

WHO'S THE BOSS? PROVERBS 16:1-33

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn.

M.I. EVEN THOUGH GOD IS IN TOTAL CONTROL OF THE UNIVERSE AND EVERY EVENT THAT TAKES PLACE IN IT, WE ARE STILL FREE TO ACT AND TO MAKE CHOICES FOR GOOD OR EVIL.

I. GOD IS IN CONTROL (Vs. 1-15)

NOTHING HAPPENS WITHOUT GOD'S ACTION OR GOD'S PERMISSION.

A. GOD WORKS IN OUR LIVES (Vs. 1-9)

B. GOD WORKS ON US THROUGH OTHERS (Vs. 10-15)

II. WE HAVE FREE WILL TO ACT (Vs. 16-30)

WE ARE FREE TO ACT EITHER FOR GOOD OR FOR EVIL.

A. DETERMINING WHAT'S VALUABLE (Vs. 16-20)

B. GOOD CHOICES (Vs. 21-24)

C. BAD CHOICES (Vs. 25-30)

III. GOD'S CONTROL / OUR FREE WILL (Vs. 31-33)

GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSES USING OUR FREE WILL.

A. OUR PART (Vs. 31-32)

B. GOD'S PART (V. 33)

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Last week I said that it was hard for me to preach that text because it brought me face to face with my own hypocrisy that I have to look at each day.

This morning's text is hard to preach because I'm not sure I understand it. Here are the two ideas that compete with one another: On one hand, the Bible is very clear that God is totally sovereign. He is absolutely in control of everything that happens, but the Bible equally asserts that we have free will. We can choose good or evil.

Further, even though God is not the author of evil, evil could not exist without His consent, and bad things could not happen without God's permission.

I think in our attempt to make Christianity palatable, we often water down the message. But the Bible writers never make any excuses for God's behavior and neither does God. Many of us don't give much thought to what we believe, so let me get us thinking: Three years ago, on September 11, a group of maniacs hijacked several planes and flew them into the World Trade Center in New York City and killed several thousand people. God could have prevented that tragedy. In fact, all of us here can probably testify how God saved our lives time and time again. Either God is in control or He is not. Now as a pastor or a friend, I would never say that to families who lost a loved one, but nevertheless, we do have to face this question... Is God in total control or not? And if God is in control, then could we really say that we as humans are free to act as we will? You see, these two concepts seem to contradict one another.

I think most of us never spend any real time looking at the dilemma. Most of us just operate every day without thinking. Now I know that I am going to get into trouble with everyone this morning so let me get started right away.

This is not meant to be sexist, but it just happens that it involves a young woman. When I was going to college in the late sixties, the more Charismatic students used to pepper everything they said with, "Praise the Lord." One day, my car was in the shop so I asked a friend if he could give me a ride home, he said that would be fine.

When we got in the car, I noticed his girlfriend was in the driver's seat. You see, he was teaching her to drive. I buckled my seat belt and shut up. His girlfriend started the car, and because she was one of those "Praise the Lord" people, she held her hands up and said, "Lord guide my hands to steer this car." Then she put her hands on the wheel, put the car in drive, and we were off.

Her boyfriend thought it would be good to get her on the highway, so we got on the Eden's Expressway. Everything was going fine until we hit a busy pocket of traffic. One car sped around and cut in front of us. Another was coming into our lane as he was trying to merge, and another was still coming up fast from behind. It was a little hairy. All of sudden, she threw her hands up in the air and said, "Lord Jesus, Take the Wheel!"

Needless to say, I didn't ask my friend for another ride. But isn't that the way we approach life for the most part? We start out by asking God to help us, and then we forget about Him as we steer our way through everyday life. Then when we get ourselves in a jam or life gets out of control, we remember Him and cry out for Him to take the wheel.

