

MESSAGE 3 – GOD’S SOVEREIGN OVERSIGHT

Introduction

- In this session, I want to concentrate on this area of truth:
 - God's primary concern for us is our growth in moral and spiritual stature, and He sovereignly watches over our lives to help us progress in that direction
- *God sovereignly watches over the lives of those who love Him and walk with Him, so that all they go through would help contribute to their growth in moral and spiritual stature, as they respond positively to God's provisions and the Holy Spirit working in their lives*

A pictorial illustration of God’s sovereign oversight - Parable of the Vineyard

- This parable helps us appreciate the main issues we are considering in this message

Isaiah 5:1–7

1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
2 He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.
3 “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.
4 “What more was there to do for My vineyard
that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?
5 “So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.
6 “I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.”
7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

- o Here, we see God watching over and caring for His people (Israel) – portrayed by the planting of the choicest vine in the vineyard and doing all He could for the vineyard (vs 2, 4)
- o God desires and expects that the vineyard produces good grapes (vs 2, 4)
- o Likewise, God has redeemed us, we are His children – and God has provided all that is needful and helpful for us

- o Just as the Lord asked Israel: ‘What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?’ (v 4) – God may also say to us, ‘What more is there to do for you that I have not already done?’
- o In fact, God has done and provided for us even more than what He did for the nation of Israel in the time of Isaiah.
 - Sending the Lord Jesus into this world – revealing His intentions for us through and in Christ
 - The outpouring and ministry of the Holy Spirit
 - The Scriptures: we have both OT and NT – they did not even have the complete OT
 - Church life
 - So much helpful materials available to us that were not available to them – e.g. Christian literature, audio messages, Internet resources
- Paul asked a rhetorical question in Rom 8:32

Romans 8:32

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

- o I.e. all that would be good for us (v 28) – especially that we may be conformed to the image of His Son (v 29) – that we may grow well in moral and spiritual stature
- The Lord Jesus also uses the picture of vineyard and fruit bearing in John 15:1-11 – with some modifications

John 15:1–11

1 “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

2 “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.

3 “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

4 “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.

5 “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

6 “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

7 “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

8 “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

9 “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.

10 “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.

11 “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

- o Here, God is the vinedresser, the Lord Jesus is the vine and we are the branches (vs 1, 5)
- o Just as the branches must abide in the vine – we must abide in the Lord Jesus that we may bear much fruit (vs 4 ,5). As we abide in the Lord and He in us, He nourishes our spiritual life and work in and through us
- o God has done what He can for us and continues to watch over us
- o If we respond well to the Lord and what He seeks to bring about in our lives, we will grow well and bear much fruit and glorify God (v 8)

- o However, we may fail to respond well – and in more extreme cases, end up being thrown away, cast into the fire and burned (v 6)
- o Every branch that does not bear fruit God takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit (v 2)
- If the scenario is just between God and non-moral aspects of His creation like plants, things will turn out well according to God's will and intention
 - o If there are no moral beings present to spoil the scenario, the plants will grow and bear fruit the way God created them
- But because the vineyard in Isaiah 5 and the branches in John 15 represent man, the outcome may not be good – we may fail to produce good fruits
- As moral beings, we may respond positively or negatively to God's working and provisions

Growth in moral and spiritual stature requires positive response to God

- We have noted that:
 - o Moral and spiritual stature of man does not proceed directly from God's being, and God cannot bring it about by Himself, because it requires positive moral response and input from man
 - o Man cannot make progress in moral and spiritual stature on his own, but only in reliance on God's provision and enabling – whatever we can attain to is by the grace of God
- How man makes progress in moral and spiritual stature involves an important principle at the heart of the outworking of God's purposes:
 - o God and man – man's positive response to God's initiative, provisions and enabling
- This principle of 'God and man' comes through clearly in Phil 2:12-13

Philippians 2:12-13

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;
13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

- o God has initiated His great salvation plan in Christ
- o We are to work out our salvation in positive response to God at work within us
- o God even helps us to will – in conformity to His perfect will
- o Our positive response leads to our well-being – and it delights the heart of God
- o We must not be presumptuous – but must work out our salvation with fear and trembling – carefully, prayerfully, diligently
- o These two verses not only reflect the principle of 'God and man', but also the issue of growth in moral and spiritual stature
- o As we work out our salvation in fear and trembling, in positive response to God at work within us, we will grow with respect to God's intentions for us, which includes growth in moral and spiritual stature
- The apostle Peter also urges us to respond positively:
 - 1 Peter 2:2**
like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,

- o We are to 'grow in respect to salvation' - at the heart of this is conformity to the image of Christ – i.e. growth in moral and spiritual stature

God sovereignly watches over us

- In the light of God's revelation in passages like Isa 5:1-7, John 15:1-11, Rom 8: 28-29 and James 1:2-4, we can say:

God sovereignly watches over the lives of those who love Him and walk with Him, so that all they go through would contribute to their growth in moral and spiritual stature, as they respond positively to God's provisions and the Holy Spirit working in their lives

- The deeper our response to the Lord's teaching and training, the more we will learn and grow

