

One Small Step Part 4

Established By The Lord

Proverbs 16:9

Memory Verses: Proverbs 16:9

MANUSCRIPT

Introduction (Me, We, & the Struggle)

About 7 years ago I got really determined to take one small step to get in shape. I signed up for a 5k. Now, I had never run a race before in my life... but, I needed motivation. I had two months to train, and so I walked and jogged 3.1 miles until I could run 3.1 miles without stopping. Everyday I saw my times get a little better. I was really encouraged. Then the day of the big race finally came. Up until this day all of my motivation had been to get in shape, get faster everyday, and set a personal best, but about a mile into the race I found new motivation. You see... there were about 10,000 other people running this race with me... old, young, men, women, people in wheelchairs. And they were all passing me. You want to find motivation in a race? Have an 80 year old woman and a 6 year old kid pass you in a race and you will find it. For the next two miles I tried to catch the 80 year old woman who passed me. There was no chance of catching the 6 year old kid. And here's what happened. I beat her. And I beat my fastest time by almost two whole minutes. My first step was to sign up for a race I was not prepared to run. My second step was to start walking 3.1 miles. My next step was to start running. Which led to the next step, run a 5k. My final step, beat an 80 year old woman. One step leads to the next, right?

We've been talking about small steps the past three weeks. One small step, leads to another, which leads to another, and by the time you reach your destination you've walked a million miles. We don't often think about those small steps. Rather we think about reaching the final destination. But without each one of those small steps there's no way we would have made it to the final destination.

Each step is important... so we determine to make day to day decisions that help us take the right steps. Our destiny is determined by day to day decisions. Each step is important... so we must get past our past. The only way our past can hold us back is if we trust in it more than the mercy and love of Jesus. Each step is important... so we must not miss the journey for the destination. We may not be where we want to be, but thank God we aren't where we used to be. Every step leads us closer to Christ, so we keep taking small steps.

Let's look again at our main passage for this series; **Psalm 37:23-24** tells us that "the steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the

Lord upholds his hand." God celebrates the small steps, he helps us make each small step, and though we may fall back down a step or two he will catch us and help us back up. This verse is extremely encouraging to those of us trying to make each step towards Christ count. But, there is something here that we may have overlooked. **Verse 23** says, "the steps of a man are established by the Lord." Now what does that mean? In fact, when we look at many of the verses that deal with our steps, they sound familiar. Look at **Proverbs 20:24, Jeremiah 10:23**. Look at **Proverbs 16:9**, "the heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." So what does it mean that God establishes our steps?

I think we struggle with verses like this because they seem to weigh against our autonomy, our free will. Do verses like this mean that we really don't have a choice in the matter? Do they mean that when I make a step it wasn't really my decision to make that step, but instead God was making me make that step? And if that is the case, do I have any freedom to make my own decisions and take my own steps? Who's actually taking my steps? Me or God? And, does it really matter?

Well the short answer is yes, yes, and yes. But the answer is more complicated and at the same time more simple than that. Today I want us to recognize something so fundamental to our faith that it determines how we take our steps. As believers who everyday struggle to take small steps in God's way we need to get this... **My Steps May Be My Own, But I Can Never Walk Outside God's Sovereign Path**. Today I want us to learn two basic truths about God's sovereignty that will change the way we think about the steps we take, and will help us walk closer to him.

Teaching (Expand on the Problem, God)

The first basic truth we need to learn is this... **We Have Free Will To Plan The Steps Of Our Life**. Look again at **Proverbs 16:9a**. The heart of man plans his way. The first thing we notice is that a man's plans begin in the heart. You might think that's a good thing but it's not. The bible doesn't have much good to say about the heart of man. Look at **Jeremiah 17:9, Mark 7:21-23, and Romans 2:5**. **Every human heart in it's natural state is deceitful, evil, and rebellious towards God**.

And, yet God lets us make our own decisions and take our own steps. When man was made he was created in God's image. Now there is much debate as to what that fully means, but most would agree that it includes the fact that like God we have the ability to willfully make plans according to our intentions. We can choose our steps. To a large degree we are in control of what we do and are responsible for our choices. We have free will. According to **Proverbs 16:1** our plans belong to us. This is illustrated in **Revelation 3:20** where Jesus knocks on the door of our heart, but we must choose to let him in. If we didn't have free will then why is Jesus waiting for us to choose to let him in? Or what about Paul's dilemma

in **Romans 7:15** ; I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do what I don't want to do. If we didn't have free will then why do we give into sinful temptation? Wouldn't God keep us from making those choices? Clearly the Holy Spirit inside Paul wants to honor God, but Paul's free will can deviate from the Holy Spirit's counsel. And this is the kicker.... our free will will almost certainly always direct our steps where our evil hearts tell it to go; away from God. God lets us plan our way according to our hearts... and that's not necessarily a good thing... but it is free will.

So, if our hearts are evil and our free will follows our hearts toward evil things... then what we need is a change of heart. We need to be saved. This is why the psalmist in **Psalms 51:10** begs God to create in me a clean heart. This is why we are urged in **Proverbs 3:5** to trust in the Lord with our heart rather than leaning on our own understanding. Our hearts are inclined towards rebellion but we still have free will to choose to go against our hearts... we just need a little help to get there. Thank God he gives us a new heart. **Ezekiel 36:26** says, I will give you a new heart and replace your old heart of stone.