Let me say up front that I really don't fully understand these concepts even though I have read through most of the classics concerning the problem. I am not happy with the theological or philosophical explanations. So what I am going to try to give you the Biblical data. The Bible writers just stated the facts; they didn't try to reconcile them. Here is what I think the main idea of this morning's passage is: **EVEN THOUGH GOD IS IN TOTAL CONTROL OF THE UNIVERSE AND EVERY EVENT THAT TAKES PLACE IN IT, WE ARE STILL FREE TO ACT AND TO MAKE CHOICES FOR GOOD OR EVIL.** I don't know about you, but I can't really understand that. It seems as if those two statements contradict one another. God is sovereign. We are free. In other words, God is in total control but we are free to think and act as we choose. If I am thinking theologically or philosophically, I cannot get to a resolution. However, I think that I live my life as if both of those propositions are true. Sometimes I find myself acting better than I think while at other times I find myself believing better than I act. So most days, I do my best, remember God is in control, throw my hands up in the air and sing the Doxology.

I am going to say some difficult things this morning, and I'll ask God for His forgiveness for any misstatements I make, and I'll ask for your forgiveness if I seem insensitive to your pain or hurt your feelings.

I. **GOD IS IN CONTROL (Vs. 1-15)**
NOTHING HAPPENS WITHOUT GOD'S ACTION OR GOD'S PERMISSION.

The first assertion that the Bible makes is stated in verses 1-15, God is in control: **NOTHING HAPPENS WITHOUT GOD'S ACTION OR GOD'S PERMISSION.** This is a hard pill to swallow, but I want you to think about it. If God has a goal in mind, we have no power to stop it. God will accomplish His purposes with or without our cooperation. So in reality, we are of little importance. However, God approaches us and treats us as if we were

important. He holds us accountable for our actions. Furthermore, think about this; God can deliver us from sickness and death. When Peter and John were in jail, God sent an angel to help them miraculously escape. There were death contracts out on the Apostle Paul, but he too miraculously escaped time and again. Jesus not only healed people, He brought back His friend Lazarus from the dead. The apostles did the same; they healed the sick and raised the dead. I have prayed for people and have seen God bring them back to life when they were about one inch away from death. God has miraculously delivered me from death and all the glory goes to God.

But on the other hand, the Roman government killed Peter, Paul, and the other disciples, only the Apostle John died of old age. I myself have prayed for people, and yet I have had to watch them die. One friend died a prolonged and painful death. Should I still say, "And all the glory goes to God?" I have seen old people suffer and die. I have seen young children die, and I have seen pre-born children die. Should I still say, "And all the glory goes to God?" We watched with horror as some religious maniacs flew planes into a building killing several thousand people. Should I still say, "And all the glory goes to God?" The Bible seems to say, "That is exactly what we should say. All the glory goes to God."

A. GOD WORKS IN OUR LIVES (Vs. 1-9)

Verses 1-9 state that God works in our lives. Let me make one comment in passing about the poetic structure; in chapters 1-9, the poet, Solomon, gave us a discourse on the nature of wisdom. Solomon is credited with chapters 10 through the first half of chapter 22. As we have seen, he has used the antithetic parallel form in chapters 10-15. Here in chapter 16 through chapter 22 he will use various forms of synonymous parallelism. In other words, instead of the second line of each verse contrasting the first, in these chapters, for the most part, the second line

will enhance the first line. Where the second line completes the first or states it in a different way, that poetry is called synonymous parallelism.

First, let's look at how this section is framed. Verse 1 and verse 9 seem to parallel one another. What those two verses seem to say are this: To us as human beings belongs the task of making plans. We are not only free to think and act, we are created that way by God and expected to act accordingly. It is our nature to formulate plans for living, but the ends and the outcomes belong to God. Verse 1 seems to indicate that The **LORD** has the last say, He is the final word. Notice that the **LORD** is the personal name for God, Jehovah or Yahweh. In verse 1 it seems as if God works after the fact. In other words, we make the plans of action and He either approves them or nixes them. But verse 9 seems to indicate that Jehovah God has our steps planned out before we plan a course of action. In the Psalms, David, Solomon's father, said that all the days of our lives were recorded in God's book before we were even born. That's amazing! As we look at these 9 verses, let us try and see what type of plans we should be making and how we should be making them, and then we should examine them to see how it is that God determines our steps.

In verse 2 and 3 we see that we are easily fooled by the world. We are not really as smart as we think we are. So when making plans, we should humbly go to God with our thoughts. Why? Because God sees things more deeply and clearly than we do. Even though we may think something is innocent, our motives that are sometimes even hidden from us; will be weighed and judged by God. Those of you who were here when I preached through the book of Daniel, remember the incident of the handwriting on the wall. God wrote a message to the King of Babylon. The message was, "You have been weighed and come up short." Shortly after this, the Persians conquered Babylon.

