

## Providence and Suffering

Acts 4:27–28

*23 And being let go, they came to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said unto them. 24 And they, when they heard it, lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, O Lord, thou that didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is: 25 who by the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David thy servant, didst say, Why did the Gentiles rage, And the peoples imagine vain things? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves in array, And the rulers were gathered together, Against the Lord, and against his Anointed: 27 for of a truth in this city against thy holy Servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together, 28 to do whatsoever thy hand and thy council foreordained to come to pass. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness,*

Peter and John are facing their first whiff of open attack, persecution from the local authorities.

They are released and, we're told in verse 23, after they've been threatened and so forth, that they go back to their own people. This is, not simply to the Jews. At this point, it's the Jews that are giving them trouble. They are Jews themselves, and this is Jews attacking Jews. Rather, they go to their own people, that is, the fledgling Christian community. They go back to their own community, who are all or mostly Christians themselves, and they give the report of what had gone on.

Verse 24: When these Christians heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign Lord', this is amazing, when persecution breaks out in the New Testament, very frequently the first thing that is confessed by the believers is God's sovereignty.

That's true across church history. You put Christians under persecution, and again and again, they confess God's sovereignty.

Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. They are saying, You're still in charge. This is your universe, even as we're facing opposition.

Verse 25: The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One, against his Messiah.

They quote Scripture to demonstrate that these kinds of ugly outbreaks against Christ and his people are to be expected. Scripture says so, this is not a neutral universe. It's already a fallen universe, a broken universe, and of course there will be opposition against God and his people.

verse 27, they say that the outworking of Psalm 2 has already taken place: Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. That's why, politically speaking, Jesus went to the cross.

There was a wretched conspiracy, a kangaroo court. The Jewish leaders conspired with Pilate and the Gentile leaders. They condemned Jesus, even though they knew that he was innocent. there was a conspiracy, and he was killed, It was wicked!

verse 28: They did what your hand had determined beforehand would be done. So when Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the other authorities crucified Jesus, it was according to the determination of God Almighty. Now unless you believe both verse 27 and verse 28, you will destroy Christianity, you have to have them both.

***Supposing you only believed verse 27, that Jesus went to the cross because of this conspiracy.*** That God has nothing to do with it, that Jesus went to the cross because of the conspiracy. Then you have preserved the wickedness of all of these people.

***This would mean that Jesus death is not according to the plan of God in his sovereignty bringing these things to pass.*** This would mean that it's nothing more than an accident of history brought about by the conspiracy of a bunch of idiots who are corrupting justice in order to have a little more political freedom.

Is that what you believe?

***If that is true, then what do you do, then, with biblical texts in Revelation 13 and 17 that say that, in God's mind, Christ is the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world?***

What do you do with all of those images in the Old Testament of the Passover lamb, Yom Kippur, and all the promises? What do you do with Isaiah 53, a picture of a suffering servant who is wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities? What do you do with all of this that predicts that God is in charge and bringing all of these things to pass?

If you only look at v27, then it's all just an accident of history, if God hadn't foreseen anything, hadn't planned anything, and hadn't done anything, but rather it just happened, ***then how can you possibly believe that the gift of Christ on the cross was a gift to us because there he bore our sins in his own body on the tree?***

***On the other hand, suppose you believe verse 28 and don't believe verse 27.***

Just wipe verse 27 out, forget the conspiracy bit. Now Jesus goes to the cross because God arranged to bring Jesus to the cross. God arranged for him to die in our place. It was all God's plan in the first place. Don't blame dear old Pilate. Yes, he has to wash his hands and all that, but it was all ordained.

Herod was corrupt in all of this and didn't care about justice, but that was all ordained. All the chief priests that were involved in all of this were jealous of Jesus authority, were afraid that his popularity would actually foment a rebellion, and they corroded justice. That was all ordained because, obviously, God had to get Jesus on that cross!

***However, if God's sovereignty means that the people who crucified Jesus are innocent, then God's sovereignty surely means that everyone is innocent. We're just pawns, we're just tools, that's it.***

Yet if we're all innocent because God ***is sovereign, we don't need a redeemer.*** There's nothing to redeem us from. How can we be guilty, We're all innocent. We don't need Jesus to die on the cross. If God just does what he does and moves the pieces around, then I'm innocent and don't need a redeemer.

