

01/02/11

Being Prepared for What God May Choose to Do In/Through You This Year

- one of the greatest challenges in understanding God's Word is reconciling the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.
 - in other words -- what has God already planned, or fore-ordained...and how do the choices that we make every day impact that plan, if at all?...
- 1. For example...the issue of prayer...
 - Do you believe that God has a plan for you, and for everyone else?...sure you do...
 - **Jeremiah 29:11 - For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.**
 - well, how long has that plan been in place?...regarding our salvation, Paul said...
 - **Ephesians 1:4 - Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.**
 - **Ephesians 1:9-11 - He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,**
 - well, if God works all things after the counsel of His will, and if these matters have been determined before the foundation of the world, why should we ever pray?...
 - what would be the point of that?...
 - well, apparently because God wants us to...because we are frequently commanded to do so in Scripture...
 - that's why Jesus took time to teach His followers to pray in the Sermon on the Mount...
 - that's why we're invited and even commanded to pray in spite of the fact that God has a specific plan already in mind for each of us...
 - that is so true that we read verses like...**I Thessalonians 5:17 - Pray without ceasing.**
 - and if you say -- well, I'm not sure I fully understand the balance between "my part" of faithfully praying and "God's part" of answering those prayers according to the counsel of His will...
 - that's the very issue -- the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility...
 - but think about this -- what do believe the Lord would say if we asked Him about the issue of prayer and the difficulty we have of understanding the balance on this matter?
 - do you suppose it would be something like this...
 - Because my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts, it should not be surprising that there are things this side of heaven that will be hard for you to understand...
 - if you (follower of Christ) focus on doing your part, you can rest assured than I, as the God of heaven and earth, will do mine...so let's just each hoe our own patches, what do you say?...

- would you agree with that -- that even if we don't fully understand the balance, we can certainly focus on doing what God has instructed us to do in His Word regarding our responsibilities...we'll do our part, and we'll trust Him to do His...
- there's much more we could say about the purposes of prayer and its impact on us, but that's enough to make the point...there's a balance that will not be completely understood this side of heaven...
- the same is true of the matter of evangelism...telling others the good news of Jesus Christ and encouraging them to repent and believe...
 - if you're going to take the Bible seriously at all, you have to do business with the fact that human beings are born spiritually dead and therefore God Himself has to initiate the salvation process...
 - we saw that in the verses we read in Ephesians...but the doctrines of election and foreknowledge are taught all over the Bible.
 - for example...in this passage that is very dear to followers of Christ...
 - **Romans 8:28-29 - 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. 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;**
 - so just like with prayer, you could look at passages like these that heavily emphasize the issue of God's sovereignty in the salvation process and say -- then why should we evangelize, why should we send missionaries, why we should we do outreach?...
 - and the answer is -- because God has told us to...and apparently He delights in using our joyful obedience in the accomplishment of His plan...
 - so verses on man's responsibility are everywhere as well...
 - **2 Peter 3:9 - The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.**
 - **2 Corinthians 5:20 - Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.**
 - so, can we all agree with these premises...
 - this side of heaven, we are not going to fully understand the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility...
 - but we are completely committed as individuals and as a church, to try to work passionately to fulfill our responsibilities and enjoy our privileges in Christ and we'll trust our heavenly Father to do His part well...
 - is that a deal?...
- OK -- now what does all of that have to do with anything?...
 - here's the answer for today -- this is January 2nd...
 - there are still a lot of folks from our church family who are out of town...so we're delaying out annual why are we here, where are we going, and how do you fit in discussion until next week...
 - that's when we'll roll out our annual theme...go over this year's initiatives, etc...
 - so that gives us a free week to focus on something that pertains especially to where we are in the calendar right now...

