

A MYSTERIOUS PARTNERSHIP PROVERBS 21:1-31

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M.I. LIFE HAPPENS THROUGH A MYSTERIOUS PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR FREE WILL.

I. GOD'S PART OF THE MYSTERY (Vs. 1-4)

GOD EMPOWERS US WITH THE DESIRE AND THE ABILITY TO PARTNER WITH HIM

A. GOD'S POWER (Vs. 1-2)

B. GOD'S PROPOSAL (Vs. 3-4)

II. OUR PART OF THE MYSTERY (Vs. 5-19)

GOD HAS GIVEN US THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTNER WITH HIM

A. BUILT IN CONSEQUENCES (Vs. 5-11)

B. GOD'S DIRECT CONSEQUENCES (Vs. 12-15)

C. NATURAL CONSEQUENCES (Vs. 16-19)

III. LIFE'S PART OF THE MYSTERY (Vs. 20-31)

AS WE LIVE LIFE AND MAKE DECISIONS, GOD INTERACTS WITH US THROUGH NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL CONSEQUENCES

A. WISE DECISIONS (Vs. 20-23)

B. FOOLISH DECISIONS (Vs. 24-29)

C. GOD'S DECISIONS (Vs. 30-31)

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Last time we were together, we talked about how God will hold us accountable for every thing we say, think, and do. Further, we said that we will all have to face up to the consequences of our actions.

This morning's text is going to build on this theme, but, in a different way. We will see that in understanding how God's complete control of the universe and our free will can work together. Since the beginning of time, philosophers and theologians have tried to make sense out of these two seemingly incompatible propositions. On one hand, the Bible portrays God as absolutely sovereign; nothing can happen that God is not in control of. On the other hand, the Bible asserts with equal certainty that each one of us has free will; we are free to choose what we say, what we think, and what we do.

I will not solve that problem this morning. However, I think I do have some insight into how those two truths work themselves out in everyday life ... in my life anyway. I'm sure I gave this example before, but I think it's worth repeating here: One of my friends said to me, "You sure are lucky to be able to go on so many nice vacations." My immediate response was, "Hey, my wife and I worked hard when we were young. We saved our money, and now we are able to travel when and where we want." No sooner had those words come out of my mouth when the thought crossed my mind, "I am only able to do these things because of God's grace. I don't deserve to go on these vacations. I am not well off financially because of my hard work and wise management. I am only able to go on vacations because God has provided for me and because He is graciously allowing me to go."

And then the conflict arose. Which one of those propositions is true? I am more inclined to go with the second proposition that God has provided all I have and given me the opportunity to go. However, as I continue to study through the book of Proverbs, I can see more and more where both of the propositions are true. I have the money and ability to travel because my wife and I worked hard and saved our money. However, the second proposition is equally true. I can only go on vacation because of God's blessings, God's provisions and God's permission.

More and more, I'm coming to the conclusion that life is a mysterious partnership between God and us. But we must look for His guidance and direction. The problem is that the partnership is just that ... a mystery.

Let me give you an example: A priest and a pastor were on the side of the road. They had a sign proclaiming, "The end is near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!"

One driver that drove by didn't seem to appreciate the sign and shouted at them as he whizzed by, "Leave me alone you religious freaks!"

Seconds later, the priest and the pastor heard a big splash. They looked at each other and the priest said to the pastor, "Hey, do you think we should just put up a sign that says, "Bridge out!" instead?"

Many of us really do muddle through life because we either ignore or miss the signs God continues to put up for us. The main idea of this morning's text is: **LIFE HAPPENS THROUGH A MYSTERIOUS PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR FREE WILL.** Again, let me say this one more time; the Bible asserts both of these truths. Nothing can happen outside God's will. He is in total control. Yet, we are free to think, speak, and act as we choose, and because of this freedom, God will judge us based on the

choices we make. Life is the most rewarding when we make intentional choices to cooperate with God.

