty of God in verses 34-35. These words are impossible for the unregenerate heart to confess (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:10-14). After graduating from the school of humiliation, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that God's kingdom is the eternal one, "whose dominion is an everlasting dominion" and that man cannot be compared to God, for "all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing". Nebuchadnezzar was then cognisant that God is God and he is not! Nebuchadnezzar attested to the omnipotence of Almighty God: "he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" Heaven rules! Nothing has changed concerning this truth, even in the 21st century!

Lessons to be learned

The God who reigned over the lives of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar is still on His throne. Our God is still in control of human history, for "he ruleth by his power for ever" (Psalm 66:7). The potential for our circumstances to cloud our faith in God's sovereignty is always a real possibility. Are we willing to trust Him when our world disintegrates? Is God greater than our circumstances? Do you have a "nervous faith"? We need to learn that if the past and the prophesied future are governed by the sovereign will of God, then so is the present. God has not ceased to rule over the affairs of men and women. He reigns over all and can sovereignly work with or without the means of external events and persons to accomplish His ultimate purposes. The truth of these facts should:

- (1) humble us
- (2) teach us to seek the will of God in everything
- (3) lead us to live for the glory of God
- (4) remove our anxieties – leave the unknown future in God's hands
- (5) cause us to interpret all our experiences by the truth that God is working all things together for the ultimate good
- (6) enable us to be content in all our circumstances
- (7) move us to rejoice in the Lord that He is in control of every event in our lives
- (8) urge us to pray for sinners and witness for Christ – if God can reach Nebuchadnezzar with the Gospel, He can reach anyone.

There is no more comforting doctrine for the people of God in Scripture than God's unfettered, absolute sovereignty over the affairs of this planet. Living in our fast-paced, knowledge-based society, it is all too easy to be intimidated by the powers of governments and corporations if we judge them from a human standpoint only. However, when we judge from God's perspective, then we can see that it is God who still raises up nations, governments, kings and even multi-national corporations. It is also God who is building His church in our crooked and perverse generation. Just as He promised, He has preserved His Word and His people in every generation. Everything is still in His control. His will shall ultimately be done. We can sing in every age, "Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (Revelation 19:6).



The Sovereign God of REDEEMPTIVE HISTORY

Ephesians 1:1-12



Paul Ferguson

The Book of Ephesians is one of Paul's prison epistles. It is written to a church living in one of the most pagan idolatrous cultures. Paul planted the church there in a mighty move of God as recorded in Acts 19. Ephesus was a city particularly given to the worship of the goddess Diana. There was great hostility to the gospel, which was evident when probably around 25,000-30,000 people cried for 2 hours in the theatre: "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" (Acts 19:34).

It would be easy for the church at Ephesus to be intimidated by the antagonistic world around them. Paul begins his epistle by directing his reader's attention to the great truths of God's absolute sovereignty in salvation. Doubtless, this not only encouraged them but also the apostle himself as he languished in a Roman prison.

In this first section of the epistle, the apostle allows us to "eavesdrop" on the eternal counsels of God. He unfolds three aspects of God's sovereignty in redemptive history, namely: (1) God planned it all, (2) God effected it all and (3) God will perfect it all.

God planned it all

The 21st century boasts of man at the centre of politics, business, science, technology, philosophy and morality. Man begins and ends with himself. This is also true in respect of religion. Every alternative form of religious thought begins with man and seeks to reform man by his own efforts to work his way back to God. By contrast, Christianity is unique in that it starts with God and not man.

The doctrine of God's free, unfettered sovereignty pervades all of Scripture. You cannot truly understand election, justification, sanctification and glorification until you grasp this doctrine. Here in Ephesians 1, Paul makes it clear that God, in granting us salvation, has blessed every believer "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (v. 3b). These "spiritual blessings" are not the result of our own efforts, but of God's sovereign planning. Two words are deliberately selected to evidence this – "chosen" (v. 4) and "predestinated" (v. 5).

