

September 2, 2007
 The Absolute Power and Unthwartable Plans of God
 Isaiah 46:5-10 / Daniel 4:28-37 / Job 42:1-6

For nearly 35 chapters Job had asked: "What's going on Lord? What did I do? Why has all this happened?" Words all of us have probably asked or pondered at one time or another.

Havoc and chaos fell on Job and his family seemingly out of nowhere, and for no apparent reason whatsoever, making it seem to him like God was either angry at him, had it out for him, hated him, was unfairly picking on him, or had lost control of the universe. That somehow evil or Satan had gotten the upper hand, won out over God's goodness, and thwarted God's plans and purposes (at least in regard to Job). "Plans to prosper and not harm, to give him hope and a future" as Jeremiah 29:11 puts it.

You see, it's easy to affirm that God's power over evil is Absolute, and His plans unthwartable when the "divine hedge" that God places around us to keep Satan from buffeting us more than he does is erect and solid and firmly in place (v. 1:10).

Yet Job continues to declare the absolute power and sovereign rule of God over everything even when God removes the hedge He had placed around him all his days up until that point (which is why Job stands as a stark contrast to most of us).

We all gladly acknowledge God is in control when things are, or appear to be going our way, but tend to back off from making such declarations when things turn sour. Job did not.

After the first set of disasters strike — after he lost everything — his great fortune, his herds, his servants, his flocks, and all 10 children (and possibly some grandchildren) — we read: "Job fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." (1:20-21)

And what is that, except a very obvious affirmation of Job's inner conviction that God was sovereign over EVERYTHING — the good things that happen as well as the bad. God, says Job, is the one that gives. He is sovereign in the bestowal of all the good things we receive. It is He who sovereignly distributes the divine blessings of grace, mercy, forgiveness, healing, protection, material prosperity, health and earthly wealth — life and breath and everything else. Job, in keeping with all the other Scriptural authors rightly understood that.

But he also knew and declared with equal clarity, that it was also the LORD who also “takes away.” Something we are a little more hesitant to say. Yet as Job goes on to point out, God is sovereign over the removal of those blessings as well. That is, God is sovereign over the bad things that happen as well. Because as Job was well aware, the way God chose in his case to “take away,” was by permitting Satan to stir up evil, or the criminal activity Sabeen marauders, Chaldean raiding parties and even a mighty wind storm that blew in from the desert and destroyed the house in which his children were feasting.

You see, Job understood that God is sovereign over all, even such things as natural disasters, wars, droughts, famines, economic recessions, depressions and so forth. And in declaring what he did he was merely affirming what God Himself said in Isaiah 45:5-7, where we read:

“I am the Lord and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I the LORD do all these things.”

That is, I the Lord am sovereign over all of it — the good and bad alike. As much as we don’t tend to like it, or even speak in those terms any more, it is true nonetheless. Such things don’t happen unless God permits them.

In that sense Job was more biblical and more theologically astute and consistent than many modern day saints or contemporary theologians who affirm God’s sovereignty when good things happen, but distance themselves, and even deny any sovereign involvement of God whatsoever when bad things happen.

Erwin Lutzer pointed that out (as I’ve mentioned before) when he spoke of being in California when an earthquake hit (I believe he said early in the morning around 5 am). Almost immediately, he noted, Christian pastors got on the radio to assure people that God had NOTHING TO DO WITH THE EARTHQUAKE. It was a purely geological event. The mere shifting of fault lines. A totally natural phenomena that God had nothing to do with!

But as he went on to note, he ended up attending the church of one of those very pastors that Sunday. And the man who had been so quick to assure people on the radio that God had nothing at all to do with that earthquake prayed and said something to the effect of: “We thank you, Lord, that the earthquake happened at 5 am, when the roads were empty, and loss of life was kept to a minimum.”

But as Lutzer pointed out, you can’t have it both ways! Either God had absolutely nothing to do with the earthquake and therefore deserves no thanks, or He did and deserves our praise.

But you can't thank Him for "perfectly timing" an earthquake He had nothing to do with!!! Yet it happens all the time! And the sad part is that very few people even notice such a blatant inconsistency and theological contradiction.

In that sense little has changed since A. W. Pink wrote nearly 60+ years ago:

"The "god" of the 20th century" (and let me add the 21st century as well) "no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle (flame) the glory of the midday sun. The "god" who is now talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday School, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most so-called Bible Conferences is the figment of human imagination...A "god" whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated (whose plans are thwarted), and whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits nothing but contempt."

Yet Job doesn't simply affirm God's sovereignty over both good and bad once. He does the same thing again when disaster strikes a second time in the form of "painful sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet" (Job 2:7-8). His wife encourages him to "curse God and die" (or essentially commit suicide), and what is his response? "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble (evil or disaster)" (v. 10).

