

State of the Union

Sovereign Grace Churches Pastors Conference 2025

Mark Prater

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My State of the Union this year is going to be a little bit different than previous years. Typically, I include a number of updates in my State of the Union, but this year I'm going to hold those for the Executive Director update. It's a little more extensive so you have a copy of it your packet.

Recently, I've been reflecting on how amazed and grateful I am that God would call me into ministry and into a specific family of churches known as Sovereign Grace. Any pastor can faithfully fulfill his ministry in a denomination that preaches Christ and advances the gospel, but I'm so grateful God called me into ministry here as a pastor for almost 30 years and that it's all been here with you men. I'm grateful for many reasons, but this one's near the top of the list for me: The privilege I feel and have in laboring alongside of each of you for the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a wonderful joy. It is a wonderful privilege that continues to affect me. You are an amazing group of pastors, leaders, and preachers. You are dear brothers in Christ to me and friends in the gospel. I count it a joy to serve alongside of you. It's you that I'm carrying on my heart as I deliver this State of the Union this morning, as we look together to our future in Sovereign Grace.

The title of this State of the Union is *A Race to Run and a Race to Finish*, and we're going to start in Acts 20:22-24. As you know the context, Paul is in Miletus and having this conversation with the Ephesian elders when he says to them in verse 22, "And now behold, I'm going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit not knowing what will happen to me there except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me, but I do not account my life of any value, nor as precious to myself if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." 2 Timothy 4:6-8, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing." May God bless the preaching of His Word.

Distance running Coach, Caitlin Tucci, makes this observation about those that start and finish a long-distance race. She says, "There are no shortcuts in distant running. Progress doesn't come from one single great run or one hard training week. It comes from stacking solid days, weeks, and months of effort over time." The runners who improve aren't necessarily the fastest or the strongest, they're the ones who stick with it. The key to running and finishing a long race is not talent or perfect workouts. It's showing up day after day and being faithful. I share that because that is the picture that emerges from both Acts 20 and 2 Timothy chapter 4. In Acts 20, there is a

race before Paul, a long race that he is called to run by faithfully proclaiming the gospel of the grace of God. He's called to do that day after day. He's showing up day after day.

In 2 Timothy 4, there is a race that is almost finished, and Paul has kept the faith he says. Meaning, that he has faithfully proclaimed the gospel for all his ministry. Philip Towner makes this observation, "The perfect tense of the verb in 2 Timothy 4:7 emphasizes an activity begun in the past, still holds true in the present. To the degree that faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel is in mind, the implication is that Paul has fully discharged his obligation with respect to the gospel." Acts 20 and 2 Timothy 4 gives us one of those rare portraits in scripture of a race that was started, ran, and finished faithfully. I share that portrait from scripture because I want to talk about the race that is before us, brothers, that we are called to run. Then I want to talk about finishing that race well.

Let's talk first about this race that lies before us as a family of churches that we are called to run. To faithfully run this race, we must be the kind of pastors all drawn from Acts 20:22-24.

First, we must be pastors who are constrained by the spirit. Look again at verse 22 with me, "And now behold, I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the spirit not knowing what will happen to me there." Paul was constrained by and compelled by the Spirit of God to go to Jerusalem. Paul didn't decide on his own that he would go to Jerusalem. Rather, the Spirit of God imposed upon him this divine compulsion to visit Jerusalem again. If you study Paul's letters, as you guys have, note that he uses the word spirit 153 times referring to the Holy Spirit, to the Spirit of God, and to the Spirit of the Lord. A theology of the Holy Spirit was prominent, not just in Paul's letters, it was prominent in his life and ministry as well. The race that God had called Paul to run is a Spirit directed, Spirit empowered race. Brothers, the race that is set before us, the race that we are called to run; we need the Spirit. We need to be Spirit filled, Spirit led, and Spirit empowered men.

Our pneumatology in our Statement of Faith must inform and function in our pastoral theology so that we are pastors who are filled with, directed, and empowered by the Spirit of God. Here's why we need the Spirit. It's very simple. We're not that good. I'm not that good and you are not that good. That's just the reality. On our own, apart from the Spirit's help and apart from the Spirit's power, we will definitely veer off course, and we will not run our race faithful. But with the Spirit and a felt dependence upon the Spirit of God, the Spirit will compel us and lead us in a direction that He wants, and He will empower our race and the outcome of our race in a way that only God gets all the glory. I think it's easy to illustrate. Who would have thought that Sovereign Grace would plant churches in Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, the Philippines, Mexico, Italy, and North Manchester, Indiana.