- so here's my question...do you believe that God has things that He would like to do in/through you this coming year?...of course...
- and do you also believe that you have to be prepared if you want God to do those things in/through you?...sure...
 - and we're not going to get all wrapped up about what our responsibility is, and what's God's responsibility is...and how all of that plays out in what will actually happen or not....
- but we know this -- there are plenty of examples in Scripture where the Lord chose to do something marvelous in/through the lives of one of His servants....and there is also evidence that such individuals did the important work of being well prepared...
- and that's what we're talking about this morning...**Being Prepared for What God May Choose to do In/Through You This Year...**
- see, think about this from a purely human perspective for a moment -- wouldn't it be terrible if God did want to do something in/through us this year -- but He passed over you and used someone else because you were not prepared?...
 - and don't get too hung up on the divine sovereignty/human responsibility aspect of all of this...but I hope we would all say this...if there are examples in Scripture of men and women being well prepared, and God in turn doing something marvelous in/through them...we want to know what those areas of preparation are...so we can put ourselves in the best possible position to be used of God in this coming year....are we all on board with that?...
 - here's what we're going to do this am with the rest of our time....we're going to consider the stories of 3 people in Scripture...2 men and 1 woman...if you're familiar with the Bible at all, you'll at least know their names...
 - and you'll also know that God chose to do something in a particular year in/through each of them...
 - but God's Word is also clear about this -- in the plan of God, He also used the fact that they were well prepared for what He was planning to do...
 - we want to ask ourselves -- are we well prepared in these areas so God could act in/through us in these ways if He chose to, and if not...what specific changes/adjustments need to be made....
- for the first example, please open your Bible to Daniel chapter 6 [page 634 of the front section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...]
- first we're going to talk about....

I. Being Prepared Spiritually -- the Example of Daniel.

[what is] A. The way the Lord used Him.

- let's look at the end of the story first....read Daniel 6:25-28...
- now imagine that, a secular king being so impacted by the life of one of his servants that he makes a proclamation throughout the entire empire that the God of Israel is the Living God whose kingdom will not be destroyed and whose dominion will be forever...
- now time doesn't allow us to go through all the background this morning, but just in case you're new to studying the Bible---this event takes place during the Babylonian captivity, which in round numbers, began around 600 BC...

- Daniel was probably just a teenager when he was deported to Babylon and where the leaders sought to assimilate him into Babylonian culture...
- that was typically the way a foreign nation would try to spread their influence by conquering an enemy and then training young potential leaders in their lifestyle and values...
- however, in Daniel's case, his allegiance to God was so consistent and faithful that he continually impacted the foreign leaders to think about declaring allegiance to the God of heaven and earth...Jehovah, Yahweh...the God of Israel...
- Daniel's faithfulness was so prolonged that he actually served several different kings...and by time we get to chapter 6, he's serving Darius...the one just made this incredible proclamation...
- now, there's no question about this...the Lord used him in this particular year of his life...

1. to have incredible influence on a secular king.

- but how did that happen?...
- what caused Darius to draw this conclusion?...
- it's because of what happened the night before in the lion's den...

2. by the Lord showing his power in the midst of unspeakable trial.

- read Daniel 6:16-22

- now please imagine that – what if God wanted to do something like that in your life this year – putting your right in the middle of a difficult trial just so that He could put His power on display in a way that cause the people around you to make a decision in their hearts to trust the Lord?...
- would you want to be in a position to impact people in that way?...
- would you want to be the next Daniel?...
- and I hope you would say – absolutely...not because I would look forward to the uncertainty of whether the lions would harm me or not...but because I value living in a way that would cause others to see the power of God...
- good...now here's the next question...
 - did preparation have anything to do with this story?...
 - in other words, humanly speaking, was God only able to use Daniel in this way because of the way Daniel had chosen to previously live?...
- now, let's push the pause button on that for as moment...we'll come back and answer that specific question in just a minute...
 - but that question may actually raise another one that could really bug you the rest of the morning unless we stop and address it...
 - because you might be wondering...well Steve, are you saying that God's plan could be thwarted by our lack of obedience?...
 - no, not in any absolute sense...
 - in fact, we could say it this way – God will use you, one way or another...
 - and He will accomplish His purposes in/through you, one way or another...
 - and that's true on many levels...
 - for example – His glory...God will be glorified in you – either by blessing and using your obedience...or judging your disobedience and using someone else in your place...

