

PROVERBS 16:9
“THE LORD DETERMINES”

Happy 2010! It's a new year, and a new decade, and we start on a new journey today. It is a journey of exploring a story. It is God's story - the story of his words and deeds in our lives and our world.

This year, Bob and I hope to walk with you through several portions of the Bible that define and describe this story. Lord willing, we will explore five major scenes in this story: creation, fall, redemption, mission and glory. What is this story? What does the God of this story want from us, as we live out our part in this story? Today, we start with a verse that reveals a foundational truth, as we live this story.

On the Monday morning I was to begin preparing this sermon, I drove Andrew and several of our young men to Meijer, where they were meeting other boy scouts to leave for an all-day outing. Most of the time, I will go from that part of town to this part of town on Chester Boulevard, but occasionally I will jump on I-70. That Monday, I decided to take the interstate.

My plan was to go home, eat a quick breakfast, get to church, and start through a big pile of work. About a quarter-mile before the Union City exit, I saw the deer, but I could not stop. I don't know what happened to the deer, but I know what happened to the front of our van. So instead of going home and eating a quick breakfast and getting to work, I stood and shivered on the off-ramp of the exit, taking pictures with my cell phone and waiting for the police to arrive.

You know what you feel in that situation. I was frustrated. Even though I was not speeding and truly could not avoid the deer, I wondered what else I could have done. Maybe I was a bit frustrated with God, too. Why, God? I don't have time for this today. I was also wishful. Can't I just turn the clock back five minutes, and decide to drive down Chester Boulevard?

This is just a small slice of the bigger story of my life, but it prepares us for the truth we find in Proverbs 16:9: "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." As we think about "the story," we must realize and embrace this truth. Let's explore these words by asking and answering two questions.

First, **WHAT DOES HE SAY?** What is the writer of the Proverbs saying here? Let's find the answer by looking at the two halves of the Proverb.

"IN HIS HEART A MAN PLANS HIS COURSE..." If you read the Proverbs, you discover a strong emphasis on the reality of human responsibility. Proverbs is about many of the details of our story, and we are constantly being called away from foolishness, and to wisdom. Proverbs assumes and asserts that God holds us responsible for what we do. Think of a few examples:

- * Honesty. Proverbs 14:5 - "A truthful witness saves lives..."
- * Work. Proverbs 12:24 - "Diligent hands will rule..."
- * Speaking. Proverbs 18:21 - "The tongue has the power of life and death..."
- * Teachability. Proverbs 10:8 - "The wise in heart accept commands..."
- * Generosity. Proverbs 22:9 - "A generous man will himself be blessed..."

It is not just in Proverbs, but it is all through Proverbs. Part of God's story is the story of creating people as responsible moral agents, and calling those responsible people to responsible actions. We see it in this verse. This idea of "planning a course" would have reminded the original readers of the idea of putting things in order. In those days, this might refer to setting up an army for battle or preparing a fire for cooking food.

In the last few weeks, I have seen a billboard around town that declares that when it comes to beating addictions, there must be an acceptance of personal responsibility. That is true - and it is true with all sorts of actions. If my affection becomes an addiction, I am responsible. If I work hard and get a promotion, I am responsible. If I curse you with cruel words and destroy our relationship, I am responsible. If I plan and

prepare a glorious meal, I am responsible.

We are thinking and doing creatures. We plan. We act. We are responsible for our plans and our actions. We are not puppets on a string. We really plan our course.

This is important to realize, because then the writer of the Proverbs calls us to embrace the second half of the Proverb: Yes, in his heart a man plans his course, "*BUT THE LORD DETERMINES HIS STEPS.*" Mark this on your heart and in your mind: the Bible never denies the reality of human responsibility, but it never declares the reign of human responsibility. While human responsibility is real, human actions never overcome or stop or defeat God's sovereign plans and purposes.

This is also a theme in the Proverbs. Here are just two examples:

* 19:21 - "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."

* 21:30 - "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord."

Now notice that word "determine." It is the idea that God directs, that God establishes, that God has the last word over the plans we make. He is ultimately in charge of our story.

How can this be? How can we believe both halves of this verse? How can we realize human responsibility and embrace divine sovereignty? In Proverbs 20:24 we read, "A man's steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand his own way?" Even the writer who declares these truths confesses the mystery in these truths. We admit it, too.