I. GOD'S PART OF THE MYSTERY (Vs. 1-4)
GOD EMPOWERS US WITH THE DESIRE AND THE ABILITY TO PARTNER WITH HIM.

God's part of the mystery is explained in verses 1-4. This is a very important truth to ponder: **GOD EMPOWERS US WITH THE DESIRE AND THE ABILITY TO PARTNER WITH HIM.** I've been thinking a lot about this lately. The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippian Church put it like this, "God works in us the will and the power to act according to His good purpose." Not only does God give us the ability to do His will, He actually puts the desire in us to do His will. To me, that's remarkable. It changes the way I approach my spiritual life. Let's say that I'm having trouble reading my Bible and praying regularly. These days, I first pray that God put the desire in me to pray and read my Bible. In the very first chapter of his book on prayer, Richard Foster encourages us to pray that God give us the desire to want what we need. That is a radical shift since most of the time we think and pray as if we need what we want. When we pray for people, perhaps we should pray that God put the desire in their hearts to obey first.

A. GOD'S POWER (Vs. 1-2)

Verses 1-2 describe God's power. Let's take a look at verse 2 first; the thing about all of us is that we think we are right and our way of reasoning is right. We are able to convince ourselves that what we are thinking, saying, and doing is logical. It gets even sadder when we try to bring God into the convoluted process. Many of us run around doing good works that make us feel better and then we convince others, and ourselves, that we are doing God's will.

The fact may be that what we are doing is something that is good and noble, but God may not have instructed us to do this good work.

I have even see people twist the Bible to fit their particular circumstance. Let me use this example because I have seen it a hundred times: A Christian young man may want to marry a non-Christian young woman. He will come to me and proudly announce he is getting married. I will then respond that I won't do the wedding, he then indignantly responds, "God loves everybody doesn't He?" There are all sorts of people in churches all over the world trying to justify their behavior by misquoting the Bible.

But look carefully at the second line in verse 2. God weighs the motives. God knows our hearts. We may be able to fool others and even fool ourselves, however, God is not fooled. We will some day have to give an account to God of all this crazy logic and reasoning we have been using to twist His word so it fits into our plans.

The best way to approach life comes from really understanding and accepting the truth of verse 1. The subject of the verse is "the king's heart." The king's heart refers to the desires and the plans that the king makes. Now look at the disposition of the king's heart. It is in the hands of God. In other words, the very desires of the king are directed and controlled by God. The second line in verse 1 tells how easily God directs and controls the king's desires. If you have ever hiked by a small creek or stream, you no doubt have stepped in mud and pushed a couple of times and found the stream diverting around the newly formed bank you made. God can just as easily step on the banks of the rivers of our hearts and alter the course of our desires. Several times the Bible talks about God hardening peoples' hearts. The Bible said that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. This is all to say that as we approach life, we need to be aware that we need to be dependent on God.

B. GOD'S PROPOSAL (Vs. 3-4)

God's proposal is explained in verses 3-4. Verse 3 tells us that we better be humble and obedient. Humility to submit to God and actually obeying God is what God requires of our part in the partnership. He is not looking for people who talk, act, and pretend to be holy; He is looking for people who genuinely love Him and desire to be holy.

Verse 4 warns us that arrogance and pride keep us from accomplishing this goal. Most of us here this morning, including me, have come to be very arrogant and proud in our approach to God. We have come to think we are equal partners with God. We obey the parts of the Bible we like and we ignore the parts we don't like. We want to claim we are Christians and then act just like unbelievers. We have come to think that God owes us explanations. Listen! Here is the plain and simple truth. God is the creator, the sustainer, and the King of the Universe. He answers to no one. God speaks and the only acceptable answer is, "Yes, my Lord."

I like verse 4 because it gives us some real insight into how we are motivated. Arrogance and pride became the lamp of the wicked. Think about this metaphor; lamps give light, they give direction, and they guide us. So arrogance and pride light the way for the wicked and lust and evil fires up the life of the proud and arrogant. Sin is the driving motivating force of the wicked.

