

May 2, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

The Sovereignty of God and the Role of Satan

Job 1 – 2

Back in 1921, a missionary couple named David and Svea Flood went with their two-year-old son and another young Scandinavian couple, the Ericksons, from Sweden to the heart of Africa-to what was then called the Belgian Congo. They set out from the main mission station there to take the gospel to a remote area. This was a huge step of faith. At the village of N'dolera they were rebuffed by the chief, who would not let them enter his town for fear of alienating the local gods. The two couples opted to go half a mile up the slope and build their own mud huts.

They prayed for a spiritual breakthrough, but there was none. The only contact with the villagers was a young boy, who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week. Svea Flood-a tiny woman only four feet, eight inches tall decided that if this was the only African she could talk to, she would try to lead the boy to Jesus. And in fact, she succeeded.

But there were no other encouragements. Meanwhile, malaria continued to strike one member of the little band after another. In time the Ericksons decided they had had enough suffering and left to return to the central mission station. David and Svea Flood remained near N'dolera to go on alone. Then, of all things, Svea found herself pregnant in the middle of the primitive wilderness and soon enough a little girl was born, whom they named Aina. The delivery, however, was exhausting, and Svea Flood was already weak from bouts of malaria. The birth process was a heavy blow to her stamina. She lasted only another seventeen days.

Inside David Flood, something snapped in that moment. He dug a crude grave, buried his twenty-seven-year-old wife, and then took his children back down the mountain to the mission station. Giving his newborn daughter to the Ericksons, he snarled, "I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife, and I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life." With that, he headed for the port, rejecting not only his calling, but God himself."... (Eventually the baby landed with some missionaries from the States. They changed her first name to "**Aggie**". Aggie grew up in South Dakota and married a young man named Dewey Hurst. They had two children together and moved to the Seattle area, where there was a large population of Scandinavians.)

One day a Swedish religious magazine appeared in her mailbox. She had no idea who had sent it, and of course she couldn't read the words. But as she turned the pages, all of a sudden a photo stopped her cold. There in a primitive setting was a grave with a white cross-and on the cross were the words **SVEA FLOOD**. Aggie jumped in her car and went straight for a college faculty member who, she knew, could translate the article. "What does this say?" She demanded. The instructor summarized the story: It was about missionaries who had come to N'dolera long ago ... the birth of a white baby ... the death of the young mother ... the one little African boy who had been led to Christ ... and how, after the whites had all left, the boy had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. The article said that gradually he won all his students to Christ ... the children led their parents to Christ ... even the chief had become a Christian. Today there were six hundred Christian believers in that one village....All because of the sacrifice of David and Svea Flood.

Aggie went to Sweden and found her father. David Flood had remarried, fathered four more children, and generally dissipated his life with alcohol. He had recently suffered a stroke. Still bitter, he had one rule in his family: "Never mention the name of God-because God took everything from me." She walked into the squalid apartment, with liquor bottles everywhere, and approached the seventy-three-year-old man lying in a rumpled bed. "Papa?" She said tentatively. He turned and began to cry. "Aina," he said. "I never meant to give you away." "It's all right, Papa," she replied, taking him gently in her arms. "God took care of me." The man instantly stiffened. The tears stopped. "God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of him." He turned his face back to the wall. Aggie stroked his face and then continued, undaunted. "Papa, I've got a little story to tell you, and it's a true one. You didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. The little boy you won to the Lord grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today there are six hundred African people serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life.... **"Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you." And that afternoon, David Flood came back to the God he had left so many years ago.**

This is the modern day story of what we read from the Scriptures – but I'm sure you noticed the differences – and especially the key difference. Where Job met bankrupting calamity and agonizing sorrow with a persevering faith in the sovereignty of God over all things, and refused to accept the counsel of his wife, David Flood cursed God and quit. And the question is – what made the difference? What was it that kept Job, a righteous man, unfairly targeted – some would say – for ruin and destruction, from ending up like David Flood? I believe it was an unshakeable faith in the sovereignty of God over all things – over all that is good and right and lovely – and over all that is evil and wicked and sinful. **A faith that says that all that God ordains happens – and all that He does not ordain does not happen.**