If we come to God in humility, He will make sure our plans succeed. On the other hand, look at verses 4 and 5: God detests the proud. This is becoming a common theme of Proverbs. God cannot stand proud and arrogant people. Look at the second line of verse 5. If we are stubborn, proud, or arrogant, we will not go unpunished. Many times the wicked will appear to have the upper hand, but look at verse 4; Jehovah, Yahweh works out everything for His own ends. This sounds a lot like Romans 8:28. There, the Apostle Paul says, "And we know that God works all things for good to those who love Him, to those called according to His will." I think we can understand that. But look at the second line of verse 4 here, "Even the wicked for a day of disaster." In other words, God works all things for disaster to those who don't love Him and are not called according to His purposes. Here is the guiding thought: Everything -- good and evil -- will all work out to complete God's overall plan. From our perspective, if we are in tune with God's will because we are humble and love Him, all things will work together for good in the end. If we are proud and arrogant, all things will work together for disaster in the end.

So far we can describe the interaction like this. We approach God with humility, love, and trust. As we make our plans, we place ourselves totally in His hands. He will insure success. On the other hand, being proud, arrogant, rebellious and independent pretty much will guarantee failure. Humility and love brings God's blessings. Pride and arrogance bring God's disgust.

Look how the poet describes success. Fearing God and walking in His ways are described as living lives of love and faithfulness. These are words that describe a covenant relationship with God. Notice that it is not the sacrifices or religious ceremonies that take away our sin; it is our love and faithfulness to God. This is a nice description of salvation by faith. And, in case we may get confused as to the definition of success, the author gives us verse 8; he says that it's better to be righteous and not have much in the way of worldly wealth and

possessions, than to be rich and live a life of injustice, being in a right relationship with God is how success is defined in these 9 verses. If our hearts and plans are aimed at pleasing God, we will not fail. God works in and through our lives directly.

B. GOD WORKS ON US THROUGH OTHERS (Vs. 10-15)

However, as verses 10-15 demonstrate, God works on us through others as well. I don't even begin to know how to explain this but God even uses evil governments to accomplish His purposes. God raised up people like Stalin, Hitler, those crazy extremist Muslims, and even our deceitful politicians. If you don't think so, please take time and read the book of Habakkuk; God tells the prophet Habakkuk that He is raising up the evil and ruthless Babylonians to come and destroy His chosen people and His chosen city. Needless to say, the prophet is confused; God's answer to the prophet is this; He will use the evil Babylonians to punish His people, but he will use another nation to punish the Babylonians. The Babylonians will freely come and destroy Jerusalem; they will carry off the people into captivity. They will be acting out of the lust for power and wealth, but in actuality, they will be carrying out the plan of God, and that cycle will go on.

It is not in my nature to be political so I will outline what these verses have to say about the King. Verses 10, 11, and 12 indicate that the King should be God's representative on earth. Verse 10 indicates that the King should be prophetic. The prophets always preached the message of social justice, the poor and the disenfranchised should be cared for and everyone should be able to find justice. Verse 12 says that the King is responsible for righteousness and, the King is to make sure that evil doers are punished and those who do good are rewarded.

And don't miss what the standard for fairness is; it is God Himself. A godly king, a righteous king, a good king is in tune with God's nature and character. God is the only legitimate standard by which we can judge good and evil.

Good kings value the truth and are not interested in intrigues, innuendoes, and cover-ups. Truth is important.

Why? Because of the power that king's wield. Look at verses 14 and 15: When kings are angry, it can be hazardous to your health, when they are happy, things go well.

Here is the point; God has established all governments, both good and evil. Whether they are good or evil, God will use them to accomplish His purpose, but they will not be off the hook. They will be judged by the way they followed God's laws. Did they promote true justice? Were they honest? Did they care for their people? Did they protect the innocent and promote clean and holy living? I don't need to editorialize, but I think you can draw your own conclusions. We live in a country that kills 1 million unborn babies each year. We live in a country that has justice for the rich, but not for the poor. We live in a country where we cannot trust our government to tell us the truth. We live in a country filled with sexual immorality of every sort.