- if you've been reading through the Bible this year, then you finished the book of Revelation this week...
- and you saw that powerful juxtaposition of the beauty of men and women entering the marvels of heaven because of their faith and Christ set against the horrors of men and women being cast into the lake of fire because of their rejection of God's Son...
- here's the truth – God is glorified on both accounts...
 - I am certainly not suggesting this morning that God's glory is ever in jeopardy based on the choices you and do or do not make...
 - but if God is either going to be glorified by blessing and using your obedience or by judging your disobedience and using someone else in your place...what person in their right mind would not want to be in the front half of that equation?...
- so that takes us back to Daniel... was God only able to use Daniel in this way because of the way Daniel had chosen to previously live?...
- and what's the answer to that question?...absolutely....because why was Daniel thrown in the lion's den to begin with?...was the king just having a really bad day?...
- no, he was tricked by some of his other advisors who were jealous of Daniel's popularity...
- so the first part of this chapter explains that the king was about to appoint Daniel to be the leader of the entire nation...so the other politicians tried to find a way to discredit Daniel...
 - and the amazing thing is – they couldn't find one thing wrong...
 - how many of us would ever be in that position by the way?...
 - in fact, here's what they said... **Daniel 6:5 - Then these men said, "We will not find any ground of accusation against this Daniel unless we find *it* against him with regard to the law of his God."**
- so here's what they did...**Daniel 6:7-8 - "All the commissioners of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the high officials and the governors have consulted together that the king should establish a statute and enforce an injunction that anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the lions' den. "Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document so that it may not be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked."**
- now, why in the world would they have said that?...it's because of...
- B. The way Daniel prepared.**
 - the folks down at McDonalds chuckle at me because my routine is so set that they sometimes see me parking my Jeep in the parking lot and they go ahead get my coffee ready before I come in the building...large coffee with 2 creams and 1 sugar...several of the people who work the counter actually know that by heart...
 - I don't know if that's good or bad...but it was certainly good for Daniel...
 - **Daniel 6:10 - Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.**
 - there it is – Daniel had no idea when this particular year began that he would be in a position where the king would make such an incredible pronouncement to the entire nation...he had no idea he would be involved in a thrilling victory like the shutting of the lion's mouths...
 - but he knew this – he needed to be prepared spiritually for whatever the Lord might bring...
 - you do your part – and then trust God to do His...

- now let's turn that around to you and me...

C. The implications to you and me.

- here's the question – what would “being prepared spiritually” for what God may choose to do in/through you this year look like?...and what specific processes do you need to have in place in order to make that preparation actually occur?...

- let's start here...

1. Are you sure you know Christ?

- [develop – some men and women continually put that decision off...]

2. Have you demonstrated your faith in Christ publicly?

- [develop how baptism does not save – but it is an important first step of obedience, and it is a public declaration of what has already occurred in your heart...also mention the joy of being baptized last year – if a handicapped young man can take that step, whatever excuse you might have is going to sound pretty lame...]

3. Do you have a Bible study plan in place?

- [plenty of resources in the MRC]...

4. Do you have a prayer plan in place?

5. Do you have an accountability partner/group?

6. Are you a member of a church?

- [develop the question you're frequently asked about the trend of people not joining any church...]

7. Should you sign up for Intro to Faith?

8. Should you sign up for another FCI class?

- so that's one key aspect of preparation for sure...none of us know how the Lord might want to use us as individuals or as a church...but we know this – it's never going to happen if we're not prepared spiritually...

- now let's take it one step further...this time by thinking about the life of a woman named Hannah...

- please turn back in your Bible now to the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel chapter 1...page 202 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...

- we're talking about...

II. Being Prepared Relationally – The Example of Hannah

- let's do the same as we did with Daniel...starting at the end and working our way backwards...see, what was...

A. The way the Lord used her – the mother of Samuel.

- read selected portions of 1 Samuel 1:19-2:11

- now, time doesn't allow us to talk about all the ways that being the mother of Samuel is so significant...but suffice it is to say that he was used of God to be one of the most significant characters in the entire OT...

- here's just one of many examples we could cite... **1 Chronicles 11:3 - So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and David made a covenant with them in Hebron before the LORD; and they anointed David king over Israel, according to the word of the LORD through Samuel.**

- please think about that as simply one example of how influential Samuel was during this period in the history of Israel...and how wonderful it would have been to be chosen as the one who would be Samuel's mother...
- but was there any preparation involved?...absolutely...

B. The way Hannah prepared.

- read 1 Samuel 1:1-16...

- here's the point we're making...Hannah prepared in part...

1. by responding well to the sinful treatment of others.