On the other hand, God places His good desires in the humble and obedient. This becomes the driving motivating force of the righteous.

Here is God's part in the mystery: He personally places good and noble desires in the hearts of people who are humble and obedient. God hardens the hearts of the proud and arrogant. Without God, none of us would think of the right things, let alone the desire to do them. The truth is this: **GOD EMPOWERS US WITH THE DESIRE AND THE ABILITY TO**

PARTNER WITH HIM. Did you catch that? God allows us to partner with Him. We don't have any right to partner with Him, but by grace and love, God invites us to partner with Him.

II. OUR PART OF THE MYSTERY (Vs. 5-19)
GOD HAS GIVEN US THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTNER WITH HIM.

That brings us to our part of the mystery explained in verses 5-19. God extends a partnership offer to us: **GOD HAS GIVEN US THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTNER WITH HIM.**

Now, as we have already seen, the humble and obedient, filled with the desire by God, jump at the chance to partner with God. The proud and the arrogant, filled with lust and self-centeredness, recoil from the offer. We can often see how we're doing by the choices we make.

A. BUILT IN CONSEQUENCES (Vs. 5-11)

Even though we are free to make choices, verses 5-11 remind us that there are built in consequences to life. Verse 5 gives us the principle that those who are diligent in their pursuit of holiness will find satisfaction in life. Those who are lazy in the pursuit of holiness will find nothing but misery. This passage is put together nicely. Let's look at those who diligently pursue holiness first. In verse 5 it says that the diligent will receive great rewards. The second line in verse 8 says that they will be living upright lives and the second half of verse 11 states that they will become wise and gain more knowledge. So what is the benefit and what is the reward for diligently following after God? The reward is an abundance of knowledge and wisdom from God. The reward includes the desire to live an innocent and righteous life. The reward is the empowerment to live a holy and upright life.

Now let's look at what the rewards are for living with a nonchalant attitude for the things of God. What happens to people who have so many priorities that come before God? People

find time to play, to watch television, to exercise, eat and entertain themselves, but rarely do they approach their spiritual life with that kind of commitment and enthusiasm. The second half of verse 5 indicates that these people are lazy when it comes to prayer, Bible reading and church activities. It can lead to poverty because they are always looking for shortcuts.

This lazy, shortcut attitude makes it easy for them to lie, and to justify lying in their lives. But for the most part, all the successes and accomplishments they obtain by lying will some day blow up in their face. It takes more energy to live a lie, then to simply own up to the truth. Verse 6 says that since these people are always lying and cheating their way through life, they may even end up being beaten up, taken to jail or worse, even killed.

Verse 9 is kind of funny, but if we take it as exclusively referring to females, then we miss the whole point of the section. The meaning is this: Living with a quarrelsome husband or a wife makes life miserable. In fact, even hanging around these types of people, even if we are not married to them makes life miserable. Think about what types of people they are: They are self-centered, they are controlling, they want everyone around them to adjust to what they want and they get angry easily when things don't go their way. You can never have fun with them when you go out because you never know who is going to upset them or what will set them off. These people try to control everyone, by constantly nagging, and they are almost never happy. It's miserable to be around these people.

And look at verse 10 because it follows naturally from what we have been saying. Don't look for help from these people, especially if you live in close proximity to them. They are the ones looking out their windows. They are consumed with other people's lives while their own lives are a mess. Don't look for any kind words and thoughts from them because they are focused on looking at what's wrong in your life. Stay away from these people.

And here is the sad conclusion for these lazy people; they will never learn. They were miserable, they are miserable, and they will always be miserable because they refuse to acknowledge God, they refuse to quit being lazy when it comes to a relationship with God, and they would rather remain miserable than change. Even if you were to beat them and punish them, they will not learn.

