

July 23, 2006

Man's Greatest Struggle—Affirming God's Sovereignty Even When Misfortune Strikes
Isaiah 14:24-27 / Isaiah 46:8-11 / Daniel 4:34-35 / Job 12:1-25

Last week, in Chapter 11, we heard Zophar tell Job that if he would just devote his heart to the LORD, and stretch out his hands to God in prayer, and let go of the sin that he was clinging to, and allow no evil to dwell in his tent — then he would have hope, and everything in his life would be wonderful, bright and rosy! He'd have nothing to fear, be safe from all ills, and many would want to be his friend!

Yet, Job's response to that suggestion (here in chapter 12) is just a little bit cynical! Because he HAS stretched out his hands to God in prayer (v. 4b), and he HAS let go of the sin he once clung to ("the sins of his youth" as he tells us in chapter 13 verse 26), and he HAS NOT been allowing evil to dwell in his tent. That was the most noted thing about Job — "he feared God and shunned evil" (Chap. 1, verses 1 and 8)!

Yet instead of experiencing protection from suffering, and liberation from fear, and a sense of happiness and well-being, and having everyone desire to be his friend (as Zophar promises) he is suffering in agony, living in darkness and fear, and has become, "a laughing-stock to his friends—though righteous and blameless" (v. 4b).

Yet such absurd suggestions—like the suggestion that good things always happen to godly people, and bad things only happen to those who are consciously and premeditatedly sinning—is the way many religious people think. Especially those who have never suffered.

That's what Job says in verse 5. *"Men at ease (men who aren't suffering) have contempt for misfortune as the fate of those whose feet are slipping."* They hold those who are suffering in contempt, and suggest that they somehow have done, or are doing something to bring it upon themselves. It's what they get for sinning.

Yet, as Job points out in verse 6, plenty of people—evil people like "marauders"—that is, bandits, thieves and murders or literally in the Hebrew "destroyers"—as well as idolaters who "carry their god in their hands" often live peaceful and undisturbed lives.

It's Jobs' way of reasoning backward and telling Zophar that since a peaceful, undisturbed life is not necessarily a sign that a person is living (or has lived) a godly life, so also a life disturbed by immense pain and suffering is not necessarily a sign that someone is sinning, or has done evil.

That much, Job implies, should be clear to anyone with the powers of observation! *Look around you and you will see some godly believers who have suffered immensely though godly, and some evil or unbelieving people who have not suffered at all though ungodly and unbelieving.*

Which leads Job to give Zophar an alternative explanation as to why he (and other godly people) often suffer. It's NOT because they haven't devoted their hearts to the Lord, nor is it because they haven't humbly stretched out their hands to the Lord in prayer asking Him to take it away. Nor is it because their hand is clinging to some sin that they refuse to let go of, or because they're allowing evil to dwell in their tent.

No! The reason godly people often suffer, as Job tells us in verses 7-25, is simply because God has (for reasons known only to Him) ordained that they should. Even the animals says Job (the birds and the fish!) are wise enough to know that, "the hand of the LORD has done this" (vv. 7-9). He is suffering simply because God has sovereignly determined that he should.

And here Larry Crabb describes the inevitable human response to this truth:

"Whether we believe that God caused the trial," he says, "or that God merely allowed the trial, one thing is clear: He could have prevented the trial. He could have given us a good time, or at least a better time than we had. And the realization that God could have... creates within us a tension with God... and... pushes us into a terrible battle with Him."

That's what we've seen all along with Job. His struggle with God results from the fact that he knows that, "The LORD holds in His hand the life of every creature, and the breath of all mankind" (v. 10). It's his way of stating what He assumes EVERY-ONE should know (at least everyone who's been around long enough to gain the wisdom that comes from having many years to observe how things work in the world, as verse 12 points out)!

And what is it that everyone can know merely by observing the way things are?

That God is absolutely sovereign over all the affairs of this world — including the life of every creature and the breath of every person. And because He is absolutely sovereign (possessing both wisdom and power — the two pre-requisites for sovereignty -- v. 13) when He chooses to do something, based on His wisdom and using His power, no being in all creation, no matter who it is, can stop it from happening.

That's a summary of what Job says in verses 13-25.