- Hannah had enough going against her that she could have poured her energies into being a vengeful, vindictive woman who was far from the Lord.
- because she was being treated sinfully on several different fronts...

a. Elkanah

- her husband...who although the text says that he tried to make up for the treatment of his other wife...
- the fact is that his polygamy put Hannah in this position to begin with...
- and by the way, lest you think about that topic for the rest of the morning, there is no question that many people in the OT practiced polygamy...
- but there's also no question that that was not part of God's original design...
- even in the NT – Jesus was talking about the subject of how laceratingly the men in that culture were practicing divorce...and a group of them even came to him and said – is it OK for a man to divorce a woman for any reason...in other words, on a whim?...
- and he said -- **Matthew 19:4-6 - And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."**
- and of course they came back with – then why did Moses command that a divorced wife be given a certificate of divorce?...referring to a practice in the OT that if a man was going to treat a wife in that fashion, he should at least go through some sort of process whereby she could carry move forward with her life instead of being condemned to being a social outcast in their culture...but they were making it sound like Moses commanded people to divorce...
- and Jesus then replied... **Matthew 19:8-9 - He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."**
- in other words – God's plan was always one man and one woman for life...well, if your response to that is – then why did God not judge men like Elkanah for their polygamy?...
- that's a fair question – and let me volley one back...do you really want God to respond to all sin immediately and absolutely?...and would it be OK if He enacted that new policy by beginning with you?...

- but the bigger point is – Hannah had to deal with the fact that her husband had treated her in a sinful fashion...and that was greatly compounded by the harsh treatment of...

b. Peninnah

- she was a piece of work, huh?
- **1 Samuel 1:6 - Her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.**
- time doesn't allow us to develop this one—other than perhaps for me to quote another woman in our church who said to me once – women can be incredibly catty – I think I'll just leave that one alone...
- but that's clearly what's happening here...and then there was even...

c. Eli.

- **1 Samuel 1:14 - Then Eli said to her, “How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you.”**
- now, if you know anything about his story, you know that he has absolutely no room to be judging anybody...he ought to get home and give each of his sons a spanking, but that's another story for another day...

- but here's the point...even though she is being treated sinfully on several fronts...what's she doing...

2. By crying out to God with emotional authenticity.

- **1 Samuel 1:10 - She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly.**

- she wasn't lashing out at her husband, or her rival, or her priest...but nor was she stuffing the pain of her situation inside and trying to paste some glib smile on the outside...
- she was well prepared for what God was about to do because she had responded to the sinfulness of others in a way that was relationally wise...

C. The implications to you and me.

- Here's my question for you this morning...do you have unfinished business with people in your life that needs to be cared for and addressed before you're really ready for whatever God has for you this year?...
- **Ephesians 4:26-27 - BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.**
- or is it possible that you're angry at the Lord – because He has not allowed something to come to pass according to your timetable...and instead of honestly speaking to Him about that, you've become embittered and have given up hope...
- Hannah was discouraged, and Hannah was upset – but she didn't stop talking to the only one whom she knew could deliver her if He chose to do so...
- wouldn't it be terrible to find out that we had given up on God the very year He had intended to show Himself strong in some area of our lives?...

- so be prepared spiritually, and be prepared relationally...please turn over to Nehemiah chapter 6 for one more example...[page 356 of the Bible under the chair in front of you]
- let's think about...

III. Being Prepared Organizationally – the Example of Nehemiah

A. How the Lord used him.

- Nehemiah 6:15-16 - So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of *the month* Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard *of it*, and all the nations surrounding us saw *it*, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

B. The way Nehemiah prepared.

- [as time allows, survey Neh. 2:3 ff – he had exact answers to the questions posed by the king and queen because he had his act together organizationally]...
- when God chose to bless --- Nehemiah was ready because he had already done his part...

C. The implications to you and me.

1. Have you (and your spouse) prepared your annual budget?

- I personally do not see how someone could be a good steward without a budget, a workable spending plan, and a method to track who is spending what and how those decisions are made...[if you and your spouse can't discuss these matters without a fight, get some help)

2. Have you reviewed your retirement plan and communicated with your spouse?

3. Have you reviewed your college savings fund and communicated with your children?

4. Have you established savings accounts for other long term purchases?

- develop – may need to take a financial peace class this year...

5. Have you reviewed your life and disability insurance and discussed it as a couple/family?

6. Have you updated your family balance sheet?

- do you know if you are going forward or backwards financially?

7. Have you updated your “gone to heaven” file?

- this sounds a little morbid – but I believe every person should have a death file – or if you prefer, a “Gone to Heaven” file...
- and obviously it should be kept in a safe, secure place...but it's all the information someone would need if you passed away...
- and, the point here is – it should be updated once a year, and now is a great time to do that...what should it contain?...

a. Full names (s)

b. Will

- especially if you have children in your home...

c. Social security number (s)

d. Tax information

- especially if you are self-employed

e. Family balance sheet

f. Medical and Life Insurance information

g. Retirement plan/funds

h. Credit card information

i. Decisions/preferences about funeral home, grave plots