Yes, we are helped by the idea that "the God who ordains the ends, ordains the means." In other words, while God determines the outcome of all things, has decided that he will accomplish his plans through the responsible actions of his creatures. For example, Jesus' death on the cross was the will of his Father, but it was done through the evil scheming of people. They were responsible for their actions, but God was sovereign over their actions.

Yet with all of that, there is still a mystery. Why did I hit that deer? I made a decision to take the interstate. But what if I had made a different decision? Would I have found another way to bash up my van? Or would I have been delayed in my day another way? What was God's purpose in sovereignly determining that this deer would cross that interstate at that moment?

I do not know. But never, ever in the Bible do you see God giving up even the smallest bit of his sovereignty. People do all sorts of things, and God holds them responsible for what they do, but he always uses those actions to accomplish his sovereign purposes. The Bible never denies the reality of human responsibility, but it never declares the reign of human responsibility. "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."

This is true, as we think about *life forever*. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." But Jesus also said: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

The Lord is sovereign in salvation. I am fully aware that when I say that, I will not win any popularity contests, maybe even among some of you. I am painfully aware that if we would just give up this teaching, we might be a much more attractive church to some people.

But as I read my Bible, I cannot give up this conviction. While we are responsible for our acceptance or rejection of Jesus, God is ultimately sovereign over whether people will come to faith in him. Salvation is the result of God's free, gracious, sovereign will. We choose him because he chose us first. We love him because he loved us first. Yes, there is mystery here. But the Lord is sovereign over salvation.

This is also true, as we think about *life today*. In John 9, Jesus meets a man who is blind from birth. The disciples ask whether he is blind because he sinned, or because his parents sinned. Jesus responds by declaring God's sovereignty: "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." But then Jesus calls his disciples to their responsibility: "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me."

We do think. We do plan. We do act. We do live. But even as we do all of this, we embrace the truth that God is sovereign, and he will do what he will do in our lives. I try to stay healthy, but God can sovereignly

bring illness. I mess up, but God can sovereignly bring success. I go here and there, but God can sovereignly bring a woman into my life whom I will marry. I pursue a career, but God sovereignly provides a certain job. I drive young men to the north side of town, and I decide to take the highway home, but God can sovereignly bring a deer. With life forever and life today, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.”

That is what he says. So now let’s ask, **WHAT MUST WE SAY?** What happens in our hearts and on our lips when we realize and embrace this truth? I offer two phrases.

First, *I LIVE BY FAITH.*

Have you ever been in an earthquake? I have now been through three: one in Cincinnati as a teenager, one in college in Pennsylvania, and one here, several years ago. (I like to tell people that in the moment of the earthquake here, I was reading a chapter in a book on how we have to forgive people. That got my attention!)

Earthquakes are terrifying, because you feel utterly helpless. Do you stand up? Do you try to run outside? Is the roof going to collapse? Will the shaking ever stop?

We read, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps,” and we may be terrified. We may feel as if we are at the mercy and whim of a God who is simply beyond us, who is more powerful than the most powerful of earthquakes, and who may someday sovereignly pick us up, toss us around, and drop us.

Apart from the truths of the gospel, this truth is terrifying. If I know that God is sovereign, and if I am not in relationship with him, I will live my life in fear. But as the sovereign God reveals the truths of the gospel to our ears and our hearts, we live by faith, not fear.

* One truth is the reality of *creation*. We will explore this more in the days to come, but the creation story reveals that a personal, purposeful God has designed this world, and he is still present and powerful in his creation.

* Another truth is the reality of *redemption*. God is perfectly just, but he is also perfectly merciful. In his justice, he has sentenced his own Son to death for the sins of sinners. So in his mercy, he has purchased sinners for himself, by forgiving their sins through that death.

* Another truth is the reality of *adoption*. As we learned two weeks ago, God does not just grudgingly forgive sinners. He receives them as his sons and daughters. We can call him our Father through Jesus. We can cry to him, and we can trust in him.

Creation. Redemption. Adoption. These truths are central to the story of Christianity, and they are unique to the story of Christianity. In other faiths, we see “gods” who are clueless or cruel. They cannot do anything to help people, or they will not do anything to help people. But through Jesus Christ, we live before this sovereign God, not in fear, but in faith.