“To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are His. What He tears down cannot be rebuilt; the man He imprisons cannot be released” (vv. 13-14). Or in other words, when God decrees that something will happen, NOTHING can stop it from happening. “For who,” as Paul says in Romans 9:19, “can resist His will?” And the answer? **No one, that’s who!**

Anybody with the powers of observation, says Job; anyone who looks at the world around them and seriously contemplates the way things are, should know that God is the sovereign over all the affairs of His world. And therefore whatever He sovereignly ordains or decrees, will UNSTOPPABLY come to pass!

If one doesn’t know that (as Job seems to imply Zophar doesn’t) they should merely ask the birds of the air, or the fish of the sea, and those creatures will inform them—for even they know it’s true (vv. 7-8)!

Job is engaging in hyperbole, of course, but his point is well-taken. In fact, he would have wholeheartedly agreed with Spurgeon where he said in a sermon on Matt. 10:29:

“The blooming of every daisy is arranged by eternal purpose. A frog croaking in the marsh, or a leaf falling from an oak tree is part of eternal wisdom’s plan. The migration of each swallow is as arranged as Columbus’s voyage. The breaking of a fowlers net is as ordained as a nation’s emancipation. God is in all things. Not one single sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will. Even the hairs on your head are numbered... These are all part of His eternal purpose.”

Thus Job goes on to tell us God sovereignly rules over the weather—be it drought or flood (v. 15). He is also the one who determines who will be victorious in war, and is Lord of both deceived and deceiver — both belong to Him (v. 16).

“Counselors” (v. 17) (or Military advisors) “He leads away stripped” (that is, He causes them to be led away as prisoners by the very armies whose conquest they tried to avert by their counsel)!

The same is true of judges. It is God who judges and sovereignly rules over earthly sovereigns or kings (v. 18). Kings may put someone in shackles, or in prison, but if God wants them out of prison, no earthly power can keep them there! We see it all through the Old and New Testament.

Daniel, Peter and Paul (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego!) were all put in prison by the decree of a king or ruler, but God delivered them all—showing that what Job says is true—if God wants someone out of prison, it doesn’t matter what some puny king, or president, or prime minister decrees. God sovereignly overrules all of them, because no one can resist His will.

Be it the religious (v. 19), or the socially or economically secure (v. 19b); be it trusted advisors (v. 20), or the elders of the city (v. 20b); be it nobles or mighty men (v. 21) — “God does whatever He pleases with the powers of heaven and the people’s of the earth” (Ps. 115:3; Dan. 4:35). “In his heart,” says Proverbs 16:9, “a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.” Or again, “The heart of the King is in the hand of the Lord, He directs it like a watercourse, wherever He pleases” (Proverbs 21:1).

It is God who by His sovereign wisdom and power “makes nations great and destroys them; enlarges nations and disperses them” (v. 23). Isaiah says the same exact thing repeatedly in chapters 10, 14, 45 and 46. God is sovereign over the nations—which ones prosper and rise to power; how long they will exercise that power; when they shall fall; how they shall fall, and who will rise to take their place when they fall!

He is the one who deprives leaders of their ability to make wise choices, and sends them into exile (v. 24). They may cry out for wisdom, but if God with-holds it, they “grope in the darkness with no light (or understanding)” — He (that is, God) “makes them stagger like drunkards” (v. 25).

It’s Job’s most extensive teaching on the sovereignty of God over all things, or the immutability of God’s will once He has sovereignly determined to do something. And obviously in reference to Job, what God has sovereignly and immutably determined for him, is that he should suffer for an allotted period of time.

Which brings me to my **FIRST** point. Job wants Zophar (and us) to know, that THAT is why his suffering has not lifted, despite his prayers and petitions that it would. And not just him, of course, but multitudes of Christian saints along with him. When they suffer, Job would say, it’s NOT because they have sinned, or are sinning. It’s not because they are clinging to some sin in their hand, or allowing it to dwell in their tent, as Zophar suggested last week.

But rather, it is simply because God (who is sovereign over everything) has ordained it for a season. In Job’s case (as we know from chapters 1 and 2) God ordained that he suffer, and not just **THAT** he suffer, but **HOW** he should suffer, the **EXTENT** to which he should suffer, and the specific length of **TIME** that he should suffer.

THAT (implies Job) is why his suffering won’t go away. Because God has ordained it for him; for a specific period of time; and for a specific purpose (as we did see in chapters 1-2). And thus his suffering won’t be lifted until that time is up, and the purpose for which God ordained it has been accomplished.