That is, shall we accept that God is sovereign over the good and not the bad things? If they are both the result of God's sovereign oversight over His creation, and He being infinitely wise allows or ordains BOTH, shall we accept the one as being from Him and not the other?

Yet, we as human beings have such a hard time "accepting" the fact that God ordains or permits evil, trouble, or disaster, that we've developed theories and even entire theological systems that are designed to disassociate Him from such things altogether. Something Job, wise as he was, refused to do.

In fact, as we saw last week, God's answer to Job in chapter 41 was very clear: *Satan, the dragon, or the devil, like all the other created beings He listed from chapter 38-40, was subject to God. And thus, although God COULD (right now), and eventually WILL (one day in the future) crush and destroy Satan completely — He has chosen (for reason's known only to Him) that for this present age Satan will be allowed to continue stirring up sin, evil, havoc and chaos. (And last week we considered some of the possible reasons why God would allow him to continue doing so.)*

We also saw last week in chapter 41 verse 11, God “owns” Satan and controls his every move, limiting and restricting the extent to which he can stir up sin, evil or chaos. He may be “the prince of the power of the air” but the KING who rules over the prince determines the extent to which he can do anything as Job 1-2 makes so undeniably clear. Satan is allowed to rule in this world, but he can only rule to the extent God permits! He’s like a dog on God’s leash! He can go only so far before God yanks on the collar and says, “No further!”

That’s why Martin Luther could say, “The Devil is God’s Devil.” God owns him! God rules over him! God dictates what he can do and cannot do! God permits him to do some things, and forbids him from doing other things.

“How much power does the devil have?” asks Erwin Lutzer. “The devil has exactly as much power as God lets him have, and not one mite more... he cannot act without God’s express permission; he can neither tempt, coerce, demonize, nor make so much as a single plan without the consent and approval of God... Satan is not free to wreak havoc on people at will... Satan can only touch God’s children with God’s approval... He has to receive God’s permission before he can carry it out.”

And I know that for many that doesn’t seem to sit too well with them! I’m not going to fill a church in this day and age by declaring the fact that God **COULD** (being Almighty) crush Satan right now, but **CHOOSES NOT TO**...

The fact that God **COULD** (right now) bind Satan and stop him from wreaking any havoc of chaos, but **INSTEAD** gives him permission to do so (as in Job’s case, or Saul’s case, or Peter’s case, or even in our case), even dictating the extent to which he can or cannot instigate evil, injustice and suffering. It just doesn’t tend to sit well in the hearts and minds of most people — though that is exactly what this book demonstrates and affirms from beginning to end.

Most people (even most Christian people) I’ve spoken with would prefer to think (along with Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book “Why Bad Things Happen To Good People”) that God would like to stop all evil but can’t, foiled as He is by His own limitations and commitment not to interfere with our freedom or autonomy.

Most people I know prefer to believe God has the desire to stop such things, and would if He could, or if He had the power to do so, but He doesn’t and can’t because although He would like to, He doesn’t have the power or ability to do. (An idea, by the way, that God has just spent the last 4 chapters obliterating!)

That is what most people believe. It fits more accurately with their perception of what God is like, and the popularity of Kushner's book, and others like it, tends to support that that is what people think — or want to believe.

Yet today, what I'd like to do is use the opportunity this text affords us to share how knowing God is sovereign and affirming it (like Job does), can actually comfort, help, strengthen, uphold and encourage the believer. Because that's what it's meant to do!

The intensity of Job's sufferings may have led him for a while (toward the middle of the book) to lose sight of God's absolute power and the unthwartable nature of His plans. But regardless of how much that may have happened, Job here comes back to his senses, repents and affirms with even greater conviction than at first that God is indeed sovereign — even over Satan and the bad things Satan had brought his way.

For God to be sovereign *He must be Sovereign over ALL or He is not Sovereign at all!*

So **FIRST**, let's consider the fact that Job, after somehow letting his pain and pride persuade him otherwise, is brought back to affirm his original and correct perspective with even greater conviction. That which he initially assented to and affirmed in the beginning (and apparently lost sight of for a while due to his immense suffering) he once again declares as the main lesson he learned from his entire trial and God's lengthy rebuke — "That God can do all things, and no plan of His can be thwarted" — not even by Satan — the most powerful of all created beings.

In fact, we could even go as far as to say that his reaffirmation of God's sovereignty over all things in some senses a sign of the restoration of Job's "sanity" (if by "sanity" we mean a return to the right way of thinking).

Take the story of Nebuchadnezzar from our reading in Daniel as one example. There in chap. 1 we read, "The Lord delivered Jehoakim, king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple" (1:2).