Charles Spurgeon once told the story of two men being carried down a river toward a deadly waterfall. People on the shore threw a rope to them. Both grabbed it. One of them held on to the rope and was safely dragged to shore. But the other saw a log floating by. It was bigger than the rope, so he let go of the rope and grabbed the log. He went over the waterfall, because while the rope was attached to something sure and certain, the log was attached to nothing.

“In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” If you do not “grab” Jesus Christ by faith, that is a terrifying truth. But if you have “grabbed” Jesus, and you are living by faith in him, that is a comforting truth.

I do not know all the chapters in my story. I surely was not expecting that chapter that morning on the interstate. But I know that the chapters will be written by the hand of a Father who has created me, redeemed me, and adopted me. I don’t know why he does what he does, but I know he is for me, because of Jesus. I have no promise of ease, but I have the promise of grace.

I grab hold of this, as I stand and wait for the police. I grab hold of this, as I receive the drug that will knock me out for surgery. I grab hold of this, as I pray for my children. I grab hold of this, as I wonder about

my job. I grab hold of this, as I weep over the friend who is no longer a friend. I grab hold of this, as I grab hold of your hand, at the graveside.

“In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” Because of the God who creates, redeems and adopts, I live by faith. As well, *I LIVE IN FREEDOM*.

Sometimes you sit at a table and eat a meal. It is a busy meal - with lots of dishes and maybe salad dressing and ketchup and mustard and mayonnaise and most everything else out of the refrigerator. You eat, you digest, and you stare. You can barely see the table. You forget what color it is. You have enjoyed the feast, but you realize, “This isn’t going to clean itself up!”

While this truth can be terrifying, it can also be paralyzing. We may think of a sovereign God, and we may know that he determines our steps, and we may sit and hope he will just clean it all up. He will do what he will do, so I don’t have to do anything. This is always a danger when we talk about the sovereignty of God. We forget and neglect human responsibility.

Instead, this truth should free us to get out of chairs and get into our world, living as God calls us to live. Because God is sovereign, I am free to live for him as he calls me to live for him, for I trust that he will take my feeble, fickle and failing efforts, and use them to accomplish his purposes in the story he is writing. Let me offer three brief examples of this.

Showing. Two weeks ago in Sunday School, Shawn Munn urged us to love people as God has loved us. Here is another way to say that: we are to show Jesus to people.

But is not God sovereign in salvation? Yes - but the sovereign God calls his saved people to be his instruments of showing Jesus to them - in word and deed. Because I know God will sovereignly work as he wills, I am free to boldly love people in Jesus’ name. I will fumble and flop, but I know God will sovereignly use my love to draw people into his family.

Serving. Paul writes that God’s people are his workmanship - created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Do you hear the sovereignty there? Of course. But do you also hear the responsibility?

Maybe I am earning a wage. Maybe I am serving for no wage. But I am free to work hard and well, because I know God will provide and bless through my work. I may be in my home, or a factory, or an office, or a soup kitchen, or the church, but no matter where I am, I labor with confidence that the sovereign God can and will use me for his purposes.

Suffering. I believe God is sovereign over my suffering. That is hard, but it is true. I can be confident in that situation, because I know he is my Father, and I know these hard things are for my good. I know he wants to use this suffering to help me be more like Jesus the Christ.

So I am free to love and serve God and others, even in suffering. I have seen this often, in my ministry and even in my life. When I suffer, I want to become passive. I am prone to be paralyzed. Instead, I am free to love and serve others.

Maybe I am sick or weak, but I can pray. Maybe I am heartbroken, but I can do a simple job. Maybe I am worried, but I can listen to someone else who is worried. Maybe I have little money, but I can give time and energy to serve those with less than me. I am free to do all of this and more, because while my suffering is real, God’s grace is also real. I am free to live for him, and to see him minister through me and to me, even as I suffer.

So why did I hit that deer that morning? Why are the latest chapters in your story, written as they are? You may not know for sure. But you know what you have done, and you are responsible for it. And in Jesus, you can live by faith and in freedom, for you know that the sovereign Lord determines your steps, directs your ways, and writes a wise and good chapter each day - now and forever.