The word "chosen" here has the idea of selecting or singling out a smaller number from a larger one. In the original Greek text, this word is in the aorist tense and middle reflexive voice, indicating that it is a completed action which

God has done by Himself and for Himself in the past. The Lord Jesus Christ using the same Greek word affirmed the divine order: “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16; cf. John 6:44). This choice was “in him before the foundation of the world” (v. 4). The NT commentator, John Eadie, rightly observes, “Before that world which was to be lost in sin and misery was founded, its guilt and helplessness were present to the mind of God, and His gracious purposes toward it were formed.”

The Greek word translated “predestinated” in verse 5 means to mark out in advance the boundary or limits of a place, thing or person. So the apostle Paul is making it absolutely clear that our salvation is the result of God’s unconditional, sovereign election before man ever walked this earth. It is difficult to know how Paul could make this any clearer!

Object of this election

This is not a universal election of every man and woman who will inhabit the planet. Paul, in this context, points out that this “us”, who are chosen (verse 4), are “the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus” (v. 1).

Motive

There are some Arminian theologians who argue that God chose His elect people simply because He saw some good in them or that He knew in advance that they would chose Him. Paul pointedly ignores all of these reasons. Instead, he makes it clear that God chose us “according to the good pleasure of his will” (v. 5) and “to the praise of the glory of his grace” (v. 6). Writing to Timothy, the apostle underlines the same truth that God “hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2 Timothy 1:9).

All of election is tied up in God’s sovereign will. No one persuaded or assisted God in this. Man had nothing to do with it. The Fall of man did not catch God by surprise or change His plan. God did not choose His elect for their faith, but to faith. We might find this difficult to fully understand and even recoil from it, but let us acknowledge that this is what the Bible teaches. The apostle Paul does not try to argue this logically or philosophically to accommodate the finite minds of man. Neither does he evade nor apologise for it; he simply states this as a fact.



Purpose

God's sovereign election has a distinct purpose. It is not to puff us up with pride but "that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (v. 4b). We were not chosen because we were holy but that we could be holy. This sovereign election should result in the greatest glory redounding to God "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (v. 6). The sad thing is that believers often use their holy vessel for unholy purposes. This robs God of the rightful glory that belongs solely to Him. May God help us so that our practice corresponds to our position in Christ.

God effected it all

God not only planned the redemptive history before "the foundation of the world" (v. 4) but also sovereignly put this plan into effect in time. Paul tells the Ephesians that "he hath made us accepted in the beloved" (v. 6). This is by "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (v. 7a). This is not by our efforts but simply "according to the riches of his grace" (v. 7b).

This truth is patterned right through Scripture. In Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve fell, it must be noted that they were not running to God but from God: "And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8). It was God who had to seek them out and it was God who sovereignly declared His plan of salvation for fallen man in Genesis 3:15.

After declaring His sovereign plan, it was God who put this into effect: "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made

under the law" (Galatians 4:4). It was God who moved Caesar Augustus to require all the world to be taxed, it was God who brought a virgin and a lowly carpenter together from Nazareth, and it was God who intervened and sent John the Baptist to herald the coming of the Messiah. The motive for this gift was God's love: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). The coming of Christ is all tied up in God's sovereign will. That is why the angels ascribed all the glory to God in the first Christmas carol: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

God's grace had to effect the plan of salvation as man could not. As Paul explained in the second chapter of Ephesians, the unregenerate heart is "dead in trespasses and sins" (v. 1b). This man is "having no hope, and without God in the world" (v. 12b). He goes on to describe the mind and habitual course of life of fallen man:

"Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Ephesians 2:2-3).

Dead men cannot understand their predicament and cannot communicate. It does not matter how desperate their situation is. The unsaved man is spiritually and eternally dead; not merely weakened, incapacitated, disabled or sick. He is not seeking God as "there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh

after God” (Romans 3:11; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14).