Seven verses later we read: "Now God caused the officials to show favor and sympathy to Daniel..." affirming what we've seen here in Job — that God was sovereign over the BAD (that is, the defeat of Judah and the looting of the temple (1:1), and also over the GOOD (that is, inclining the officials in Nebuchadnezzar's court to be favorably inclined toward Daniel (1:9).

It's a reminder of what we read in **Prov. 16:9**:

"In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."

Or again in Prov. 21:1: *“The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.”*

But Nebuchadnezzar either doesn’t believe, or doesn’t want to believe God is sovereign over all. He doesn’t believe it is God that has given him the victories he has won, and God who has granted him the greatness he has achieved.

He thinks he has done it autonomously, and totally independent from God sovereignly willing it to be! He thinks he is the sole cause of his own greatness — which is nothing more than a denial of the truth God had already declared and in itself an expression of insanity (or wrong, warped or twisted thinking).

So what does God say to Nebuchadnezzar (4:25): “You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven (living in the open fields at night). Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to whomever He pleases.”

But Nebuchadnezzar refuses to admit that truth. He looks out over the great city of Babylon and says: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my name?”

And immediately comes a voice from heaven saying: “Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will live with the animals and eat grass like the cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and He gives them to anyone He wishes.”

And it is not till the end of those “seven times” that Nebuchadnezzar raises his eyes to heaven, and has his sanity restored. And what’s the evidence of the fact that his sanity was restored?

He comes to acknowledge the fact that God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men, and declares: “His dominion is an eternal dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He please with the powers of heaven (including angels, demons and Satan himself) and the people’s of the earth.

NO ONE can hold back His hand or say to Him “What have you done?”

And as a result of simply affirming what’s true, not only was his sanity restored, but so also was the glory of his kingdom, which interestingly “became even greater than before” (4:36).

(So many people try to find dark, mysterious, hidden meanings in Daniel, when the whole point is God is sovereign—admit it and take comfort for the future from it!)

You see, as I mentioned to someone just the other day: Christianity never asks us to believe something that's not true, it merely asks you to affirm and believe what is true. Something sin and society and idolatry and pride of self has persuaded us not to accept or believe.

"The truth," said Jesus, "will set you free." And the "truth" God wanted Nebuchadnezzar to acknowledge (and Job as well) was that—He as Lord is sovereign over EVERYTHING — the powers of heaven and the people's of the earth — the good as well as the bad.

Do YOU believe it? Do you? Could it be that the things God has permitted in your life may actually be for the purpose of bringing you, like Job and Nebuchadnezzar to simply affirm or reaffirm that truth? A truth which when believed will help, comfort and strengthen you?

C. H. Spurgeon says the same:

"There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God's Sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that Sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought more earnestly to contend than the doctrine of...the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands—the Throne of God and His right to sit upon that Throne...We proclaim an enthroned God and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as He thinks (best), without consulting them in the matter...it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon His throne whom we trust."

Listen to the words A. W. Pink:

"Here then is a sure resting-place for the heart. Our lives are neither the product of blind fate nor the result of capricious chance, but every detail of them was ordained from all eternity, and is now ordered by the living and reigning God. Not a hair of our heads can be touched without His permission... What assurance, what strength, what comfort this should give the real Christian."

And likewise, Erwin Lutzer goes on to say:

"We must bear in mind that (Satan) does have frightful powers, but knowing that those powers can only be exercised under God's direction and pleasure give us hope. We must...be reminded of Satan's limitations if we are to fight against him in faith. The more secure we are in the knowledge that the devil is not capable of acting independently, the more faith will arise in our hearts that we can defeat him.... The lives of Christians are not in the hands of Satan but in the hands of the Lord. Satan is paralyzed, unable to touch us,

unless God gives the command. Satan, I am convinced, wants us to think of him differently. He wants us to believe that he has independent power. If that is our understanding, we are caught off guard, filled with fear that the enemy of our souls might be acting when God isn't watching... we might think, God has given Satan...powers that are...unsupervised."

Then **SECONDLY**, affirming the Sovereignty of God over EVERYTHING — both good and evil; the creation and animals and people and events and even Satan helps us in another way. It liberates us from the paralyzing fear that Satan is somehow going to win! That Satan or some demon will somehow capture our soul and hold it captive! That God isn't powerful enough to simply speak the word and liberate us from demonic possession or oppression.

It frees us from the very real dread many people have, that family curses cannot be broken; spiritual chains cannot be made to fall off, or that occult or ritualistic curses cannot be broken.

