
Covenant Reformed News

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God's Way Is in the Sea (1)

In the last two issues of the *News*, we followed Asaph, in Psalm 77, through his doubts and struggles, through his sleepless nights and comfortless days, until he finally came to his spiritual senses. Verse 10 is his turning point: "And I said, This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High." Verse 13 is his great confession: "Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary: who is so great a God as our God?" No matter what Asaph had foolishly thought earlier, God's way with him had been holy and blameless. God's way with us is also in the holy place, where He tabernacles with us in Jesus Christ. Rest and be at peace!

Now we turn to another, similar confession of Asaph in Psalm 77: "Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known" (19). Thus, God's way is both in the "sanctuary" (13) and also in the "sea" (19). God's way in both verses, you understand, is His providential dealings with us in our lives.

Asaph's faith is triumphing in the latter part of Psalm 77. Verses 11-20 are filled with the incomparable wonder of our God. Gone is the defeat of self pity in the opening section. Now Asaph has confidence in Jehovah and His ways.

We need to see this, too, in order to understand the ways of God with man, and His way with you and your family and His church. About God's "way," "path" and "footsteps"—all three words meaning essentially the same thing—we are told that they are "in the sea," "in the great waters" and (dropping the metaphor) "not known."

Think of your footprints on the beach. The tide is coming in. When you turn around to walk back, you see the waves reaching your footprints and erasing them. Your footprints are gone.

Our text is even stronger than this. It is not even that once the footprints could be seen but now the water covers them. Rather, God's footsteps *when made* are beneath the water. As soon as He lifts His feet, the water obliterates His print, so we can not see it. Even if the footprint were down there, we still could not view it because of the depth of water. We are not looking into a puddle here. We are talking about "the sea" and "the great waters." As verse 19 says, "Thy footsteps are not known," because they instantly disappear through the action of water and because they are many fathoms down at the bottom of the sea. This is a biblical image of God's way with us in our lives.

You see this time and time again in the Psalms. "Why?" and "How long?" are two poignant questions repeatedly asked of the Most High. No wonder! "Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known" (19)!

Asaph, in Psalm 77, is distraught, overwhelmed and comfortless (1-6). In anguish he asks, "Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" (7-9). He is experiencing painfully the truth that God's "way is in the sea" (19).

The life of Joseph is a good example too. He was cast into a pit in Dothan by his jealous brothers—"Thy way is in the sea"! He was carried away from the promised land by Ishmaelite traders—"thy path [is] in the great waters"! He was put in fetters in jail in Egypt (Ps. 105:18)—"thy footsteps are not known"! But God meant it all for good (Gen. 45:5, 7; 50:20), to save the family of Israel from the coming famine, as they all came to see years later (but not at this time).

Consider "the patience of Job" (James 5:11). Suddenly, he lost all his ten children, all his livestock, his reputation, his friends and his health. What on earth is going on? What in heaven is going on? God's way is in the sea! Although Job was later vindicated and rewarded abundantly, he did not know about the devil's machinations in heaven (and never would know it in this world).

Peter could not understand why Christ had to go to the cross: "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee" (Matt. 16:22). At that time, he could not see God's way, for he was savouring the things of men and not of God (23). Before the Lord's resurrection, none of His disciples could see God's footprints in Christ's nailprints.

There are many things today which leave us wondering “Why?”: the birth of a seriously disabled baby, or a Christian family unable to have children, or the death of a young person, or the loss of health of your spouse or family member, or people who come to the church for whom you have high hopes but foolishly they leave. We need to believe the truth of God’s mysterious, yet good, providence. Unless we have this straight, we will lose heart and crumble under pressure. God’s “way is in the sea” and His “footsteps are not known.”

Why should it be that God’s way is unknown in the depths of the sea? It all goes back to God’s eternal decree. We do not know His plan, His ends and His means, and how we fit into it. We do not know what He will do in and with our lives.

Only Christ, enthroned in heaven, can read God’s eternal decree; to us it is a sealed book for we are not privy to its contents (Rev. 5:1-7). We merely see (a tiny bit of) the execution of God’s decree, for everything which happens is the carrying out of His eternal purpose, but even then we do not grasp things in all their proper connections and relationships. We do not know the future, not even what will happen tomorrow or in the next minute. God’s “way is in the sea” and His “footsteps are not known.” It is crucial that we confess and remember this, especially in difficult times! *Rev. Stewart*

Judgment on Chorazin and Bethsaida

“But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment, than for you” (Luke 10:12-14; cf. Matt. 11:21-24).