God will perfect it all

God not only sovereignly arranged and effected the plan of salvation, but He also sovereignly controls and sustains it from eternity past into eternity future. Paul assures the Ephesians “that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: in whom also we have obtained an inheritance” (vv. 10-11a).

Redemptive history is being steered towards a final consummation by God in Christ. The paradise that was lost in Adam will be regained in Jesus Christ. The future is guaranteed because a sovereign God according to His divine will controls it. Nothing and no one in heaven, earth or hell can derail God’s decreed plan for His elect people.

Paul, writing to the Romans, sets forth the golden chain of redemption: “Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also

justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). The pronoun “he” used here must be noted carefully to grasp the fullness of this tremendous statement. In this redemptive chain, God is the great subject accomplishing these great purposes. He is acting here sovereignly – unadvised and unassisted. By contrast, man has no active part to play in this golden chain. He is merely the recipient of the actions of a sovereign God.

Observe also how God perfectly saves and keeps the number of His elect, “whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). The “whom he did predestinate” is the same group as “them he also glorified”. So if God predestinated 100 persons, then these same 100 persons will be glorified. When God sets out to save a man, He does not do a half-baked, or an imperfect job. This is vital, for if salvation were left to us to keep, we would lose it within 24 hours. Thank God this is not the case. We are going onto perfection and long for it, but we have not reached it yet.



Conclusion

When we were first converted, we had a tendency to think that we had quite a bit to do with our conversion. But the more we mature in biblical understanding, the more we come to recognise what Jonah discovered while in the belly of the great fish that “salvation is of the Lord”. If some people have a problem with this teaching, then they have a problem with the Word of God. It is what it is!

Redemptive history is tied up in the sovereign will of our great God. Our Westminster Confession is absolutely right to declare, “God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.” God planned it all, He effected it all and He will perfect it all. Spurgeon summed it up in his inimitable style,

God called us in Christ. He justified us in Christ. He sanctified us in Christ. He will perfect us in Christ. He will glorify us in Christ. We have everything in Christ, and we have nothing apart from Christ.

What lessons can we derive from these great truths?

(1) God planned and effected our salvation “that we should be holy and without blame before him in love”. How

are you doing? Are you living “to the praise of the glory of his grace”?

(2) This gives us great confidence in evangelizing the lost as we know that the results are guaranteed not because of our abilities, but because they are rooted in God’s immutable will.

(3) We do not need to adopt unscriptural, “seeker-sensitive” methods in our churches to evangelize as the results of salvation do not depend on making the message attractive to the unregenerate mind. The old gospel message is the “power of God unto salvation”.

(4) This gives us absolute assurance of salvation. We know that we are eternally saved because the One who controls time and eternity is always faithful to His redemptive promises. We may be unfaithful but He never is. His love for His children is not fickle as He declares, “Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee” (Jeremiah 31:3).

The old Reformers wisely adopted the Latinism *Soli Deo Gloria*, or “Glory to God alone”. We will sing this truth in heaven for evermore (Revelation 5:9-13).



The sovereignty of God is that golden sceptre in His hand by which He will make all bow, either by His Word or by His works, by His mercies or by His judgments.

Thomas Brooks

The Sovereign God of CHURCH HISTORY

Acts 4:23-33



Paul Ferguson

The Book of Acts is the book that unfolds how a sovereign God controls the history of the Church. The Lord Jesus declared to His disciples at the beginning of the New Testament church age, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Head of the Church makes it clear that God controls the:

(a) Preachers – He decides who the “ye” are that will be empowered and sent out to take the Gospel to the world. There are no self-appointed preachers in Christ’s church.

(b) Power – The power to preach God’s message comes from Him alone; “ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.”

(c) Programme – They were not to go out and come up with their own message but were to preach Christ; “ye shall be witnesses unto me.”

