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OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S SOVEREIGN GRACE

Psalm 105

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Our Response to God's Sovereign Grace
Psalm 105

As you know if you've listened to me for any time at all, one of the men who has helped me to understand the gospel more clearly is the great 19th century British preacher, C. H. Spurgeon. Early in his ministry—remarkably, while he was still in his teens—Spurgeon was clearer on the gospel than many preachers ever are! He held to the biblical gospel without wavering, although he soon came under fire from opposite directions.

On the one side were men we could label Hyper-Calvinists. They believed, as Scripture teaches, that God is sovereign in all things (Ps. 103:19). They believed correctly that God sovereignly chooses those whom He saves (Eph. 1:4-5) and that He actually saves them, so that none of them are lost (John 6:37-40). But the problem was, these men held so firmly to these truths that they would not appeal to sinners to come to Christ. They thought that such appeals contradicted God's sovereignty in salvation. Because Spurgeon pleaded with sinners to come to Christ, these men attacked him.

On the other side, those we could call Arminians emphasized man's free will. They denied that God sovereignly chooses some to salvation, explaining His sovereign election by saying that it was due to His foreknowledge of those who would choose Him. They could not reconcile human responsibility with God's sovereignty. And so they attacked Spurgeon because he held firmly that salvation is totally from God.

For example, in a sermon, "High Doctrine," which Spurgeon preached on June 3, 1860 (just shy of his 26th birthday), he hammered home the truth that salvation is totally of God. He said (*The New Park Street Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 6:259),

Again, this doctrine gives the death-blow to all self-sufficiency. What the Arminian wants to do is to arouse man's activity; what we want to do is to kill it once for all, to show him that he is lost and ruined, and that his activities are not now at

all equal to the work of conversion; that he must look upward. *They* seek to make the man stand up; *we* seek to bring him down, and make him feel that there he lies in the hand of God, and that his business is to submit himself to God, and cry aloud, "Lord, save, or we perish." We hold that man is never so near grace as when he begins to feel that he can do nothing at all.

He goes on to show that sinners cannot pray on their own, repent on their own, or believe in Christ on their own. If they do any of these things, it is because the sovereign God is graciously granting repentance and faith. Salvation is *totally* from Him.

Both of these errors—Hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism—stem from a common source, namely, rationalism. They both impose human logic on the Scriptures, but from opposite sides. But Scripture clearly affirms both the absolute sovereignty of God and our full responsibility. And Spurgeon held to both of these truths (see Iain Murray, *Spurgeon & Hyper-Calvinism* [Banner of Truth], esp. pp. 80-88). I encourage you to read him to help you think more clearly about this important biblical matter.

Psalms 105 addresses both of these truths. The bulk of the psalm (vv. 8-44) traces God's sovereign hand in choosing Israel as His people, protecting them when they were vulnerable and weak, delivering them through the miraculous events of the Exodus, preserving them in the wilderness, and bringing them into the Promised Land. The clear emphasis of these verses is that God did it all.

At the same time, the first five verses and the last verse of the psalm emphasize human responsibility. The first five verses are filled with commands: "give thanks," "make known," "sing praises," "speak," "glory," "seek" (3 times), and "remember." The final verse tells us that the reason for God's sovereign deliverance and preservation of His people was "so that they might keep His statutes and observe His laws." And thus we see both God's sovereignty and our responsibility. To sum up the psalm:

Because of God's sovereign, gracious dealings with us,
we should praise Him, obey Him,
and make Him known to others.

We don't know for sure who wrote this psalm, although verses 1-15 are included as a part of a larger song that David used when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:8-22). In spite of this, many scholars argue that it was written much later, after the return from the Exile. But we don't need to know the author to benefit from its message.

The first section (vv. 1-7) consists of a series of exhortations to praise the Lord and to make Him known among the peoples (Gentiles). Verses 8-44 recount the history of the nation from Abraham through their inheriting the land of Canaan. The psalm concludes with a single verse, "the bottom line," calling the nation to obedience and praise.