And here is the really sad part; we probably have the best form of government in the world. If we, with all our wickedness are the best, can we even begin to imagine what the worst is like? Here is the point: God uses evil people, evil governments, and painful experiences to accomplish all His purposes. Like it or not, we have to say that whatever happens to us is the will of God. Was the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the will of God? I think the answer is yes. Take some time to read the book of Lamentations to see how horrible that time was, women were killing and eating their babies for food.

Was the hijacking of airplanes by maniacs and the death of thousands of people in the will of God? I think the Bible says yes. If it wasn't, God certainly could have caused the planes to miss and crash into the ocean. Or God could have struck the hijackers dead, but He didn't.

I don't claim to be able to begin to understand this, but I can say this for sure:
NOTHING HAPPENS WITHOUT GOD'S ACTION OR GOD'S PERMISSION.

Now let me add this: Even though these atrocities have happened throughout history and will continue to happen, that doesn't mean it is all as simple as that. God used these evil people to accomplish His purpose, whatever His purpose was, however, they will be judged for what they did. I am quite sure that Hitler, Stalin, the Muslim suicide extremists are now all spending eternity in hell. You see, we will be judged for our actions because the second part of this passage is equally as true.

II. WE HAVE FREE WILL TO ACT (Vs. 16-30)
WE ARE FREE TO ACT EITHER FOR GOOD OR FOR EVIL.

Verses 16-30 remind us that we have free will to act: **WE ARE FREE TO ACT EITHER FOR GOOD OR FOR EVIL.** As emphatic as the Bible is in asserting that absolutely nothing is out of God's sovereign control, it is equally as emphatic about asserting the fact that we are free to choose good or evil. No matter which we choose God's will be done, however, we will be judged as to our choices.

A. DETERMINING WHAT'S VALUABLE (Vs. 16-20)

If we want to make good choices, we must first be able to determine what is valuable as described in verses 16-20. Again let's see how these verses are framed. Verse 16 refers to wisdom and understanding as being more valuable than silver or gold. Verse 20 talks about prosperity and those who seek after God's wisdom and understanding, those who trust God and humbly choose to follow Him, will prosper. But please pay attention to what prosperity is here:

It is not silver, gold, or any material wealth; it is being rich in wisdom, understanding, and relationship with God.

Verse 19 reinforces that thought. Prosperity in God's economy has to do with being rich in righteousness. Often that means that we will be poor according to the world's assessment; we may not have money or power or status, but if we are in a right relationship with God, then we are rich.

We may want to say, "How does that make us rich?" Look at verses 17 and 18. If we live our lives for Christ, we can pretty well be sure to avoid the pitfalls of evil. For example, if I stay away from drugs, I will be able to stay away from addictions and all the horrible things that go with that. If I remain sexually pure, I can pretty much avoid sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies. If I stay away from alcohol, I can pretty much guarantee that I won't kill myself driving drunk or run into other sorts of mishaps that happen to drunks.

On the other hand, if I insist on doing things my way, I can pretty much guarantee disaster. You know the old saying, "You can't play with fire and not get burned." If you play around with drugs, alcohol, sex, pornography or risky behavior of any kind, let me forewarn you now, you are headed for a fall.

B. GOOD CHOICES (Vs. 21-24)

So our first assignment in life is to decide what is valuable. Do we think the things of this world are valuable or do we think having a relationship with God is valuable? We have to choose one. Verses 21-24 describe good choices. People who choose God's wisdom find peace and happiness, and you can tell this by the way they talk. Look at verse 21 and verse 24: They frame this section by talking about pleasant words. The words and actions of righteous people bring life, healing, and knowledge to people around them. Follow this now; it is God's will that

we be His representatives on earth. We are called to bring salvation to those who are not Christians. We are to help those less fortunate than we are, to find justice. We are to pray for healing and wholeness for those who are sick and suffering. We have an opportunity to be a blessing to others. It may be God's will to save or heal a person. It may be an opportunity for you to participate. That's a fantastic opportunity.

C. BAD CHOICES (Vs. 25-30)

However, as we will see in verses 25-30, people make bad choices as well. Look first of all at verse 26; there is a hunger that drives us to act. The simple illustration here is that because people are hungry and want to eat, they go to work.