God does not need to directly intervene here. He has built-in natural consequences to these types of behavior. If we diligently pursue our love relationship with God, we will find wisdom, peace, joy, happiness, and success. If we are lazy in our approach to living life the way God designed it, then we will always be confused, angry, unhappy, and miserable. The sad thing for me to see as a pastor is that there are many people who claim to be Christians, who never seem to experience the abundant life Jesus promises. If that's the case, then maybe we should go to God and admit that perhaps we are not living the way He wants us to live.

B. GOD'S DIRECT CONSEQUENCES (Vs. 12-15)

Verses 12-15 describe how oftentimes God's direct consequences kick in, where sometimes we push God to the point that He will just step in and take action. When I take time to periodically think about the truth described in these four verses, it frightens me to think that I could actually push God to the point where He would personally step in and punish my behavior. Verses 12 and 15 frame this section. Verse 12 starts out by referring to God as The Righteous One, and verse 15 does not say "if justice is done," it says, "When justice is done." The point is that God will execute justice. If we continue trying to shortcut our way through life, if we refuse to help the poor, if we refuse to help the less fortunate, and most of all, if we shortchange our relationship with God, please look seriously at verse 12. He will first of all take note of us, and

then He will ruin us; and the proper response is in the second line of verse 15; it should strike terror in us.

I don't know where you are in your walk with God, but I think these verses give us a clear warning that if we are not taking our walk with God seriously, then we should be frightened, because there are times when God will take direct action against us.

C. NATURAL CONSEQUENCES (Vs. 16-19)

So God works through built in consequences, He works through direct interaction, verses 16-19 illustrate that He works through natural consequences. The point of these verses is pretty straightforward; if you always chase after the things of this world, you will never be satisfied and you will end up financially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually broke.

If you really want to be happy in life, turn off the television, quit reading magazines, and quit desiring to live like the rich and famous. If you want to be happy in life, figure out how much money you make, take two steps down from that and carve out a modest lifestyle for yourself, and save the rest of your money. You see, if you are chasing after the latest styles of clothes, the latest electronic toys, the latest trends and styles, then you are not really at peace with yourself. If you think you need a man or woman in your life, then you are not at peace with yourself. Joy, peace, and happiness come only in being content with God and what God has given you.

Again, to make verse 19 a female thing is to miss the point of the verse. Quarrelsome and ill-tempered people are never happy themselves. They are controlling, angry and they are miserable. Here is the natural consequence of being self-centered, lazy, and self-absorbed: You will end up with nothing. You will end up alone. And, as verse 16 points out, you will be like the living dead.

Even though this is the end of a tragic section, I'd like to point out a little humor the poet has built in. In chapter 19:13 he said that living with a quarrelsome wife is like listening to a faucet constantly dripping -- drip, drip, drip. Then in this chapter in verse 9, he upped the stakes some, saying living with a quarrelsome wife would drive you out of the house to go live on a small corner of the roof just to get away. And the finale would be in verse 19, when you just couldn't take her anymore, even living outside on the roof won't do it, you've got to run away into the desert to get away from her.

You see, ultimately it's about this quarrelsome person ending up all-alone in life. The moral of this section is: We must choose how to live our lives, we have the freedom to choose. However, we need to be reminded that God is sovereign and in control. There will be all sorts of consequences for our behavior, good and bad. Some of these consequences are built into the fabric of life, some are natural consequences, and sometimes God will personally step in and administer some consequences. Think about the offer: **GOD HAS GIVEN US THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTNER WITH HIM.** We must make a choice.

III. LIFE'S PART OF THE MYSTERY (Vs. 20-31) **AS WE LIVE LIFE AND MAKE DECISIONS, GOD INTERACTS WITH US THROUGH NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL CONSEQUENCES.**

This brings us to life's part of the mystery in verses 20-31: **AS WE LIVE LIFE AND MAKE DECISIONS, GOD INTERACTS WITH US THROUGH NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL CONSEQUENCES.** Life is a series of God's invitations to us, and our responses to Him.