(d) Plan – The timing and scope of this evangelisation of the world was under the sovereignty of God. It was to be “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

God’s sovereignty is then aptly demonstrated in how this Church is launched as an unstoppable movement around the world. This was through 12 persons who were despised, unknown, persecuted and weak. They had no political influence, jet airplanes, budgets, Internet websites, seminaries, etc. The leading spokesman, Simon Peter, was “unlearned and ignorant” (Acts 4:13) and had recently failed the Lord in a terrible way. Only a sovereign God could use such instruments in such a mighty way that by the end of the first century, it was said by some historians that one in ten of the Roman Empire declared themselves Christians.

Despite these human shortcomings, the church was indestructible because God empowered her and she exemplified Zechariah 4:6 – “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.” The rapid and irrevocable spread of the Gospel confounded its enemies. The Emperor Julian, in a futile attempt to wipe out Christianity, bitterly cried, “You have won, O Galilean.” This should not surprise the observant reader as Jesus Christ had promised, “I will

build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

In Acts chapter four, we have an incident after the great move of God on the Day of Pentecost, when God convicted the hearts of 3,000 persons. As this church continued in deepening its roots in God's Word and prayer (cf. Acts 2:42), we read: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). By Acts 4:4, we read: "the number of the men was about five thousand."

This sudden move of God seemed to have caught the devil somewhat unawares. However, he quickly launched a counter-attack on the church in Acts 4 through the religious leaders of Judaism. These leaders tried to threaten and intimidate the leaders of the church into silence. In this incident, we see three truths about God's sovereignty in Church history: (1) God has a plan, (2) God's plan is always opposed and (3) God's plan always succeeds.

God has a plan

Everything our God does is significant and purposeful. He is never in a panic, He is never caught out by events, He does not learn anything, and He never acts blindly. If we build our theology on the Bible, then we will run headlong into the doctrine of God's sovereignty. In the prayer that went up by these early saints in Acts 4:24-30, they acknowledged that a sovereign God is behind all history and nature. They declared that even the actions of evil men work together to do what God has purposed, "for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done" (v. 28).

It should be noted that the "whatsoever" is in the context of the opposition to the

Lord Jesus Christ from the unbelieving powers of this world. Peter, in his previous sermon, argued that this was true even of the crucifixion, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). In this verse, we see the will of man and the decrees of a sovereign God interlocking in history. Peter was very clear that Christ was crucified by the predetermined will of God and by the action of wicked hands of human responsibility. God knows how to make the wrath of man to praise Him and accomplish His designs without diminishing man's responsibility in his sin. So in one and the same event, God was operating with good intentions while the Jews were operating with evil intentions.

Throughout the Scriptures, we are reminded that God does not cause sin but that He works through the sinful actions of men for His glory and purposes. Joseph testified of this same truth, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20). Our God is the ultimate governor of the universe "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11).

God's plan is always opposed

The activity and opposition by the devil to God's plan is evident in the Scriptures. Nowhere is this more prominently displayed than in the book of Acts. The devil's strategies are diverse and involve external attacks such as verbal intimidation (Acts 4), physical intimidation (Acts 5), murder (Acts 7), widespread scattering and imprisonment (Acts 8 and 9), and state execution (Acts

12). There was also an infiltration and attack from within the church such as hypocrisy (Acts 5), division (Acts 6), a satanic agent of a sorcerer (Acts 8) and heretics (Acts 15:1).

Here in Acts 4, the early church was aware that the devil and his agents were actively opposing the work of God. They took encouragement from the Word of God which foretold this, and they cited Psalm 2:1-2: "Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ" (Acts 4:25-26).

We should never underestimate the zeal or depth of the devil's commitment to destroy God's people. This will often be through human instruments who yield themselves to the directing of the devil. Our struggles on earth are not merely with flesh and blood even though it appears that way most of the time (cf. Ephesians 6:12). Satan can come as a friend, as he did to Eve in Genesis 3, and even masquerading as an "angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The devil is like a spiritual terrorist as he is relentless in his zeal to ensnare us. Being victorious on one day will not make you immune the next. Indeed, he will attack us when we least expect it, often at the point when we think

we are strongest. If you think that the devil is ignoring our churches and families, then you lack discernment. There is no release from the battle until glory.