Who would ever have thought we would do that, right? We're just not that good. Who would ever have thought that we would have partner churches in India? In the Mindanao region of the Philippines? We didn't even know where the Mindanao region was of the Philippines. We've got partner churches there. Brazil, Emerson is here, Columbia and Costa Rica. Brothers, the leadership team is not that good. I'm not that good. You are not that good. The only reason we are becoming a global family of churches is because this is the Lord's doing as being led by the Spirit of God. With all that God is doing in Sovereign Grace, the leadership team and I, we want to focus on something; we want to focus on building wisely now without exclusively focusing on expansion. That doesn't mean we won't expand, but we want to make sure that what we've got, we're building well, so that it will endure over time. We will need the Spirit's help, and we will need the Spirit's power to do so.

Let me just give you one example to illustrate what we have been working on as a leadership team. Over the last year and a half, we have been working on a global pastor's college certification plan. That was presented to and affirmed by the Executive Committee at their retreat in August and is now a part of our Sovereign Grace policy. We want to encourage theological training centers throughout the world, but if one of those theological training centers wants to call itself a pastor's college, a Sovereign Grace Pastor's College, then there are certain criteria that they need to meet to ensure theological consistency and theological fidelity. You're going to hear more about this from Dave Taylor today after the State of the Union, but here's what I want you to understand. We need the Spirit's help. We need the Spirit's power to steward this expansion that God has miraculously and surprisingly given us.

Let me just mention one other thing under this point. It seems that God is doing some kind of wonderful work on college campuses right now and in college age kids. I heard two or three hundred were at a recent Volunteers for Christ meeting. That's one of your biggest they've ever had. We've seen the same thing at a small college near us at West Chester University. I think the first meeting there on campus was around 200 college kids. We talked to Dave Taylor and he's seeing the same thing in Sydney, Australia. We're stepping back as a Leadership Team and saying, "The Lord seems to be doing something in that generation." Maybe you've noticed it as well. That's Spirit born, right? We can't do that. That's Spirit directed. So, let's do this. Let's go share the gospel with that generation and see them come to Christ and be potentially members of Sovereign Grace Churches.

Number two, to run our race faithfully, we need to be pastors who anticipate suffering. See that in verse 23? Let's read it again. "Accept that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." Note the Holy Spirit not only compels Paul to go to Jerusalem again, but he also reveals to him that in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await him. I believe it's kind of God to tell Paul beforehand that he will suffer afflictions. If he's not aware of that, he could lose heart and he could stop running his race. This verse is in our Bibles for all Christians, but I believe it's specifically for pastors. We must anticipate suffering in pastoral ministry and not be surprised by it. If we are, we could lose heart, and we can get off course, and we could want to quit. Like Paul, we don't need to be certain where our road in ministry will take us. We don't need to know specifically how we will suffer, but to be faithful to run the race that God has given us, we must have an adequate pastoral theology that includes suffering. You men know this so well in its various forms, whether that's criticisms, false accusations, departures, or various forms of persecution. May our pastoral theology include a robust pneumatology, for Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:8 that God will give us power through the Spirit to endure suffering for the gospel. Let us anticipate it and let us be aware of our dependence upon the spirit to walk through it well so that we will continue to preach the gospel. Brothers, we must continue to do this. We must continue to faithfully preach God's word because to do that we will remain a theologically faithful family of churches. That is the most important thing we do in building theologically faithful churches. If you continue to preach God's Word and you call them to obey it, actually live it out, you will suffer.

Martin Luther says, "Those who are in the teaching office should teach with the greatest faithfulness and expect no other remuneration than to be killed by the world, trampled underfoot, and despised by their own. Teach faithfully and do expect not glory, but dishonor and contempt." Now you might be thinking, "Luther's using hyperbole here." If you think about how God used him in the context, he used him to bring about the reformation, I don't think this is hyperbole. I think this is reality for Luther, right? It seems that God gave Luther power through the spirit to

endure suffering because he finished faithfully. He preached his last sermon from his deathbed; that salvation is from God alone and is only through the work of His Son alone. That was his last sermon on his deathbed. May that be our last sermon from each of our deathbeds. To continue to build theologically strong sound churches, we must anticipate suffering and be dependent upon the spirit's power to endure it so that we will run the race faithfully. As we seek to build, with the Spirit's help, theologically sound churches, the leadership team and I have theological categories that we want us as a family of churches to pay attention to. I'm just going to mention three very briefly.

First, our complementarian convictions because there are biblical anthropological foundations that complementarianism springs from and they're wonderful gospel connections to our complementarian convictions. This is a hill to die on for Sovereign Grace Churches. Let's be clear about that. I am happy to report that Josh Blount has just written a book on our complementarian convictions that will be published in our perspective series and should be out next year. This will be another tool that you can take out of your toolbox to help your churches not just see but embrace and enjoy the beauty of complementarianism. Complementarian is a beautiful thing that God has given us.