1. In His sovereign grace, God has chosen us and has His hand upon us, even through our trials (105:8-44).

The psalmist attributes *everything* in Israel's history to God's sovereign purpose. You can see this in the repeated use of the pronoun "He." "He has remembered His covenant ..., the word which He commanded" (v. 8). "He confirmed it" (v. 10). "He permitted no man to oppress them" (v. 14). "He reproved kings for their sakes" (v. 14). "He called for a famine" (v. 16). "He sent a man before them" (v. 17). "He made him [Joseph] lord of his [Pharaoh's] house" (v. 21). "He caused His people to be very fruitful" (v. 24). "He turned their heart to hate His people" (v. 25). "He sent Moses" (v. 26). "He sent darkness" (v. 28). The same is said of all the plagues (vv. 28-36). "Then He brought them out" (v. 37). "He spread a cloud for a covering" (v. 39). "He opened the rock" (v. 41). "He remembered His holy word" (v. 42). "He brought forth His people with joy" (V. 43). "He gave them the lands of the nations" (v. 44). You can't miss the point!

The psalmist begins (vv. 8-11) with God's covenant promise to Abraham, which was repeated to his sons, Isaac and Jacob, to give them the land of Canaan and to make of their descendants a great nation. There was nothing in Abraham to merit God's choosing him out of all of the other pagans living in Ur of the Chaldees. God did not foresee a spark of faith that Abraham would exercise out of his own free will. Rather, God sovereignly chose Abraham, revealed Himself and His purpose to Abraham, and protected him and his descendants when they were few in number, in the midst of

the hostile Canaanite peoples (vv. 12-15). Derek Kidner observes (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 375), "Nothing could make it clearer that it was God, not man, who saw the whole matter through."

This is especially true in the story behind verse 15. This quote does not occur verbatim in Genesis, but God does refer to Abraham as His prophet in the incident where Abraham lied to Abimelech about Sarah being his sister. God appeared to this pagan king in a dream and said, "You're a dead man because you took this woman, because she is married" (Gen. 20:3). When Abimelech protested because he had not yet had relations with Sarah and also because Abraham had lied to him, God told Abimelech that the reason he had not sinned was that God had kept him from it.

He also told him that Abraham was a prophet, and that he would pray for Abimelech so that if he restored Sarah, he would live (Gen. 20:6-7). Genesis does not tell us whether Abimelech was confused over how there could be a lying prophet who had power in prayer with God! But clearly, the emphasis in that story is on God's sovereign purpose to preserve Abraham and his progeny, not on Abraham's obedience!

God later protected Jacob from his much stronger brother, Esau, who easily could have murdered him for stealing his birthright (Gen. 33). Still later, He protected Jacob after his sons slaughtered the Shechemites after the rape of their sister (Gen. 34). By calling the patriarchs His "anointed ones" and His "prophets," God is showing that their preservation was not due to their political or military power, but to His sovereign choice of them.

The psalm continues with the story of Joseph (vv. 16-22). God called for a famine on the Promised Land. That's all that it takes for a famine to come on an otherwise fertile land: God calls for it! Proud America should take heed! If God called for a famine on America, our farms would look like the Sahara! But because God had a purpose for Abraham's offspring, He had "sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave" (v. 17). Joseph went to Egypt because his jealous brothers sold him as a slave, but the psalmist attributes it to God sending him. Joseph himself affirmed that God had sent him to Egypt to preserve their lives (Gen. 45:5). They meant evil against him, but God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20)!

But before God elevated Joseph in Egypt, He tested him through his time in prison (vv. 18-19). "His word" (v. 19) probably refers to Joseph's dreams that he would be over his father and brothers, which God had given to him years before. During his years in the Egyptian prison, he must have wrestled with doubt. "Was that *truly* God's word to me, or did I just imagine it? Should I count on a bunch of dreams, or was I just a foolish teenager?" Before God elevated Joseph, He had to humble him, so that he learned to trust in God alone.

Then in His perfect time, God elevated Joseph, who was then able to provide food for his extended family during the years of famine (vv. 20-22). The former prisoner was now able to imprison even princes! Although this has a wider reference, I think it also refers Joseph's imprisoning his own brothers when they came to him for food, to teach them wisdom. Through Joseph, Jacob and all his descendants came to sojourn in Egypt, where God caused them to be very fruitful (vv. 23-24).