Do not be deceived into thinking the devil is stupid or impotent. The greatest trick Satan has played on the Church is the refusal to take him seriously or the tendency to ignore him altogether. All too often we underestimate his powers to destroy us and overestimate ours to withstand his onslaughts. Yet, this great foe has felled the greatest of God's men. He was even able to get them in their maturity. Noah was a man who was "a just man and perfect in his generations" (Genesis 6:9), yet even after he had endured the pre-flood generation and having lived over 600 years, the devil trapped him in drunkenness. David defeated the giant of Gath, the onslaughts of Saul, subdued the Philistines, wrote many wonderful Psalms, yet in his middle age, the old serpent ensnared him with Bathsheba. He had just the right woman in the right place at the right time to appeal to David's weakness, for "the woman was very beautiful to look upon" (2 Samuel 11:2).



God's plan always succeeds

The devil has limited tactics but God has all knowledge from which He can order events. You cannot anticipate the actions of a sovereign, omnipotent God. We need to be constantly reminded of this truth.

There are great resources in God at our disposal. The only way to overcome the devil is to "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" by putting on "the whole armour of God" (Ephesians 6:10-11). The early church learned this lesson early. They knew and believed that "without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). So they fled to the place of prayer to "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). One of the reasons that our churches, families and our own spiritual lives are overcome by the devil is the impotency of our prayer lives.

The saints in Acts 4 cried, "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus" (vv. 29-30). Prayer was the only weapon they had but it was enough. They knew this was a serious moment and they were serious about their praying. The Lord immediately answered their prayers of faith and we read:

"And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was

his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:31-33).

The devil's tactic ultimately backfired and the work of God progressed at an even greater rate with the church "of one heart and of one soul" experiencing "great power" and "great grace". No person or circumstance can thwart the sovereign plan of God for His church. Indeed, if God is not sovereign, then who is? What power is in ultimate control of this universe? The glorious news is that God's "kingdom ruleth over all" (Psalm 103:19b).

Conclusion

The Spirit-led author of Acts wants us to note especially the power of prayer. There are few believers who cannot discern this, but so few that really pray. There are many in our churches who can argue about doctrine, memorise the Scriptures, give sacrificially, but tragically few who are intercessors. The prayer meeting is fundamental to the life of a church. Sadly, it is usually the most poorly attended meeting in any local church.

What other lessons can we derive from these great truths?

(1) God is still in sovereign control over His church. He is building it through His message by His power for His glory. We tend to despair of the future, especially for our youths. Yet, Daniel proved by God's power that our young people can live in the "Babylons" of this world but never be of Babylon. God can keep them "blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse

nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15). Let us take confidence in that.

(2) There will always be opposition. Even the apostle Paul had a Demas in his ranks so we should expect “fifth columnist” infiltrators. Often they will look like believers, will talk the talk, will be eloquent and friendly, and will hang around Christians. They are dishonest as to their identity and allegiance. The apostle Paul warned the Corinthians just how deceptive these people can be:

“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

A false prophet coming in the form of a minister “of righteousness” is hard to detect.

The devil knows that the lie that is closest to the truth will be the hardest to see through. Just because someone looks like a Bible-believing pastor and talks like one does not mean he is one! Martin Luther used to warn his people: “When you are looking for the devil, don’t forget to look in the pulpit.”

(3) Nothing can stop the work of God going forward. Jesus Christ promised, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Do you believe that? If you do, then go out and live the Gospel, defend the Gospel and preach the Gospel. Hold on to the promises of God: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).



A Letter of Appreciation for Bible Witness

Dear Editor,

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you and the Bible Witness Media Ministry. The Bible Witness Media Ministry for the past 6 years (2 years of study at FEBC and 4 years of pastoral work in Sierra Leone) has been a blessing to me personally. And for us at Nyangba Town Presbyterian Church, it is our study material for the various Bible study groups.