Second, biblical counseling. As you know, there is an integrationist trend in some biblical counseling circles that drifts into the therapeutic and we must protect our churches from that drift. We must have confidence brothers in God's word not only to preach God's word; to put counsel our people with God's word and we must not compromise that if we're truly going to serve our people. I could say a whole lot more about this, but Josh Blount is going to preach on this Thursday morning. You're going to love this sermon, so I will seed that over to Josh.

Third, gender ideology. The confusion over gender and sexuality in our culture that exists does affect some members of our churches and specifically younger members of our churches. I've talked to more Sovereign Grace pastors in the last year who are saying, "I'm now counseling high school and college age kids who are wrestling with their gender identity." I've heard that more than I ever have in ministry. It's something that we're facing and that's biblical anthropology right there that we've got to remain faithful to. It's why I've been sending you Josh Blount's reviews of gender books because I just want to equip you in any way I can so that you can continue to counsel well and to help folks just embrace the beauty of how God's made them. Josh, thank you for serving us that way. Those are so helpful. I think a very crucial part of building theologically sound, faithful churches, is making sure that we don't rush men through the ordination process. If we rush men through ordination because we feel the pressure to meet practical and urgent needs in the church or to have a more robust plurality, we will short circuit the patient preparation necessary to continue to build theologically faithful churches.

Let's be honest, guys can pass ordination exams and that's a good thing. They're good exams, that's a good thing. I'm not critiquing them. But men who have consistent Christ-like character, who possess theological integrity over time, who have pastoral wisdom, and are biblically faithful; that takes time and it takes intentionality. Here's what we've been doing as a Leadership Team; over the last year and a half we've been working with the regional leaders to create a pastoral development course. You received one of those in your packet I believe, and you're going to hear more about that from John Payne and Jeff Purswell after the State of the Union. I believe this is really important. I think this course is something that is a tool that you can use. It's meant to assist you in developing men for pastoral ministry, especially those who can't go to the pastor's college. I think it's also important to your region and it's also important to our

denomination because once you ordain a guy, he has BCO given authority in your region and in our denomination as one who is responsible to theological faithfulness over time. We've got to make sure we're ordaining men that can be theologically faithful. Again, you'll hear more about that later.

The third way that we can finish this race faithfully is to be pastors who rid ourselves of ourselves. Verse 24, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Paul is saying that my ministry will only have value if I forget myself and focus on that continuing proclamation of the gospel regardless of what that costs me. Brothers, to run our race faithfully, I believe we must rid ourselves of ourselves. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and his book on the Sermon on the Mount, has a chapter entitled Denying Self and Following Christ. This is what he says: "The whole trouble in life is ultimately this concern about self. That is something we must rid ourselves of entirely. We must rid ourselves of this constant tendency to be watching the interests of self." He's preaching to me, and he may be preaching to you.

You men know that pastoral ministry is hard. It's challenging at times. We're criticized for leadership decisions. We hear from people what's wrong with the church. You counsel someone for months, and maybe years, and they don't change. In those discouraging times, a pastor is vulnerable to focus on self and to question his call and to wonder if he's even effective at what he does. Criticism after criticism can cause any of us to lose heart and quit running the race. I've quit a few times in my mind. Have you? Acts 20 speaks into those moments when we want to stop running the race and this is what Acts 20 says to us: Don't count your life of any value or as precious to yourself in that moment. Rid yourself of yourself and focus on finishing the ministry that the Lord Jesus has given each of you to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

For those of you that arrive here this week discouraged, weary, or maybe ready to give up. I understand. I think every man in this room understands. We understand, but this is my prayer for you: That you would, with the help of the Spirit, take your eyes off of yourself, and that you would look to Jesus, your great shepherd who wants to tend to your soul and care for you and give you the power of the Spirit to strengthen you and sustain you to keep running and to finish your course. I pray that you would leave Orlando saying, "My life has no value. My life is not precious to myself. Here's the only thing that matters: That I would faithfully continue to proclaim the gospel of the grace of God." May that happen this week in your life. May it happen in all of our lives. I believe ridding ourselves of ourselves is important for us to pastor and lead our churches well and it's important to the strength of our partnership in Sovereign Grace. Let me explain what I mean. While we have so many wonderful strengths, last year I said that one of the weaknesses I believe we have in our family of churches is this: We can be unwilling to have hard conversations. After I mentioned that last week and actually dedicated a podcast to it this year, so many of you came to me and emailed me and said, "Thank you for saying that. I needed to hear it." So, it did strike a nerve. We can all have difficulty. We all don't like having hard conversations, but to grow in our ability to do so, to have those hard conversations, we must rid ourselves of ourselves. That's what we must do. To have the hard conversation, we must take our eyes off ourselves and place them upon Jesus. Then speaking truth in love, we communicate what needs to be said, what's truthful and necessary, whether that's a person in your church, another pastor on your team, or someone in your region. Let's have hard conversations with the help of the Spirit.