Only when we understand that can we understand why Job would go into such a lengthy discussion of God's sovereignty over all things—a discussion that begins with a special emphasis on NOT being able to rebuild what God tears down, or release the man God imprisons!

In fact, that last statement is most likely a symbolic reference to his own situation, or a perfect description of how Job has felt all along—like God has put him in a prison of sickness or suffering, and he cannot release himself from it! Apart from understanding that, this entire discussion of God's sovereignty makes no sense whatsoever in the context.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. If God sovereignly ordains that we go through a season of sickness or suffering, and what He sovereignly decrees cannot be changed or resisted by anyone or anything, then what's the use of praying?

At least Zophar's take on things would give us reason to hope that through prayer our suffering can be lifted! But if what Job says is true, then why would we even bother praying at all? Doesn't belief in God's sovereignty even over things like suffering and sickness lead to despair and prayerlessness?

It would seem so, wouldn't it? But not really, just as Jesus statement that "God knows everything we need before we even ask" should not lead us to prayerlessness either—though some have taken it that way. In fact, much to our dismay, Jesus actually includes that statement in a text of Scripture exhorting his disciples to pray! Which means that contrary to us, Jesus sees that statement as an encouragement or a spur to pray, and not as an excuse not to pray!

Knowing that I have a God who knows my every need before I even ask; knows my thoughts before I think them, and my words before I speak them, and is intimately acquainted with all my ways (Ps. 139:2-4) enables me to come before him without any pretenses. It helps me see I don't serve an ignorant God who somehow has to be filled in on all the details of my life! It expands my understanding of God, and increases my awe of Him, and helps me see that for such a great God ***NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE!***

The knowledge of God's sovereign and immutable decrees DOESN'T discourage me from praying, it merely alters the **WAY** I pray, and the **THINGS** I pray for. It changes the **FOCUS** of my prayers, and the **CONTENT** of my prayers as I go along.

For instance, knowing God has ordained even the things that I suffer, has helped me pray, not that they immediately be lifted, but that I might learn from them while they last, or that they might have their sanctifying effect upon my soul.

“It was good for me to be afflicted, says the Psalmist, that I might learn your decrees.” “Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey Your word. You are good, and what You do is good, teach me your decrees” (Psalm 119:67-71). And obviously, in the context, the good which our good God does, must at least include the afflictions that came his way! Afflictions that were sent, says the Psalmist, to instruct and transform him. And which also means that in asking God to teach him, he is essentially asking for afflictions, if that is what it takes.

You see, whether we like it or not (and we usually don't!) the greatest change in our lives, or the times of greatest growth, do not occur in times of comfort or ease. They occur in the times when God sends us through the furnace of affliction. “Behold,” says the Lord in Isaiah 48:10, “I have refined you... in the furnace of affliction.”

Using the imagery of a metal worker, who heats silver or gold to turn it to liquid so that the slag and impurities will float to the top so they can be removed, so also trials, pain and shattered dreams act in that fashion. When I realize that God is sovereign over them, and has allowed them to enter my life for a purpose, it changes the way I perceive them, and how I pray when I go through them.

It doesn't mean I stop asking to be delivered from them! It merely means that I am more restful in them, understanding that if God chooses not to deliver me, or not at that specific time, it is because their sanctifying purpose in my life has not yet been accomplished—the patience, or trust, or perseverance, or humility, or compassion and empathy he seeks to work in me has not yet been accomplished.

When it has accomplished that purpose, it will be lifted—but not a second before!

“Take troubles as they come,” says Spurgeon, “and remember them to your God because they come from Him... He arranges even the smallest events in your life... This is a truth on which you may implicitly rely. Think about it until you lull the sharpest pain, calm the most feverish excitement, and obtain the sweetest rest that a weary restless spirit can indulge. This is the antidote for fear: God appoints everything in the future.”

My friends, I exhort you to pray with all your heart! Pray long and hard and without ceasing! That's what the knowledge of God's absolute sovereignty over your trials and afflictions is meant to do—spur you to prayer—merely altering the **CONTENT** of your prayers, redirecting the **FOCUS** of your prayers, and eradicating **FEAR** from your prayers. For Spurgeon is right: Knowing that God appoints everything in the future is the antidote for fear—or at least should be.