So do I choose a new heart or does God give me a new one. Both. **Romans 10:10** tells us with the heart we believe and are saved, but **John 6:44** tells us that no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws them. **We are saved through our free will and through the sovereign choice of God.** Everyone has free will to rebel against God, and everyone will because it is in their nature. But, when it comes to salvation God makes the final decision by drawing those who he chooses. According to **Eph 2:8** he gives them faith and those who have faith will by their own free will believe and repent. Did you catch that... we must choose by our own free will to repent. Look at **Acts 3:19**; which says, 'repent that your sins will be blotted out. **2 Peter 3:9** tells us that the Lord is patient until we reach repentance. God will help us believe in him, but he still waits for us to take that first step. The bottom line is simple... **you have the ability to make decisions according to your own will or in submission to God's will.** You have free will.

But the second basic truth we need to learn is this... **Every Step We Take Will Be Within God's Sovereign Will.** Look at the second part of our verse today; **Proverbs 16:b.** God establishes our steps. If I have free will to step where I want, then how does God establish my steps?

God's sovereignty 101. This is basement level theology so hopefully you guys can stay with me here. God has two wills – his general will and his sovereign will. Let's first look at his general will. God doesn't establish your steps according to his general will per se. God desires, or wills, many things for you as an individual. God desires you to do good – **1 Peter 2:15**, God desires you to give thanks in all circumstances – **1 Thessalonians 5:18**, God desires you to keep his

commandments – **John 15:15.** The Bible is chalk full of God's desires for you life. These are the steps he wants you to take to get closer to him. But even though these are God's wills for your life, as we just saw, in your free will you can choose not to do these things – you can choose to step outside of God's will and he will let you. Okay, that's God's general will.

But God also has a sovereign will. This would include things like his plan for humanity, the universe, and eternity. Even though we have free will and can choose to live according to God's general will or not, scripture teaches us never to let this reality fool us into believing that we have the final say in what we do. There is one will that always supersedes our wills, namely, the divine sovereign will of God. **Ephesians 1:11** says that God works all things according to his will.

So, practically how does this work? The big picture would be like this. God has a design for your life, for the whole world, and for eternity. Let's just take your life for example. God has planned when you will be born, when you will be saved, and when you will die, along with a million other things. They are set outcomes that God wants to happen and will make happen. But within those set outcomes, God will allow you to take different paths to get there. Imagine a circle. We will call that circle God's sovereign will. Now imagine a million different paths within that circle. You can't leave the circle but you can take any of those paths within the circle.

So there are stories about healthy people who work out, diet, and live very healthy lifestyles but still die of heart attacks out of the blue. They took good steps within God's general will but ultimately God, in his sovereign will, chose the time of their death. On the flip we have all heard stories of unhealthy people who don't work out, don't diet, smoke three packs a day everyday, and end up living for 100 years. They choose to take bad steps outside God's general will but ultimately God, within his sovereign will, chose their death. And of course these are exceptions to the rule, but they serve to show that God is ultimately in control of when we die.

Or what about when 12 men, who were clearly outside of God's general will, decided to fly planes into two buildings killing 3000 people. It was a horrible thing that God did not desire in his general will, but within his sovereign will God used that tragedy to unify a nation and draw 100's of thousands of people to Christ. Or what about Joseph's brothers plot to murder him, and sell him as a slave. Clearly this was not according to God's general will, but what did God do? He used that situation to make Joseph the highest authority in the world and save the world from a famine. And how did Joseph frame this? **Genesis 50:20.** In God's sovereign will he will bring good out of our evil steps. God will have the final say concerning our steps. **In God's sovereignty, our choices are sometimes made according to the results He has ordained, and we accomplish what we have intended. Other times, our ordained choices do not match the results He has ordained, and our plans are thwarted. but in both cases, God's purpose never fails.**

Our steps are established according to what He has designed, for He has the final say in His creation. Praise God, **My Steps May Be My Own, But I Can Never Walk Outside God's Sovereign Path.**

Application

Praise God that he allows us the free will to decide our steps. We have freedom to rebel from him or to follow him, to love him or hate him. Our steps matter! But praise God he will never let us step beyond his grand design for our lives. Left to ourselves we would take too many wrong steps so God takes our bad wrong steps and makes them work for something good... and then he helps us take the right steps to get back on track. We may plan our way, but God establishes our final steps.

So, let me ask you a couple of questions. Are you stepping where God wants you to step within his general will? Are you choosing to do the things that God wants you to do?

Perhaps you aren't because you haven't take that first step of repentance. Have you taken the step of opening the door to Christ? He is patiently waiting for you, in your free will, to choose to open that door.

If you have repented and accepted Christ, and if you are taking small steps to do his will everyday, then... **are you seeing God's sovereign will keeping you on his path and establishing your steps?** Have you seen God's sovereign hand gently nudging you back on to the path, guiding you back into his plan? Praise God that he won't let us wander too far. **My Steps May Be My Own, But I Can Never Walk Outside God's Sovereign Path**

Conclusion

The conclusion is simple. Human freedom and divine sovereignty exist in a complex, mysterious relationship. Though God ordains all of our choices—even choices that end up being thwarted because they do not match the results that He has ordained—we can never blame Him for our sin. Neither can we escape responsibility for our actions. We have misunderstood Scripture if we think our choices are the final determiner of the course of our lives, but we have also misunderstood it if we deny human freedom. **My Steps May Be My Own, But I Can Never Walk Outside God's Sovereign Path**