**You see, for the whole of the Bible to make sense, you have to believe those two propositions**

**God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions to mitigate human guilt.**

Human beings are morally responsible creatures, but our moral responsibility never means that God is asleep at the switch. He still remains sovereign; he still remains in control.

I am not sure exactly how to understand those two propositions side by side. For those of you who are interested in such things, the view that both of them are true (I think is taught everywhere in the Bible) is sometimes called compatibilism. That is to say, the two propositions are mutually compatible. You can sensibly believe both of them.

There are mysteries bound up in all of this, in everything that is related to God and salvation.

**For example I don't know what it means to say, though the Bible says it, that *God inhabits eternity.* I don't know how the God who inhabits eternity does things in space and time.**

I know a few things about space and time. but don't ask me to explain eternity! Is that like more time going both ways, or is it another dimension? What does it mean that God inhabits eternity? Does that mean God lives a long, long, long time, endlessly, in both directions?

Yet this God who inhabits eternity does things in space-time history where we live, and I don't know how he does all of that. All I know is that the Bible is very clear about both of those propositions being true. The only way we can maintain both of them and not drive ourselves insane thinking about them is by being very careful to let both of those propositions function in our life the way they function in the Bible.

It's important not only to believe both of those propositions but also to let them function in my life the way they function in the Bible. For example, what does the Bible infer from the fact that God is sovereign? How is God's sovereignty used in the Bible?

Is it ever used to say, "Well, God is sovereign, so we believe in fatalism.

Que será, será. What will be, will be. I can do anything I jolly well please because God is sovereign. You know, if I eat Cheerios today, it's because God ordained that I eat Cheerios. If I'm an Arminian, it's because God ordained me to be an Arminian. If I am a crook or cheat, God ordained it. What will be, will be, God is sovereign; you can't escape that. No problem with any of that. Does the Bible ever use God's sovereignty that way? I don't think so.

The Bible does use God's sovereignty, instead, to establish the mystery of providence, to establish a Job saying, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." It uses God's sovereignty to draw out Romans 8:28. We still can believe that "all things do work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

### **If you start by saying human beings are responsible, what is inferred from that?**

The Bible never uses human responsibility to drive you to the conclusion, Well, because we're responsible, God has just decided to back off and let us make our own choices without any influence or any sovereign sweep anywhere. Even God himself, poor chap, doesn't quite see the consequences of all that we do, but he wants us to have our perfect freedom, and our responsibility is grounded in the perfect capacity to say Yes or 'No.

### **The Bible never reasons that way.**

Lots of preachers reason that way, but that's not the way the Bible reasons. The Bible reasons that we're held accountable because **we do what we want to do**. We're held responsible for it.

We are a morally responsible people, and we will be held accountable. Yet God is never outfoxed, outmaneuvered, or outplayed. He still remains in charge. So if we learn to let the Bible use these two truths in our lives the way these truths function in the Bible, we will find it immensely stabilizing for all that we say and do.

Here is one example of this so that we are not just, talking theoretical, but practical. God uses some of these horrible things in our lives in a variety of ways, and sometimes we can see how this mystery of providence is working out for good. Sometimes we don't see it right away, but sometimes we see it.

First, suffering as a preparation for believers to help others. For example, in 2 Corinthians especially, the apostle Paul speaks of the sufferings that he has endured, such that he has learned to be able to give comfort to others with the comfort that he himself has been comforted with. In other words, God has prepared him to help others by going through really rocky times.

You lose a parent, or you lose a child. You wonder if you'll ever get out of it. In the mercy of God, if you're a serious Christian at all, a year or two or three years down the road, you are exactly God's appointed person to bring comfort to others with the comfort with which you yourself have been comforted.

You've learned, in all of this, something of how Christ does come by his Spirit and bring counsel and hope. You've received help from other Christians. You've received help from reading certain parts of the Bible.

You start seeing how the mystery of providence works out in ways you never would have foreseen and certainly wouldn't have asked for, both to bring glory to the Son and to strengthen and help another generation of his people.

Has that been any of your experience?