Then **LAST**, we must consider the title of my message: That One of Man's Greatest Struggles is Affirming God's Absolute Sovereignty Over Everything—Even When Misfortune Strikes. Not when things are going **GOOD**! Few people struggle with the concept of God's absolute sovereignty when things are going **WELL** — when they're in good health, and God is blessing financially, and the relational picture is bright and cheery, and their spiritual life is rich and fulfilling. In such times who would struggle with the thought that God is in control, and has sovereignly ordained such things for them. No one I know!

But let the tables be turned, and let the opposite ensue — let good health deteriorate, or sickness strike; let prosperity be replaced by poverty; let relationships disintegrate, and one painful setback after another strike home, and all of a sudden the thought that God is in control, and has sovereignly ordained such traumatic things for us, becomes a major struggle for us. Does it not? Is it just me? Isn't truth that we gladly affirm on one occasion made difficult to affirm on another merely by the circumstances?

I've mentioned this before but it bears repeating here, that never struck home for me as clearly as it did a couple years back when within a week or two of each other, two different people stood up in my church in Honduras to share during the time to offer praises or prayer requests.

The **FIRST** stood up to thank God for sparing the life of her husband whose van had gone off the road to avoid an oncoming car, and actually flipped over—yet amazingly, nothing happened to him—nothing except a few minor scratches. "I want to thank God for watching over him and protecting him," she said amidst many "amen's."

Then, only 1 to 2 weeks later, a **SECOND** person stood up. He ran a Christian School in another city, and drove about 2 hours to come to church each week. With tears in his eyes he stood up to tell how a young teacher (22-23 years old), a new missionary trainee from the states, who had just gotten engaged, was driving in the back of a pickup just a short $\frac{3}{4}$ mile trip, when a trailer truck hit the pickup and she was thrown from the truck and killed instantly. This time there were no "amens," and many were wrestling with what to think, or say.

And that wasn't the only time. One friend who worked for a relief agency was chased in his truck by bandits who shot at him when he refused to pull over. The bullet struck just behind him—an inch or two made the difference between life and death. He even showed me the bullet hole in his truck, which he left there as a reminder of how God had watched over him.

Yet another friend (a missionary doctor) taking a poor Honduran boy and his parents home after an operation in the states to fix his leg, did pull over when bandits chased down his car. They got out of their car, shot the tires of his car to try and immobilize it, but being unable to blow the tires, shot him in the head. He survived the ordeal, but lost an eye in the process.

The first two incidents make it easy to affirm God's absolute sovereignty — one walked away without injury, and the other was missed by the bullet totally. But the second two incidents make it a little harder, don't they? A young missionary trainee killed, and another missionary who loses an eye.

Yet this is the dilemma—God is either sovereign or He's not! He's not sovereign over the GOOD and yet impotent over the BAD, because if He's not sovereign over the bad as well, then He's not sovereign! If He's only in control of the GOOD, then He's not really "in control" at all!

So how do we resolve such a dilemma? I believe Job answers that question for us in verse 13, where he tells us that, *"To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are His."*

It's Job's way of saying that God does not merely have the power to unstopably enforce whatever He decrees, but with an even greater emphasis Job assures us that what God decrees has been determined in light of all He knows—in light of His infinite wisdom, counsel and understanding. It's his way of assuring us that whatever God ordains has been ordained in light of a knowledge and wisdom beyond our knowing — a knowledge that encompasses the whole picture.

He alone, as Isaiah tells us, sees "the end, from the beginning!" Not just the present! God doesn't wait for things to happen, and then rush into clean up mode, as if He was unaware that they would take place. He saw everything that would ever happen at any moment in history—before time as we know it ever came to be!

Knowing everything there is to know, He considered EVERY possible option, in light of EVERY possible scenario and EVERY possible situation arising from it, before He ever decreed anything!

Not one detail of any situation, nor any possible scenario resulting from any situation, was overlooked! It was all taken into account.

And not just in relation to YOU, but in relation to everyone and everything around you. God knew from eternity past how everything that would ever happen, would affect not only you, but everyone everywhere else as well!

Which means that when God ordains that things should happen in a certain way, it is because He (in His infinite wisdom and understanding) has considered everything there is to consider, and in light of it all, has chosen the wisest, and best option.

Something that's easy to affirm when it includes good things, but is much harder to accept when it includes suffering or misfortune.

The question is: **Can you trust Him**? Hard as it is, that is what we're left with — we must trust His inscrutable wisdom, counsel and understanding.

For to trust Him only in the good times, is really not to trust Him at all!

The true test of trust is not when we're being pampered, but when we're being pummeled—and some of you are. I know that.