We have spent the last couple of weeks demonstrating this from the Scriptures and we are spending some more time this morning on the same thing for a couple of reasons. The first is that I believe that one of the things I am supposed to do is to prepare your minds and hearts for seasons of suffering. We have been seeing Paul do that very thing with the church in Thessalonica, and in fact it was the first few verses in chapter three that got us started on this: '*...we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.*' 1 Thessalonians 3:2-3 The saints there were enduring some afflictions – some pressure, some squeezing, some crushing – and Paul wanted to bolster their faith and hope in a God who not only knew what was going on – but had ordained those very afflictions in the first place.

The second reason we are spending more time here is because I have no rest in my spirit to move off of this yet. I'm not sure why the Holy Spirit does not seem to be letting us go on from here just quite yet – however I do know, that this Biblical truth is either not proclaimed as it ought to be or is declaimed as a lie in many pulpits. Many Christians will gladly say that God *has* the power and right to govern all things, but they are very reluctant to say that He in fact *does* govern all things for His own wise and holy purposes. They are more prone to say that God did not ordain this evil, this affliction, this suffering, but that He can take the affliction that I am suffering and turn it all to good.

Perhaps some of you have heard of Tony Campolo. I have found him to be a thoughtful, godly author and speaker that I have appreciated through the years and for the most part, he holds good, sound biblical theology. Nevertheless, when Katrina hit New Orleans, he wrote an article in which he says this about suffering and evil and calamity in the world: *Whenever there is a catastrophe, some religious people inevitably ask, "Why didn't God do something? Where was God when all those people died? ...Unfortunately, there are a lot of bad answers. One such answer is that somehow all suffering is a part of God's great plan...I don't doubt that God can bring good out of tragedies..."*

According to Mr. Campolo – to say that God would ordain suffering or catastrophe is to somehow blaspheme God. But we need to remember Job's response when calamity struck: '*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Through all of this, Job did not sin with his lips.*' Job 1:21b – 22 In other words, Job did not sin when he said, '*It was God who caused this – it was God who took my livestock and my herds, it was God who bankrupted me, it was God who took my children.*' Job recognized what Tony Campolo does not – that God is sovereign and what He wills happens and what He does not will does not happen. My aim in preaching this is to build your faith in our loving and gracious heavenly Father who is not only *near* when we suffer affliction, calamity and trouble – but indeed has ordained that it come to us from His hand. Good theology is essential to walking through suffering well.

I also want you to know with certainty and rock-solid assurance that **God never does evil.** When Job says '*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away*', he was not saying that the Lord did the evil. God never does evil. Genesis 18:8 tells us that the Judge of all the earth will always do what is right. Moses tells us that His works are perfect and all His ways are just – that He is a faithful God who does no wrong – 'upright and just is He'. Deuteronomy 32:4 God never does evil. **What Job was affirming, however, was that while God never does evil, He permits it, sends it, and stirs others, in this case, Satan, to do it, to accomplish His own holy and righteous purposes.** It was God who stirred up the Sabeans to ravage his livestock – God sent the fire from heaven to burn up his sheep and servants – God permitted the Chaldeans to steal his camels and God sent the wind that killed his children. Nothing happens in the universe outside the will of God. That is exactly what Job was saying.

So when we look at the story of Job, we see a God in full control of things, and using Satan to accomplish His will. Although Satan creates much evil in the world – although his hand can be seen in calamity, sickness and suffering, although he is very powerful and more than a match for humans, nevertheless we need to understand that in the purposes of God, Satan has a role. And there are at least four truths about the sovereignty of God and the role of Satan, that we can see from these first two chapters: God is sovereign over Satan's world rule; He is sovereign over Satan's hand in calamity; He is sovereign over Satan's hand in sickness, and He is sovereign over Satan's power to kill. I believe that embracing these truths will cause our hearts to respond as Job's did in humility and worship, and they will inject steel into our spiritual backbones to endure and persevere with joy when hard things happen.