Then God turned the hearts of the Egyptians to hate His people (v. 25). This does not imply that God is the author of evil. Rather, He takes the evil that already exists in people's hearts and uses it for His own holy purposes. This was supremely demonstrated at the cross, where God used evil men to accomplish His sovereign purpose of salvation through the death of His own Son (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

Next, the psalmist tells the story of Moses and Aaron, His chosen servants (v. 26) whom He sent to bring Israel out of slavery through the plagues. We don't know why, but the psalmist begins with the ninth plague (darkness), then goes back to the first and second (blood and frogs), reverses numbers three (gnats) and four (flies), skips five (pestilence on the livestock) and six (boils), and then lists seven (hail), eight (locusts), and ten (death of the first-born). Various suggestions are given as to why the ninth (darkness) is listed first, but these are only speculations.

On "they did not rebel against His words" (v. 28), there are at least three different views. John Calvin and Matthew Henry take *they* to refer to Moses and Aaron, who obediently pronounced the plagues in spite of Pharaoh's threats. John Gill refers *they* to the plagues, which were obedient to God's commands. Derek Kidner

and H. C. Leupold think that *they* refers to the Egyptians, alluding to Exodus 11:3, which says that the Lord gave the Israelites favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, who gave them much silver and gold before they departed (Ps. 105:37).

The psalmist goes on (vv. 37-41) to recount the Exodus (although he omits the parting of the Red Sea) and God's protection and provision for the nation in the wilderness through the cloud, food, and water. He ends by repeating that all these miraculous events happened because God remembered His covenant with Abraham to give the land of Canaan to his descendants (vv. 43-44).

Let me summarize some of the spiritual lessons from this brief history. Please observe that there is an important practical reason for knowing the history of God's dealings with His people, both through the inspired Word of God (as here), and also through church history. The point of rehearsing these 500 years of Israel's history was so that God's people would remember His gracious dealings with them and be obedient to His covenant commandments (v. 45). Here are seven lessons:

(1) Salvation is totally of the Lord, from start to finish.

God chose us, He called us to Himself, He protected us when we were weak and vulnerable (even before we came to saving faith), He guided us in His ways, and He brought us to His promised salvation. This history clearly shows that salvation is through God's mighty power, not through our feeble human will. Abraham lied on more than one occasion. Isaac favored the godless Esau over the scheming Jacob. Jacob was a deceiver who bemoaned God's dealings with him (Gen. 42:36; 47:9). Jacob's sons were cruel and immoral (Gen. 34, 37, 38). Yet God chose them and used them as the people through whom His Savior would come.

(2) Nothing can thwart God's purpose for His people.

Pharaoh, the mightiest king on earth, was no match for God when He chose to deliver His people. God didn't need a mighty army to defeat Pharaoh. He merely spoke and sunny Egypt was engulfed in total darkness. God spoke again and Pharaoh's rivers turned to blood, his bedroom swarmed with frogs, his skin crawled with gnats and flies, and his land was destroyed by hail and locusts.

- (3) God's sovereign purposes involve individuals, but always in a corporate context.

God called and used Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron, along with many other individuals. But He called them and used them as His nation, His corporate people. In America, Christians tend to be overly individualistic. We attend church like we attend the theater, not really forming close relationships. If we don't like one church, we change to another that suits us better, or we drop out and do our own thing. Who needs the church? But God's purpose is not just to save individuals, but to form "a holy nation, a people for [His] own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). If you are not committed to being built together in a local church, you are not in line with God's purpose for history.

- (4) God's sovereign purposes are not fulfilled in our timetable, but in His.

The history sketched here took over 500 years, 400 of which God's people were slaves in a foreign land. God promised Abraham the land, but he died only owning a cave in which to bury his dead. He promised to multiply Abraham's descendants as the stars of the sky, but he died with only one son of the promise, Isaac. He prophesied to Joseph that he would rule over his father and brothers, but He didn't tell him that the route to fulfillment included spending his twenties in an Egyptian dungeon.

- (5) God's sovereign purpose includes using trials to refine us.