In connection with the above verses, a reader asks, “Is it reasonable to argue that if it was God’s decree to save Tyre and Sidon, He would have done mighty works in those cities? Does the fact that He did not do mighty works in Sodom mean that God did not decree to elect them?”

Tyre and Sidon were wealthy, pagan, coastal, trading cities north of Israel. Sodom was a city in the plain of Jordan that was destroyed with fire and brimstone from heaven because of its terrible depravity, particularly the sin of homosexuality (Gen. 19).

Chorazin and Bethsaida (and Capernaum) were cities in which the Lord preached and did “most” miracles during His earthly ministry (Matt. 11:20-24). They were part of the church of the old dispensation, but they rejected Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and so were even more wicked than Sodom, Tyre and Sidon.

Now to the question: Can this passage be used to prove sovereign and eternal election? It is interesting that this passage is sometimes used to argue for the very opposite position. Arminians, who teach the doctrine that man has a free will and that he can accept the gospel if only he is given a chance, sometimes argue that these cities that never heard the gospel would have believed if they had heard it and had seen Christ’s mighty miracles.

I do not think that Luke 10:12-14 can be used to prove the truth of unconditional election (and reprobation). However, the reader is correct when he asks, “Does the fact that [God] did not do mighty works in Sodom mean that God did not decree to elect them?” To that we must give a definite “Yes.” But the text itself does not prove God’s sovereignty in election. At the same time, the text must—say, emphatically, “must”—be interpreted in the light of Jehovah’s eternal and unchangeable election.

Jesus Himself proves this beyond any doubt in the context of the parallel passage in Matthew. Immediately after He pronounces His woes on Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, He prays. He does not pray, “Lord, I am sorry that there were no missionaries to go to Sodom.” Or, “Lord, be easy on these people in Tyre and Sidon, for they never had a chance to believe. Indeed, they would have believed if I could have gone to them to perform miracles.” Listen to what He prayed “at that time”: “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight” (Matt. 11:25-26)!

The Lord thanked His Father that He had not saved the unbelieving Jews in these cities of Galilee! This certainly teaches that God did not save Tyre and Sodom because it was His will not to save them. God saves whom He will and reprobates whom He will. God sovereignly and unconditionally saves His elect only. The prayer of the Lord in Matthew 11:25-26 shows us that God’s sovereign purpose lies behind all unbelief—and all faith. But Luke 10:12-14 does not prove sovereign predestination.

The point here is that God accomplishes His sovereign reprobation in the way of sin. Christ proclaims woes upon

these cities of the Jews for their dreadful wickedness.

First, man never goes to hell *because* he is reprobate. He goes to hell because he justly deserves hell for his great sins. One may argue that he cannot do anything else but sin since he is totally depraved, but his depravity is his own fault for he sinned in Adam.

Second, the Israelites especially had every reason to believe in Jesus. As a nation, they had been given special privileges from God (Rom. 9:4-5). They had the Scriptures and were taught them from childhood. The hope of the Messiah was held out in the old covenant Word of God and they professed that they were looking for a coming saviour and king. They went to church (the synagogue and temple) regularly. They heard Jesus' sermons that were far more excellent than any earthly preacher could ever preach. They saw miracles that proved conclusively that Jesus was the Son of God in our flesh. God gave to the Israelites every external thing that could possibly convince a man that Jesus was the Messiah. All day long, God held out His hands to a gainsaying people (Rom. 10:21). In the parable of the fruitless vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7, God asks the rhetorical question, "What more could I have done than I did do?"

God does not in this way express a weak and frustrated desire to save all men. His counsel always stands and He does all His good pleasure (Isa. 46:10). But it must be shown clearly and unmistakably that man goes to hell because of his dreadful sin so that the perfectly holy God is justified in all His dealings with man.

Third, man is punished according to the measure of his understanding of the things of God. Jesus makes this clear in Luke 12:48: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." Not much was given to Sodom, Tyre and Sidon, and so not much was required. Their sin is less than Israel's sin. Their judgment on the last day (though awful) is more tolerable than that of the unbelieving Jews. To the Jews much was given but they refused to believe and so crucified Christ. The Lord Jesus came to call sinners to repentance but they had no sin in their own eyes. Their smug self-righteousness blinded them to the righteousness of God in the Messiah (Rom. 10:3-4).

Undoubtedly, the questioner is right. Behind it all stands the eternal decree of the sovereign God whose counsel stands forever (Ps. 33:11) and who will have mercy upon those to whom He will show mercy—and the rest He hardens (Rom. 9:18).

Paul, that great teacher of election and reprobation, issues a serious warning to us: "Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches [i.e., Israel], take heed lest he also spare not thee" (Rom. 11:19-21). *Prof. Hanko*

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