Romans 8:28-29

28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

- o "And we know"
 - This is a spiritual reality – it is important that we know and be deeply convicted about this area of truth
- o "that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God ..."
 - For those who love God, God has their ultimate welfare in mind – He is concerned about them, He takes an active interest in them, He is involved in their lives, overseeing, supervising, undertaking, overruling, intervening for their good
 - There is a positive direction, purpose, goal
 - All of God's attributes are involved: greatness and goodness (omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, sovereignty, love, wisdom, grace, kindness, patience ...)
- o "all things"
 - In His sovereignty, wisdom and love, God is ensuring that all things work together for good to those who love Him
 - The phrase 'all things' includes 'disasters'; whatever the conduct and words of others - even the negative motives, conduct and schemes of men; whatever the evil schemes of the forces of darkness
 - We can have the assurance that when we live well and respond well, in faith and love, it will be well with us, no matter what happens, and whatever men or the evil forces may try to do to us
- o "for good"
 - That which is truly good – in the eyes of God – from the perspective of God's kingdom
 - Good in a broad sense – whatever is helpful especially for moral, spiritual development - relationship with God, prayer life, appreciation of truth and realities in the spiritual realm and the fulfilment of God's purposes
 - The primary area of good for the believer is God's goal for our lives – 'called according to His purpose' (v 28) and 'being conformed to the image of His Son' (v 29) - growth in moral and spiritual stature
 - May not appear good from the worldly, temporal perspective – in fact, may appear detrimental to us – unpleasant, painful, difficult, pressurising

- But God, through His sovereign undertaking and supervision of events and situations, seeks to bring about positive outcome in the lives of those who love Him
- 'for good' has the meaning of 'in the direction of what is good'
- The Greek word translated 'for' is 'eis' – has the meaning of 'in the direction of' – it communicates a direction but does not ensure a positive outcome
- o 'eis' is also used in Rom 15:2: "Each of us is to please his neighbour for (eis) his good, to his edification".
 - It has the meaning of seeking to bring about a good outcome for someone – but the good outcome is not ensured
 - For the person to be edified and built up, he needs to respond positively
- o In the same way, God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, for their edification, but it does not mean that the outcome will necessarily be good for all of them at all times, in all situations, whatever their response
- o We will need to respond positively - otherwise we will not be edified or built up
- o If there is positive response in our heart, attitude and conduct – we are assured of positive outcome and we will grow in moral and spiritual stature

What if we stumble and fail?

- The apostle Peter faltered and failed, yet he continued to learn and grow – because of the positive meaning in his heart and commitment to the Lord
- All of us do falter and fail – but like Peter, we too can continue to learn and grow
- However, if we are presumptuous and harden our hearts, we may go far astray and fail to bear good fruit
- Do beware of the accusations of the evil one – he wants to cause us to have such a sense of condemnation so that we will not be able to carry on meaningfully with the Lord – know that for those who are repentant and contrite, there is cleansing and forgiveness in the Lord

Degree of spiritual growth and development

- The degree of positive outcome and development will depend on the degree of positive response on our part.
 - o We all learn and grow at a different pace
 - o We do not all attain to the same level of moral and spiritual stature
 - o Factors that make a difference include: the depth of our love for God, the degree of meaning in our hearts, our attitude, spirit, approach
 - o Whether others pray for us and help us can also make a difference

Trials as God's training program

- When we appreciate the meaning of God sovereignly watching over our lives and what He seeks to bring about in the situations we go through, we can more readily understand the words of the apostle James in James 1:2-4:

James 1:2-4

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,

3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

- o The word translated 'perfect' in v 4 in the phrase 'perfect and complete', is the same word translated 'perfect' in Matt 5:48 ('be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'), and translated 'mature' in Eph 4:13
- o It is not easy to go through life with this attitude and spirit, especially during times of severe testing and pressures
- o It helps a lot when we know God's intention for us and His sovereign undertaking as we go through the trials of life
- o The trials we go through are part of God's wholesome, complete training program for us – for the development of every aspect of our being – for wholesome growth in moral and spiritual stature

Concluding remarks

- It is important for God's children to be properly assured: to be deeply convicted about this area of truth and go through life with the right perspective, attitude and response
- We will be tested in many ways – the evil one will try all ways and means to disturb our composure and shake our faith in God
- When circumstances are very trying, it can be very difficult to maintain the right posture and perspective
- But know that God is sovereignly watching over us – regulating what we go through, undertaking for us so that it is feasible for us to respond well and thereby have a positive outcome
- The process of growth in moral and spiritual stature is painful and difficult – but if we have an eternal perspective, we will learn to regard such difficulties as 'momentary, light affliction' which is producing in us an 'eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison'
- Let us not be deterred by the difficulties and trials but view them as opportunities for learning deeply and growing well
- God wants us to grow and if we respond positively, we will grow
- Nothing can stop us from growing except our own negative response – ultimately it is between God and us
- Whether we grow well or not depends on whether we respond well to God's provisions and God's working and what He seeks to bring about in our lives
- The quality and depth of positive response on our part will have a direct bearing on how much we learn and grow
- Let us make the most of our time on earth: to learn, grow and bear much fruit – that we may not look back with regrets – for we will not be able to relive our time on earth
- The story of Job can be a strong encouragement to us – that it is feasible to emerge a better person even when we go through very severe trials – God is sovereignly watching over us and deeply interested in what we are going through – even when it may appear otherwise. Satan could only attack Job within the framework of what God had permitted – and God knew the perfect timing for Him to intervene and speak to Job – and what to say to him – at the end of the story of Job (Job 38-42).
- Job learned much through the terrible ordeals he went through and emerged from the trials a more mature and stable believer in God – which enhanced his testimony and impact on the lives of others for his remaining time on earth, and even to subsequent generations. An

important lesson he learned is the quality of commitment, faith, posture and attitude that God desires to establish in man:

An unwavering faith and confidence in God and His ways, accompanied by unceasing worship, praise, thanksgiving, appreciation and humble, joyful submission to God and His perfect wisdom, together with steadfast love and commitment to Him and to the truth whatever the circumstances.