As we study the articles in the magazines, we understand the Bible in greater depth and the doctrines of Reformed Presbyterian Church better. As we are applying the teachings we learn from the magazines and RPGs, our Christian life becomes steadfast and unmoveable. Praise God.

Second, to all Bible Witness Media Ministry staff, beloved of God in this ministry, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ for the tremendous work you are doing.

The Bible Witness Media Ministry is God-honouring work. This ministry promotes faith in the one and only Saviour, Jesus Christ, who died for us so that we might have everlasting life.

As you continue to send us the magazines and RPGs free, we, as a small church, are always standing in the gap making mention of your ministry in our prayers that God will continue to prosper your work. We hope to receive from you these precious gifts in the year ahead. Many thanks and God bless.

*Rev Albert Ben Kainesie
Nyangba Town Presbyterian Church
Freetown, Sierra Leone*

ETHIOPIAN

MISSION REPORT

Extracts from the editor's report of his two-week Ethiopian mission stint in May 2012

The Building Project:

Construction work of the church and the Bible Institute is completed.

Church sanctuary



GBI & Church complex



GBI dormitory



Urgent Needs:

About S\$75,000/- is needed for digging a borehole, installation of water pumps and construction of retaining wall around the premises to prevent water rushing down from the hills during the rainy season.



GBI administration building

Gethsemane Bible Institute, Ethiopia:

Classes began with a day of prayer on 8th May 2012. Though five students were expected to come, only three were present. Of these three, only two were admitted. One did not produce proper documents and was rejected. "Many are called, few are chosen!" The two young men who have been admitted into full-time theological studies are Bayera and Zechariah. They are eager to learn God's Word, and ready to serve the Lord. In the second week of classes, a pastor's wife joined the institute for part-time studies.

I taught them Pastoral Theology for two weeks, five hours everyday. The regular lecturers are our three preachers – Rev Ephrem, Engida and Imane.

Though it is a small beginning with two students, we have great hopes about equipping and sending faithful men to the Lord's harvest field.

Participants at the opening day of prayer



Bro Engida installed as missionary-in-charge of the church in Addis Ababa



6th Anniversary of Gethsemane B-P Church of Ethiopia:

On 20th May 2012, the two congregations of Addis Ababa and Alem Gena came together to praise the Lord for six years of Gethsemane's mission work in Ethiopia and also for the completion of the buildings of the church and GBI. About 80 men and women gathered in the new church sanctuary in Alem Gena. They gathered in front of the church with great joy and singing. Rev Ephrem read from Solomon's prayer of dedication of the Temple in 2 Chronicles 6. Then he invited me to lead in prayer of dedication of the church. After the prayer, everyone walked into the church with singing.

In the worship service that immediately followed, I preached from 2 Timothy 4:1-8 on the topic, "Divine Charges to the Pastor and His congregation". Five divine charges were given: (1) Preach the Word, (2) Watch Thou in All Things, (3) Endure Afflictions, (4) Do the Work of an Evangelist and (5) Make Full Proof of Thy Ministry.

Some of the worshippers



Worshippers entering the sanctuary with singing.



BIBLE TRIVIA - EXODUS 4

Sarah Yong

COMPLETE THE PARAGRAPH BELOW BY FILLING IN THE BLANKS. (HINT: USE THE LETTERS IN THE BRACKETS TO HELP YOU)

Moses was worried that the children of Israel would not believe him nor hearken unto his _____ (ecioy), so the LORD gave him three signs as an assurance. First of all, Moses was told to cast his rod on the _____ (dnuorg) and it became a _____ (tnepres). When he picked it up by the tail, it became a rod again. For the second sign, he was told to put his _____ (dnah) into his bosom and it became leprous as _____ (wons). When he repeated the action, his hand returned to normal. The third sign would require Moses to take water from the _____ (revir) and pour it upon the dry land, and the water would become _____ (doolb).