Ridding ourselves of ourselves I believe is also to the strength of our partnership in Sovereign Grace. I think ridding ourselves of ourselves is necessary for pastors and pastoral teams to get counsel from outside of your local eldership. Whether that's your regional leader, other brothers in your region, other brothers in Sovereign Grace, or maybe a leadership team member or an executive committee member. Our polity does this. It rightly honors and affirms an eldership autonomy to govern itself locally, but our polity also affirms an eldership's interdependence on a wider ecclesiological body, and I am grateful for both. I know you men are grateful for both. Our conviction for our local polity must be as strong as our conviction for our extra local polity. That's what I want to bring before us because both are necessary for your church and your eldership to benefit.

We are elder led locally and we are elder led extra locally. Your church will benefit from both. Just knowing that your church is not isolated and alone, but connected to this broader family of churches, this broader like-minded group of churches and pastors, that's something wonderful God has given us. We must value it and let's never forget it. Let's embrace it and benefit from it. Historically, I think we benefited from getting extra local input more than what we do today. I think we've done that better historically than we're doing today. Local elderships can be slow to invite the input and council from regional leaders, or from those outside of their eldership, maybe other members in their region. Also, when extra local council is asked for, there can be a tendency to dismiss it a little too quickly without taking time to really consider it genuinely and understanding the wisdom of it. I don't want us to neglect the great benefit we have in our extra local polity. I want us to really value our extra local polity and to get input and value that. Again, resisting the tendency that I know I have and the tendency you could have towards independence. Rather, that we would truly embrace interdependence and benefit from it.

Regional leaders are a gift from the risen Christ to our family of churches. They are. Because they have years of experience with working pastoral teams and from that have years of wisdom that they are eager to share with you. Invite their input and ask for their input. If you disagree with their input, and you can, tell them why. Just have a hard conversation with them. You may have a very good reason why their input's not so good, but the point being is that we're having dialogue over it, right? Ridding ourselves of any tendency towards independence will help your church. I think it will help our gospel partnership to value and to benefit from this wonderful gift of interdependence that's in our polity. Regional leaders that are here, would you guys stand? Let's thank these guys for what they do in serving us. They are gifts from God. Thank you, guys. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

That's the race that's set before us. Now I want to talk a little bit about a race to faithfully finish in drawing from 2 Timothy 4:6-8. You probably know this because you've studied it. Acts 20 captures a portion of Paul's third missionary journey that was most likely between AD 53 and 58. 2 Timothy 4 was written between AD 64 and 65. In other words, Paul pens 2 Timothy about 10 years after this conversation he has with the Ephesians in myelitis. He's now 10 years longer in the ministry. He's now an older man and he says, "The time of my departure has come." Knowing that death is imminent, he assesses his ministry and he says this, "I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." Meaning that he has been faithful to the end to preach the gospel. But what is on Paul's mind as he finishes the race? You know this if you've studied 2 Timothy. What's on his mind is making a good leadership transition to Timothy so that Timothy can continue to preach the gospel long after Paul departs and goes to his eternal home. I believe Paul's example is a compelling one to us. 2 Timothy, really 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy are all

about preparing this young man to lead in gospel ministry after Paul was gone. A part of finishing well means you intentionally plan, lead through, and implement a leadership transition. DA Carson says this, "There is no absolute rule," and I think he's right about that. "But the rule of thumb is that the longer a person has stayed in one ministry and the more fruitful that person has been, the wiser it is for that pastor to help arrange the transition to a successor before bowing out." To step back from everything I've said so far, finishing well includes transitioning well because the gospel matters most.

It does. That's what matters most and I believe it's imperative for Christian leaders, all of you, to equip the next generation of leaders and at the appropriate time. Keep in mind the appropriate time, I'm not trying to rush anything. At the appropriate time, transition leadership to that young man so that the gospel can continue. Transitioning well is an area that I desire to lead by an example. Over the past two plus years, I've been having conversations with the Leadership Team and the Executive Committee about my transition, the timing of my transition, and executive director candidates to take my place. The Leadership Team and I, we've had so many good conversations, haven't we? Thank you, Jeff, Jon, Jared, Dave, Rich, and Tommy. Those have been sweet memories for me. I think they've built us actually closer together as a team. Because the Executive Committee has BCO responsibility to select the executive director candidate and present him to the council for a vote, the Executive Committee and I have discussed this for the last three years at their retreats. Talking about the timing of my transition and who should take my place. We did that in 2023, 2024, and 2025. After much prayer, many good conversations, and getting input from a lot of people, including Jill and our adult children, I believe it's time for me to transition out of the Executive Director role by the end of 2026. By the end of next year. Before I give you details, let's step back. I want you to understand how I view my transition. We're a young denomination; we're only 43 years old. But if you step back, you are going to be amazed at how good God has been to us. God gave us founders, one of them being CJ Mahaney, who help found Sovereign Grace and then he led it so well for three decades. I'm not a founder. I could not have done what CJ did. Over the last 12 years, I daily had an awareness I was standing on his shoulders. I came in during a time of trouble because nobody else wanted the job. That's quite frankly what it was. I remember the first couple of years, many of you guys, "I'm glad I don't get your job."