A. WISE DECISIONS (Vs. 20-23)

Verses 20-23 describe a series of wise decisions. Verse 20 states that in the house of the wise there is abundance. The wise are described as those who pursue righteousness, those who trust in the Lord, and those who carefully think out what they are going to say. What they say, think, and do, are all guided by their desire to please and serve God. What is the abundance that they receive for following God? They have plenty, they find life, prosperity, and honor. They see victory over sin in their lives. They feel safe and connected to God, and God provides for their needs.

B. FOOLISH DECISIONS (Vs. 24-29)

On the other hand, we see the results of foolish decisions in verses 24-29. Look at the summary of what we have been talking about in the previous verses. Here is a description of people headed for disaster: They are proud and arrogant, they are lazy and stubborn, they are dishonest and they lie and fudge the truth. They are never satisfied, never joyful, and never content with life. Because these people think they deserve everything they have, their lives directly mock God. Look at verse 24: Their name is mocker. They are headed directly for a life of misery, a lonely death, and an eternity in hell, separated from Christ. They put on these bold bravado faces, but in the end, they will be weeping and crying because consequences will kick in. Why would anyone want to continue to live in this kind of misery? I don't know, but I do know that many people, even those who claim to know Christ, do.

C. GOD'S DECISIONS (Vs. 30-31)

Look, there is only one way to live life, and that is getting on board with God's decisions in verses 30-31. Verse 30 states the principle: There is no wisdom, no insight, and no plan that can succeed against God. You can use all your energy, all your power, all your connection, and all of whatever you have and insist on living life your way, but in the end, you will be fighting

against God, and you will discover that you cannot win. The Bible says, “Unless the Lord builds the house ... the builders build in vain.” So many people are unhappy and miserable because they refuse to humble themselves and submit to God.

Verse 31 kind of reconciles the whole concept of God’s sovereignty and our free will. In fact, I think that’s the way I have come to approach life. The king and his army must make every provision for war. They must train, they must plan, and they must fight. But in the end, it is God who wins the victory; we must approach life like this. We must humbly acknowledge that God is in control. We must then humbly obey what we know to be His will, and then be satisfied with what He gives us in the end: **AS WE LIVE LIFE AND MAKE DECISIONS, GOD INTERACTS WITH US THROUGH NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL CONSEQUENCES.**

Let me go back and try and explain how I have come to reconcile this in my own way. I’ll take my vacations as the example. My first and most potent thought is this; God is totally sovereign and everything I have comes from God. So I really believe that I am able to go on vacations because God has provided for me and has enabled me to go. However, my second thought is this, and it is equally valid: God has built natural and supernatural consequences into the universe. If we work hard, are diligent, live modestly, and save our money, God’s law of consequences say that generally you will accrue a nice sum of money for the future.

Our lives and our destinies were designed by God to be cooperation between His will and our obedience. Where are you this morning in relationship to God’s offer of partnership? You see: **LIFE HAPPENS THROUGH A MYSTERIOUS PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR FREE WILL.**

I'm quite sure we have not solved the complicated theological and philosophical problem of understanding how God's sovereignty and our free will work together. I'm certain that I'm not smart enough for that. However, we have learned that God is sovereign, what He chooses to accomplish He will accomplish ... with, our without our cooperation. However, we will be judged on how we exercise our free will. Life seems to be pretty simple, it is learning to trust and obey God moment by moment.

I think that this poem by Barbara C. Ryberg sums it up nicely,

**He does not lead me year by year
Nor even day by day;
But step by step my path unfolds;
My Lord directs my way.**

**Tomorrow's plans I do not know,
I only know this minute;
But He will say, 'This is the way;
By faith, now walk ye in it.'**

**And I am glad that it is so.
Today's enough to bear;
And when tomorrow comes;
His grace shall far exceed its care.**

**What need to worry then, or fret?
The God who gave His Son;
Holds all my moments in His hand;
And gives them, one by one.**

Let us not try and over-think life. Let God be God. Trust that He has great plans for us; and for our part, let us concentrate on trusting and obeying Him moment by moment. The mysterious partnership will work itself out.