However, _____ (sesoM) was still reluctant to go and he gave the excuse that he was slow of speech and of a slow _____ (eugnot). The LORD told him to go, for He would be with him and _____ (hcaet) him what to say. The LORD also sent Moses' _____ (rehtorb), Aaron, to aid him. The LORD promised to teach them what to do. So Moses took his wife and sons and _____ (denruter) to Egypt.

In Egypt, Moses and Aaron gathered together all the _____ (sredle) of the children of _____ (learsl) and conveyed what the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and performed the signs in the _____ (thgis) of the people. The people believed and they bowed their heads and worshipped.

Spiritual Lesson

Boys and girls, have you ever been fearful like Moses, giving excuses instead of serving the Lord? Remember, the LORD promised to be with Moses to teach him what to say and do. He will also strengthen and equip you to do all things for His glory. Read God's promise to you in Psalm 32:8 and fill in the blanks below.

"I will _____ thee and teach thee in the _____ which thou shalt go: I will _____ thee with mine eye."

Answers to Vol. 12, Issue 1 - Bible Trivia - Exodus 3

p. 32 - seen, heard, know, deliver, Egyptians, large, milk, Moses, bring, Israel.
God (v. 1), angel (v. 2), LORD (v. 4), father (v. 6), your (v. 13), THAT; AM (v. 14),
Abraham (v. 15), Isaac (v. 15), Jacob (v. 15), God; fathers (v. 16), Hebrews (v. 18), our (v. 18).

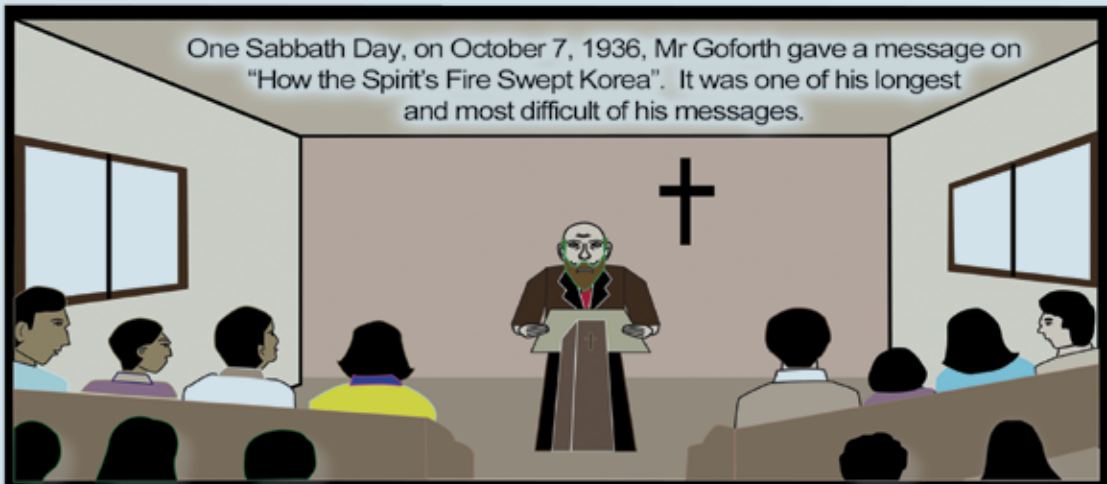
"Home Forever"