The Leadership Team and I, we tried to stabilize things and God sustained us. Now I believe that it's time, as we look into the future for Sovereign Grace, to be led by a man that has different gifts, different abilities, and different strengths that I have. Hasn't God been good to us? It's amazing to me. In making this decision, I want to do what's best for Sovereign Grace. I said that the day I started this and I want to finish that way. Do what's best for Sovereign Grace. I've been studying transitions. I can't find a lot of good Christian literature out there on it to be honest with you. But there's some good secular stuff here and there. One article I read says that a leadership transition has an oversized effect on an organization for its success or failure depending on how it's done. That kind of burdens you a little bit. I know you got to do it well. The Executive Committee, the Leadership Team, and I, we need God's grace. We need the Spirit's help. I feel this in terms of what I preached earlier. That we would lead through a pastorally caring, clearly communicated, faith building transition so that our churches can continue to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ for generations to come. That's my heart, that's the Leadership Team's heart, and that's the Executive Committee's heart. If God gives us grace to transition like that, we're keeping in step with God's heart. You know this to pass the gospel from one generation to the next. May

God receive all the glory because if we make this transition well, it'll be all by his grace and he deserves all the credit. For transitions to be done well, they take a bit of time.

What I want to do first is talk timeline, talk about who the executive director candidate is, and then talk a little bit about my future. In January, I asked for a meeting of the Executive Committee to communicate the timeline of my transition that we had discussed before in executive committee retreats. They were not surprised by that. The BCO gives them responsibility to choose an executive director candidate. This is what it says. The BCO doesn't tell them how to do that, and it shouldn't. The BCO shouldn't tell them how. For the last two years or so, they've been working on a process to choose an executive director candidate and it's our hope that that process will serve future executive committees as well. I wanted to inform them as early as possible so that they could work through their process with the hope of when they met this past August, just a few months ago, they could vote on an executive director candidate, which is being announced today.

Even though the announcement is today, the vote will not happen until next November 2026. The reason for that one-year gap between the announcement and the vote is we just want to lead through this well. We want to pastor people through it. We want to speak to any questions, hesitancy, or concerns that our churches might have. Then the vote happens in November 2026. It will actually be at our pastors and leaders conference and should that executive director candidate be confirmed by you, he will begin on January 1, 2027. That's the timeline. So, who's the next executive director candidate? I'm not going to tell you actually. I don't believe this is the best kept secret in Christendom anyway, so I think many of you probably already know, but the leadership team and I unanimously recommended to the executive committee that Jon Payne be our next executive director.

Yes, amen. Now the Executive Committee, that was just a recommendation. We don't make the decision. They do. They work through their process, and you'll hear more about that from Dave York today. They met in August to vote, and they unanimously voted as a committee to make Jon the executive director candidate. There was something special about that vote you should know. Our dear brother, my good friend, Ken Mellinger, Jared's dad, two weeks before he died, was able to get to the Executive Committee Retreat for an hour and these men arranged it for him to vote while he was there. I can see it in my mind. He was in his wheelchair, they asked for the vote, and Ken just raised his hand. It made it even more special because as you'll hear from Dave, Ken really initiated and led through this at an executive committee level so well.

Now without being presumptuous on the vote next November, I do want you to hear my full enthusiasm for Jon. I believe he has the character, the gifts, the abilities, and the intellect that we need starting now and into the future so that we can continue to preach the gospel. Jon is another gift from the risen Christ to our family of churches. I believe, the Leadership Team believes, and the Executive Committee believes, that he's the right man with the right gifts and the right strengths and abilities that I don't have that Sovereign Grace needs so that we can continue to faithfully run our race. Jon has a strong intelligent wife in Lory, who is very supportive of this. Jill and I were in Austin in January. We spent extended time with Jon and Lory, and we flew home saying that woman is for that man.

In fact, if we don't have Lory, we don't want Jon. That's what Jill and I were saying. She's very supportive. We also stayed through Sunday and Jon, you've done such a great job of building what is clearly a solid Sovereign Grace gospel centered church. It is a happy place at Redemption Hill and will provide the kind of local church base that he needs as Executive

Director. God has also been kind to provide Bruce Chick. That is a whole Spirit-led story that's crazy. Bruce, it was a year and a half or two years ago that you and I had a conversation where you came to me in tears saying, "Mark, I've had this thought that I'm supposed to resign as senior pastor in Roanoke and move to Austin to serve Jon Payne and I don't know what to do with that. I just go off the phone with Hien and she's like, let's do it."