His word tested Joseph (v. 19). Moses spent 40 years in the desert, and then had to go through the many trials of leading Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness. As Paul explained (Acts 14:22b), "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

- (6) God's strength is magnified in our weakness, so that all the glory goes to Him.

As you read this brief synopsis of God's dealings with His people, your focus is not drawn to the greatness of any of these men that God used, but rather to God's ability to accomplish His good pleasure through such weak instruments. God accomplishes that purpose in ways that often seem upside down to us. He gives Abraham and Sarah the son of the promise by closing her womb

until she was past the age of bearing children. He gave Abraham's descendants the land of promise by causing them to wander around for years, and then by enslaving them for 400 years. He elevated Joseph to second in the land by imprisoning him during his prime years. He freed His people from bondage by turning the hearts of their captors to hate them. He fed them in a barren desert with the bread of heaven and quenched their thirst from a rock. When we are weak and without resources, all glory goes to God!

(7) God will accomplish His sovereign purpose for us and bring us safely to glory.

God (vv. 42-43) "remembered His holy word with Abraham His servant; and He brought forth His people with joy, His chosen ones with a joyful shout." In New Testament language (Rom. 8:28-30), "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; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified." He keeps going to the end of that great chapter, showing that nothing can separate us from God's great love for us in Christ Jesus.

Before I close, I still need to deal with our response!

2. Our response to God's sovereign grace toward us should be to praise Him, obey Him, and make Him known to others.
 - A. Our response to God's sovereign grace towards us should be to praise Him (105:1-7).

I could easily preach an entire sermon here! Skipping for the moment the second half of verse 1, note the verbs (vv. 1-5): "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon His name... Sing to Him, sing praises to Him; speak of all His wonders. Glory in His holy name; let the heart of those who seek the Lord be glad. Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His face continually. Remember His wonders which He has done, His marvels and the judgments uttered by His mouth." Then he addresses Israel (v. 6), "O seed of Abraham, His servant, O sons of Jacob, His chosen ones!" And he reminds them

(v. 7), "He is the Lord our God; His judgments are in all the earth." There are enough things there to praise God every day for the rest of our lives!

- B. Our response to God's sovereign grace towards us should be to obey Him (105:45).

The conclusion of the whole psalm is, "So that they might keep His statutes and observe His laws. Praise the Lord!" This psalm has focused almost entirely on God's grace, while overlooking the many sins of God's people. (That will be the theme of the next psalm.) But the psalmist reminds us at the end that God's grace is never an excuse for disobedience (Rom. 6:1-2). Rather, God's grace should motivate us to obey Him and praise Him.

- C. Our response to God's sovereign grace towards us should be to make Him known to others (105:1b).

"Make known His deeds among the peoples." Israel was not to hide the revelation that God had entrusted to them, but to proclaim it. Jesus' final words to us were to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:19-20). God's sovereign grace in saving us should never diminish our evangelistic effort, but rather increase it. As the Lord told Paul when he was in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10), "go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." Those people were God's elect, who had not yet come to faith. So Paul endured all things for the sake of God's elect, so that they would come to salvation (2 Tim. 2:10). The doctrine of election should motivate us to evangelism and missions, because we know that God's sovereign purpose to save His people will not fail.

Conclusion

The very fact that you're listening to this message shows that God is dealing with you. Perhaps He is calling you to repent of your sin and trust in Christ. Have you responded to His call? Perhaps you're a Christian, but you need to submit to His sovereign dealings with you by praising Him, obeying His Word, and making Him known to others. "He is the Lord our God; His judgments are in all the earth. Praise the Lord!" (105:7).

Application Questions

1. Is it illogical to affirm both God's sovereignty over all things and at the same time, our responsibility for our actions? Why/why not?
2. Why is it of vital importance to affirm that salvation is totally of the Lord? If it is partly up to our "free will," does God get all the glory?
3. How can God be sovereign over all and use evil (Ps. 105:25) without being the author of it? What theological problems result if we deny that God is sovereign even over evil?
4. Why does a proper view of God's sovereign election not militate against evangelism (as is often charged), but rather lead to greater evangelistic effort?

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