What is it that you are hungry for? Are you hungry for God's righteousness, or are you hungry for the things of this world? Are you chasing money, power, status, unhealthy relationships, or anything else this world has to offer?

Look at verse 25; we better be sure that we are hungry for God because as this verse demonstrates, we can easily justify anything we do. We can even put religious language on things, but in the end, it leads to death. I think it's pretty easy for us to see how those suicidal extremist maniacs deceived themselves into thinking they were doing God's will and how they anticipated being rewarded after death. Do you think they may be a little confused and disappointed to find themselves living in Hell for an eternity?

Don't be too quick to judge them, because we are just as good at fooling ourselves into thinking we are doing good. We must be careful to humbly come before God and let Him weigh our thoughts and behaviors. Verses 27-30 give us some things we can use to judge ourselves. Do our thoughts, behaviors, and speech promote harmony, righteousness, purity, and healing? Or are we perverted, do we cause dissension, are we gossips, liars, or filled with hidden agendas?

Let me conclude with a sobering thought as we leave this section. Our thoughts, actions, words, or behaviors will not derail God's plans. God's will, will be accomplished whether we choose wisely or foolishly. The only question on the last day is how we will be judged. Even though God's plans will not be thwarted, the truth is this: **WE ARE FREE TO ACT EITHER FOR GOOD OR FOR EVIL.**

III. GOD'S CONTROL / OUR FREE WILL (Vs. 31-33)
GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSES USING OUR FREE WILL.

Verses 31-33 tie it all together; it really doesn't explain anything except to assert that God is in control and that we have free will to think and act: **GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSES USING OUR FREE WILL.** Think about this; God may want to punish someone severely and since you may be a person who is selfish and self-centered, He may use you to hurt that other person and you may gladly participate, and so, you have accomplished God's will. But do you really want to face God's judgment for what you have done? In our culture, people use one another in all sorts of ways, sexually and otherwise. You may be the tool God is using to punish someone. Do you really want to be in that position?

A. OUR PART (Vs. 31-32)

Look at verses 31-32 for our part: We have come to value power, money, wealth, and status and we tend to admire the strong. But look at what God values. God values people who are patient, humble, and able to control their tempers. If you are worldly, you may accomplish many things. You may conquer the city, even the world, but God doesn't value that in the least. Those who love God and serve God will wear the crown of splendor.

I know that when all is said and done, when my life comes to an end, my desire is to have found myself accomplishing God's will by being a blessing to others. I think if I can focus

on being God-centered rather than self-centered, if I can remain humble, teachable, and loving, God can accomplish great things through me.

B. GOD'S PART (V. 33)

Which brings us to verse 33, God's part: I like the way the NLT translates this verse. It says, "We may throw the dice, but The **LORD** determines how they fall." This is really comforting to me. I know that God's will be done. There is no doubt, but I have a chance to be part of that plan for good. One way or another, we will be part of His plan. We have to choose whether we want to participate in good or evil: **GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSES USING OUR FREE WILL.**

After having preached this, I still have to say that I don't know how these two concepts go together, but I know they do: **EVEN THOUGH GOD IS IN TOTAL CONTROL OF THE UNIVERSE AND EVERY EVENT THAT TAKES PLACE IN IT, WE ARE STILL FREE TO ACT AND TO MAKE CHOICES FOR GOOD OR EVIL.**

It is said that during the height of his career Napoleon was asked if he thought God was on his side. Napoleon sarcastically answered that God was on the side of the army with the biggest guns. After his defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon was exiled to the island of St. Helena. After this humiliating experience and time to think about life, he is reported to have quoted St. Thomas à Kempis, "Man proposes but God disposes."

That is a lesson we all have to learn, but first we have to know what is truly valuable and what we are hungry for.

I don't know who wrote this poem but it is certainly appropriate.

**I counted all my dollars ... while God counted crosses;
I counted gains ... while He counted losses;
I counted my worth by the things gained in store,
But He sized me up by the scars that I bore.**

**I coveted honors and sought for degrees;
He wept as He counted the hours I spent on my knees.
I never knew till one day by a grave,
How vain are the things that we spend life to save.
I did not know till a friend went above
That richest is he ... who is rich in God's love.**