We're not that good. That's sort of my point. This is a Spirit-led endeavor for Bruce, who has 25 years of ministry experience, to resign. Now Spencer Vaughn is right here, stepped in to take his place as Senior Pastor, who'd been there for decades. The transition went so well. Thank you, Spencer. This wouldn't be happening without you, and it wouldn't be happening without you, Bruce. Because Ken Mellinger had to move back to Pennsylvania for health reasons before he passed, Bruce is just another gift from God. Now Jon has the pastoral team that he needs. Reese Prater who grew up in the church, is a pastoral intern there. He's in the PC this year. He'll return to Redemption Hill. Another Prater in Sovereign Grace gives me a lot of hope by the way. Then Jason Nolte has been a faithful pastor there as a pastoral resident. So, Jon has the team that he needs, and we thank God for that. The main thing I want you to hear is that Jon has my full enthusiastic support and I'm genuinely excited. I mean that. I am genuinely excited about benefiting from his leadership. I believe we all will.

What about my future? I told Jill, I said, "I'm moving to Hawaii, you coming?" She said, "There are no grandkids there. I'm not going with you." So that's not what I'm doing. I was humbled that Jon and the Leadership Team approached me about remaining on the Leadership Team after my transition for a period of time so I could serve him, the Leadership Team, and all of you. Honestly guys, I had to think through that. Not because of Jon and not because of the men on this Leadership Team. I just know the pride in my heart. Can I be on a team I once led? Jon's going to do things differently and I want him to. But how am I going to do in that moment? I'm not that godly.

So that's why I wrestle with it. I believe the Lord told me, "It's not about you, it's about serving, Mark." That affected me and convicted me so I'm going to remain on. Jon and I have a good friendship and a good working relationship, and I really am eager to serve him. So, what will I be doing? If you know specifically what Jon and I do, we're essentially flipping roles is what we're doing. I will lead the US regional leaders, which will be a joy. Sorry guys for the step down in getting me. Jon's done that so well. I'll take ministry operations. That's basically operational leadership that I gave to Jon, a couple of years ago or so. I'll take that back. I'll keep donor development and fundraising. I have that currently. I'll keep doing that. I'll do strategic leadership team representative travel in the US and globally. Here's why. Jon is a senior pastor of a growing church. All the time I was Executive Director, I was not a senior pastor. Jared is our senior pastor at Covenant Fellowship, and he leads us so well. Thank you to the Covenant Fellowship elders for allowing me to do this for 12 years now. That's a game changer. He's a senior pastor. Plus, he's got a young family. He can't travel like I've been able to travel in my season of life. So, what I can do is I can go and represent him and the leadership team and because I've been executive director, I'm a familiar face. I'll do that and then there's just leadership team participation in work. My hope and our hope is that I can serve Jon in this way so he can be Senior Pastor of Redemption Hill and Executive Director of Sovereign Grace. In doing all these things that I'm going to be doing after the transition, Erin Radano is going to continue to work for me or I wouldn't do it quite frankly because she makes it easy for me. We also hope by staying me staying on, that it will provide a bit of stability in the midst of the

transition as well. Before Dave York comes and speaks on behalf of the Executive Committee, and then Jon, you'll follow him after that, just a closing thought.

Even though I get to serve you 13 more months as the Executive Director, it doesn't seem appropriate to end this State of the Union without me communicating to you what a privilege it has been for me to lead you men over the last 12 years. I don't use that word privilege lightly. I recently told Jill that based on my limited gifting and abilities, I still don't understand why God put me in this role. That's not an attempt to be humble, that's just reality for me. I don't understand. Here's what I do know. Serving you men over the past 12 years has been one of the greatest joys and one of the greatest privileges that God has given me. It's a privilege I don't deserve because I really do believe you are the best pastors on the planet.

I believe transitions are to be joyful events. They're to be joyful events because you can rejoice in the fact that God has given us young men. In this case, Jon, who will continue to lead us and younger men in your churches, who will continue to be faithful to preach the gospel. Let us rejoice in that, right? I believe transitions are to be joyful because as Paul mentions here in 2 Timothy 4:8, we can look forward to that eternal reward, the crown of righteousness that Christ will place on our head. That's a joyful thought, isn't it? It's why transition should be joyful. It's a joyful thing for me to make this announcement to you because whether I'm the Executive Director of Sovereign Grace or not, whether I'm on the Leadership Team or not, none of that matters. I'm going to be right here with you; right here with you laboring alongside of you as we faithfully advance the gospel of Jesus Christ together. Let us do it all for his glory alone. Amen. Dave, why don't you come now.