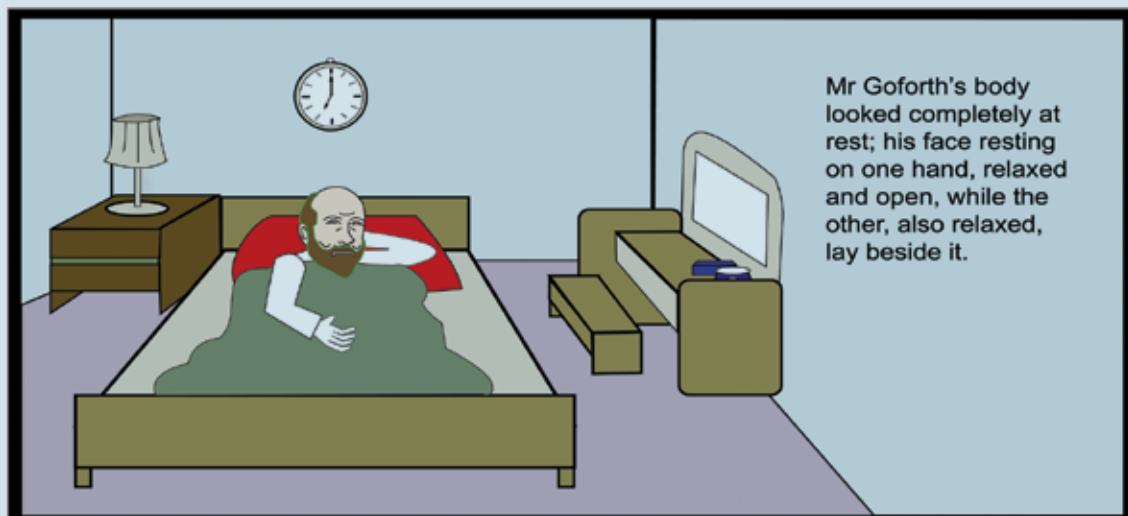
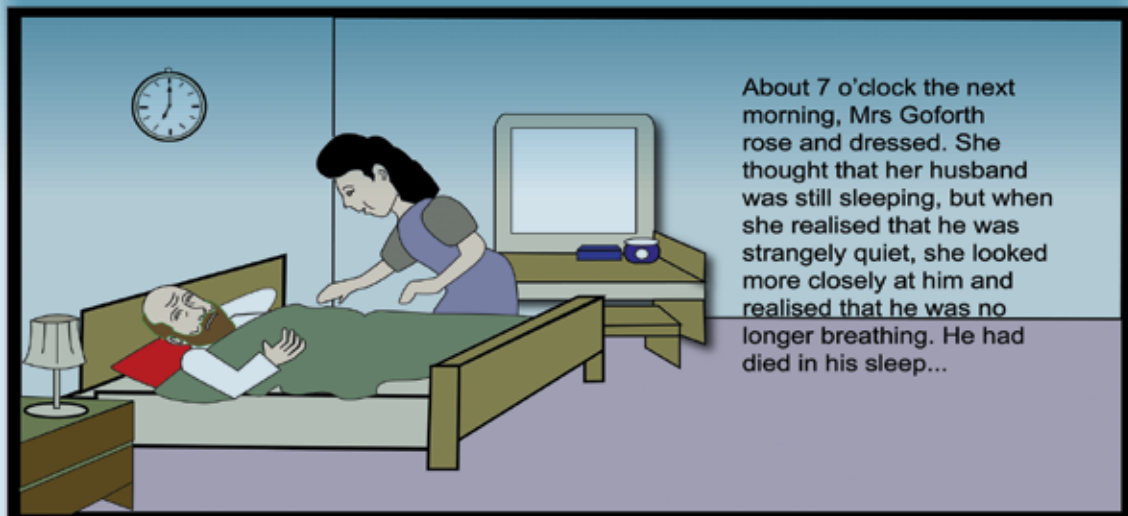
A real incident from the life of Jonathan Goforth, a Canadian missionary to China.

Bibliography: "Goforth of China" by Rosalind Goforth.

The stories are retold by Sis Ruth Low.

Illustrations are done by Bro Linus Kok.





He had said a few weeks before his death that he rejoiced to know the next face he would see would be his Saviour's; and so he did!



Goforth may have left the world, but his wonderful testimony still remains today; his faithful and sacrificial service to God has taught us many lessons which we have been reading about regularly.



Indeed, "...blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them" (Revelation 14:13).

Praise God for the life of Jonathan Goforth!

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