When I was in Honduras a missionary friend asked me if I would perform an "exorcism of sorts" on a 17 year old girl who went to his church. She had been cursed by her neighbor (a man in his 40's or 50's) who dabbled in the occult. She was pregnant, and was living in dread, not eating and losing weight and unable to sleep at night — afraid demonic powers which the man had invoked and said would "kill her baby" before it was born.

So I went to her house — a little wooden shack with a tin roof — to pray for her and over her. But first I asked her a few questions to perceive if she was a believer. And it didn't take long to realize she wasn't. In fact, it was one of the few times I've ever been able to visibly perceive the presence of a demonic entity merely by looking at her face.

And so I shared the gospel with her, part of which is an affirmation of the truth that God is sovereign over everything (including Satan, demons, and curses). Isaiah makes this clear when he says: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of them who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation and say to Zion: "Your God Reigns!" (Is. 52:7) That's a part of the Gospel so many people leave out! The Good News to people like her (who live in fear of satanic or demonic powers) is that, "Our God Reigns!" (In the NT it is spoken in terms of the kingdom, that is, the rule or reign of God)

God is in control! At His command evil must flee! No power can stand against Him! He reigns over them all! Every power in heaven and on earth must submit to Him—including Satan and all his hordes!

And that's part of the "Gospel" that SHE needed to know! Not simply that her sins could be forgiven, and she could be saved, but that God had power over Satan as well as the curse that man had placed upon her and her child (which he had told her couldn't be broken).

"*Crees eso?*" I said. ("Do you believe this?") "*Si,*" she said. ("I do.") And so I began to pray while the missionary translated, simply asking Jesus to break the curse and bind the evil one so that no harm would come to her or her child.

Now, unlike the instance with Ted, the only visible thing I saw as we prayed was the change in that girl's countenance — the sense of joy and confidence and hope that came over her as we prayed. And yes, she started to gain weight, sleep well again, and delivered a strong healthy baby. She was liberated from her fears of the demonic by the assurance that God is sovereign even over Satan!

In fact, not too long after that I had a Pentecostal minister who attended my church come to me and tell me he was going to leave, and go to another church, because although I believed the charismatic gifts function today, I didn't do exorcisms in the morning service.

"Quite the contrary," I said. "I do them every time I preach the gospel of the Kingdom—of God's sovereign rule over everything!" Demons flee and one's sanity is restored when they come to believe the Good News, or the Gospel that "Our God reigns!" That NO CREATED THING (including Satan himself) can resist or thwart God's omnipotent will!

To this day we remain friends, and he even invited me to speak on "Demolishing Strongholds" out of II Corinthians 10:4-5 to a conference of about 50 Pentecostal pastors.

Which brings me to my **LAST** point. Job's act of repentance. "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you," says Job. "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." Repent for what? Repent for a three things.

1.) For accusing God of being unjust. Something that can never be true!

2.) Repent for accusing God of being the one who was actually carrying out the afflictions he suffered. And this is important. God, as I mentioned before, **NEVER DOES EVIL**. He ordains it and uses it, but **He Himself NEVER CARRIES IT OUT.**

God was the ultimate cause of Job's suffering since He did ordain it (and everyone will affirm that in verse 11 of this chapter as we will see next week). But Satan was the immediate cause, since he was the one who actually carried out the afflictions which Job was mistakenly accusing God of doing (16:12-14; 19:7-12; etc. etc.)

And though some cry "Mere semantics!" because to them the difference seems so trivial, it's not! It's the difference between day and night! There's a world of difference between a God who uses evil (as we see God doing repeatedly in Scripture, and even did in ordaining the evil act of Jesus death on the cross) and a God actually carries out evil, and by so doing, thereby making Himself evil.

Job, by accusing God of actually doing the evil that befell him, had crossed the line, and was in some ways accusing God of "being" evil! Something he needed to repent of!

3.) And finally, Job needed to repent for losing his grip on the truth that God can do all things and that even Satan himself cannot thwart God's purposes! It is clear from his declaration here in verse 2 that somehow he must have allowed his pain and suffering to cause him to doubt or lose sight of that truth, which is why he feels the need to reaffirm it for all to hear.

He knows he must repent for allowing his suffering to persuade him that God must not be able to do all things, and that somehow Satan could possibly thwart God's plans — both of which are lies from the pit of hell!

Which brings it back to us.

Do any of us need to repent of the same things? Any of us ever accuse God of being unjust?

Have you ever accused the Sovereign God of actually being the one who was afflicting you, rather than holding to the truth that Satan was the one who was actually doing it?

Anyone here ever doubt or deny the truth of God's sovereignty over all men and nations and Satan?

Ever fall into the trap of allowing your pain to give rise to doubts which started to erode your faith in the Gospel truth that Our God Reigns!