Dave York:

In my Executive Committee report later, I'll spend some time bragging on Mark so that we can once again celebrate you. Mark, these 12 years have been a stunning success by the supernatural power of God, so we thank God for you. My name is Dave York. I am the chair of the Executive Committee, and I just want to be honest with you that this is a bit of a bittersweet moment for me. Not because I'm not thrilled about what God is doing, but because I know that our brother Ken Mellinger, who was the Executive Committee chairman until this past summer, would've loved to be standing here to make this transition. I will say he's enjoying himself much more now and so he would not want to come back like Lazarus.

When I present my Executive Committee report later, I will take a moment to honor Ken, but I would like to make note that since 2022, Ken has been preparing the Executive Committee and Sovereign Grace for this moment in our history. In Ken's report to the Council of Elders in 2022, here's what he said. "We are beginning to take a long look at life beyond Mark Prater. Here's how we're doing that. We informed Mark that he has earned the right to serve as long as he is willing and able and as long as Jill approves. That said, Mark can't serve forever. It so happens that Mark turns 65 this coming July and Sovereign Grace has a retirement policy that kicks in at 65 with a yearly evaluation. No action is anticipated anytime soon, but it is on our radar and in our discussions." Ken saw this day coming long before any of us ever did. At our Executive Committee Retreat in August of 2024, Ken's foresight once again led the way by forming a subcommittee to vet an Executive Director candidate.

He made up that committee of Brian Chesmore, Steve Teter, and me. In January 2025, Mark then informed the Executive Committee of his desire to have Jon Payne vetted for the role, which began to launch our committee into action. The entire Executive Committee then formulated key

questions for Jon, his wife, Lory, members of Jon's local team, members of Mark's local team, as well as Mark's wife, Jill. We wanted to get a full 360-degree view of how everyone viewed not only Jon's candidacy, but also Mark stepping back from the Executive Director role. Here's what we found: In our March meeting with Jon and Lory Payne, we noticed a wife who is incredibly secure, confident, and willing to share her heart with Jon. It was obvious from that discussion that Lory was full of faith for this and she was incredibly grateful for Bruce and Hein Chick's sacrificial move to Round Rock, which just recently happened in the last couple months.

She mentioned how she saw Jon as uniquely gifted for this role. Because Ken served at Redemption Hill with Jon, we asked Ken about the local team's perspective of Jon, and they heartily approved of Jon's candidacy. Ken said that Jon is pastorally gifted, a strong communicator, and a man who has a high capacity to handle many things with excellence. He said that Jon's extra local responsibilities did not detract from his local responsibilities. Our subcommittee's time with Jon proved this to be true. We could feel Jon's heart for his local church and his unique perspective about all things Sovereign Grace. Due to Jon's extensive leadership experience in Sovereign Grace; he's been a church planter, a pastor, a regional leader, the executive committee chairman, a leadership team member, and director of church development. He has a broad perspective of all things that go on within our denomination. This is more than being born in a Sovereign Grace nursery and originally wearing a People of Destiny fan club shirt.

Rather, like many pastors in Sovereign Grace, Jon is concerned that we don't expand too quickly, that we have strong complementarian convictions, that we grow in our appreciation of the Spirit's work among us, and that our church members grow more deeply rooted in our denomination, not just our leaders. These are things that all resonated deeply with the Executive Committee. The last part of our vetting process with Jon was to invite him into a Zoom call on June 4th with the full committee. This allowed all members of the committee to review our notes and ask any clarifying questions. This also allowed Jon to ask questions regarding his leadership style with our Executive Committee and how comfortable we would be as a committee about the differences between he and Mark. During that call, Jon was able to express his own weaknesses honestly, and what he sees as limitations due to his time and local responsibilities.

We noted as Mark did just a moment ago that as a Senior Pastor, Jon will lead Sovereign Grace differently from Mark. We also noted that because of Mark's willingness to stay on the Leadership Team, this will help further the transition and create more stability. After that Zoom call, we noticed that Jon has had a long runway into leadership into this role and many on the committee thought that for some time Jon has been the next leader for Sovereign Grace. Furthermore, for those of us like myself who didn't know Jon very well, it was noted from a variety of us that this vetting process helped us see that Jon was a leader who desired to build upon the foundation laid by the founding generation, that he's a man willing to have hard conversations, and he's a man that we believe we could support and fully rally behind.

The entire process has been faith building and clarifying for all of us. We agreed to pray over his candidacy and make our final decision about his candidacy at our Executive Committee Retreat in August. One of the joys of that retreat in August was making this decision. As many of you know that Mark noted, Ken was in his final days but was able to attend for a short while. I think all of us on the EC would say that was the highlight of the retreat, that Ken got to be with us for a few hours. It wasn't very long, but we had purposely put this vote off until Ken could be in the

room with us and we asked Ken to join us in the vote. As Mark said, and I have a picture of the moment of Ken raising his hand, our vote was unanimous.

So, brothers of Sovereign Grace, it is with great joy that the Executive Committee of Sovereign Grace per our responsibilities laid out in the Book of Church Order, submits to you Jon Payne as our candidate for Sovereign Grace Executive Director. It seems good to us and the Holy Spirit to do this. We believe this because in Sovereign Grace, there's currently no one like Jon. The heart, the experience, and passion for our churches. He has local, regional, and denominational leadership experience, possesses a strong leadership gift, has exceptional theological aptitude and discernment, and doesn't shy away from hard conversations. He gets things done, is broadly respected, and he has a wonderful family. Over the next year, this will allow you as pastors in Sovereign Grace to consider Jon, to get to know him and pray about this decision. At our November 2026 Pastors and Leaders Conference, we will vote as a COE on Jon becoming the Executive Director, effective January 1st, 2027.

Jon Payne:

I want to begin and I'm just going to share briefly guys; all that I'm going to say is going to be focused on gratefulness to the Lord. I want to begin by just expressing gratefulness to the Lord for Mark. Mark, the Lord has been so kind to us in you. It is an understatement to say that you stepped in during a time of difficulty. You stepped in at a time when only a man full of courage, faith, patience, and trust in the Lord, and prayerfulness, a listening ear, and a firm heart could have led Sovereign Grace. Such a man was given to us in you. It's not just that no one else wanted the job and the joke does get old eventually Mark.

It's that no one else should have done the job. I am personally, and I know I speak for all the brothers here; we are profoundly grateful to God for you. What I want to add to all of that that could have been said without this transition, is your faith and humility to initiate a transition when you're at the height of your stature, of your faithfulness, and of your effectiveness in Sovereign Grace is yet another example of your love for Sovereign Grace, your desire to build into the future, and your desire to model. I've heard you say multiple times, "I want to model how an older generation should transition to a younger generation." I can't imagine a better model than you. I know I feel, and I know the other young men on the team and other young men in Sovereign Grace feel nothing but your support, encouragement, helpful critique, exhortation, and modeling. You are a gift to us. If every young man in ministry could follow you in ministry, we would have a delightful course for our future. So let me just begin that way. We thank God for you. Amen. Let's thank God for Mark.

Be prepared, brothers, because we'll obviously have other moments to thank Mark. In those moments and over this year, I trust that our gratefulness will be overwhelming to him. Another group I want to thank is the Leadership Team and the Executive Committee. My brothers on the Leadership Team, you know and we know what Mark said is true. We're not that good. But to be around a bunch of guys like you who are all not that good, except for Jeff is pretty good. The rest of us are not that good. It's something we don't deserve; to work together for men like this. We don't deserve to do it. And yet what a gift to do it with you. What a gift to be in a front row seat for these guys; for their faithfulness, their love for their churches, their diligence, their weathering of suffering, their care, and their preaching. To get to be on that seat with you men, and Dave, Rich, and Tommy; what a gift. Thank you for the privilege of laboring with you. To the Executive Committee: I agree with Dave. I am rejoicing with Ken that he is not here, truly,

but I'm also grateful for him. For his faith and for his desire. Ken said to me multiple times, "I want to live long enough to experience the transition to the next generation of Sovereign Grace." I know he would've wished a little bit longer, but in the providence of God, his ability to be at that retreat and peer into the future was a gift to him. It was a gift to me. I'm so grateful for his faith. I'm also grateful for Dave. Dave, your willingness to step in to that role and the members of the Executive Committee; I know many of whom are here. Thank you for your thoroughness, your care, your watchfulness over my family, for your care for Jill. It is just a typically Sovereign Grace process that they've crafted and that will serve us into the future. We're not just looking for positions to be filled, we're looking for families to be cared for, churches to be cared for. That was just in evidence with those men and the kind of questions that they're asking. I'm so grateful for that and it just reminds me of why I love being in Sovereign Grace. The last group I want to thank is you men. I've been in Sovereign Grace for 34 years now. It is a privilege to be pastored by Sovereign Grace pastors. Most of my life I've been pastored by Sovereign Grace pastors. That is a privilege. To hear your sermons and receive your counsel; to receive your gracious, but godly care, is a privilege. To get to watch your leadership, care, endurance, and faith is a privilege that all of us count and hold very dear. You are a treasure to us and we thank God for you. May the Lord do what the founding generation prayed. May he establish the work of our hands for his glory and his steadfast love and faithfulness. Amen. Thank you, brothers.

Mark Prater:

There is only one way to end this State of the Union and that's to give glory to God. So, I asked Devon to have a song prepared for us because what has happened in Sovereign Grace and what this transition represents is His faithfulness to us. We're called to be faithful in the race He's given us, but He's the one who has been faithful to give us a family of churches to run that race in. We are going to sing and let's give glory to God and then we'll take a break. Devon, come and lead us.