First of all we need to embrace the truth that **God is sovereign over Satan's world rule**. Satan is referred to in the gospel of John as the '**ruler of this world**' in three separate passages: John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11. He is also called the '**god of this age**' in 2 Corinthians 4:4; and the '**prince of the power of the air**' in Ephesians 2:2 and '**cosmic power over this present darkness**' in Ephesians 6:12. These passages indicate that he has considerable power and authority in the world. In fact when Jesus began His ministry, the devil was able to show Him all the kingdoms of the world, spread out at His feet, so to speak, and to offer Him the rulership of it all. '*To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.*' Luke 4:6-7 This pre-supposes that Satan had the rulership of these kingdoms in the first place. And interestingly enough, Jesus did not correct him.

But we must remember that Satan is a liar, and the father of lies and all that comes out of his mouth, though it is shaped as the truth, is in the end a lie. What it was was a half-truth – which being not the whole truth is actually a lie. **He does have some authority – but it is delgated to him by God**. He is able to sway rulers and nations and peoples – but – and this is an important but – only at the permission of the one to whom he must eventually bow – God. That is why Jesus answered Him the way He did: '*It is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve."*' Luke 4:8 If the king of the universe had bowed to Satan, then indeed, Satan would have in reality been the sovereign. But with this simple statement, Jesus reminded Satan who was really in control and he couldn't hand anything over with God's say so.

This is what is so clearly seen in Job: *Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"* Job 1:6-8 Inferiors always '**present**' themselves before their superiors and that is what is happening here. It is God and not Satan that initiates the whole affair. Presumably, this ruler of the world knew Job even before this point – after all, it would be hard to imagine the prince of unrighteousness being ignorant of this blameless, upright and God-fearing man in his own kingdom. But it is only when God initiates the action that Satan is able to touch him.

Furthermore, Satan complains that God has put a fence around Job so that he couldn't do anything even if he wanted: *Have You not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.* Job 1:10 Satan concedes the fact that God is in control and unless He removes the restraints from Satan, he can't do anything. *But stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse You to Your face.* Job 1:11 And so God removes the restraints: *"Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.* Job 1:12

The thing of real interest to notice here is the word play between God and Satan. Satan tells God to **stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has**, and then God tells Satan 'OK , everything he's got is yours now – **stretch out Your hand** – just don't touch him'. This tells us something very important. The hand that brings calamity or sickness or some other evil is Satan's hand. It is his doing. There is no question that the evil that we see in this world belongs to Satan's hand. But his hand can only do what God's hand allows. Just like God tells Job that He has set even bounderies for the proud waves of the sea, telling them: '*Thus far you shall come, but no farther ; And here shall your proud waves stop*' – so God has set bounderies on the evil that He permits Satan, for God's own purposes, to perpetrate. In other words, Satan is on a leash of God's making. **God is sovereign over Satan's world rule**.

God is sovereign over Satan's hand in calamity. And calamity is what Job experiences first: *Now on the day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, and the Sabeans attacked and took them. They also slew the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three bands and made a raid on the camels and took them and slew the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people and they died, and I alone have escaped to tell you."* Job 1:13-19

Essentially what we have here are what we would call natural disasters and human atrocities. Things that some people would see as either outside of God's control or simply things that He allows, or permits but does not ordain. But we need to see God's great hand in this. Moved by Satan's hand, one group of raiders came and killed the workers and stole the donkeys; another group came and raided the camels and killed those workers. Fire from heaven fell on the sheep and the shepherds – quite possibly a huge lightning storm; and a great wind or possibly even a tornado came and blew down the house where Job's children were eating and drinking and killed everyone but the messenger who came to Job. **And the remarkable thing is that Job saw, in all the evil that Satan had done, the hand of God working:** *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*" Job 1:21 For Job, and for us, there is more comfort, more security, more support in refusing to credit Satan with any more power and authority than he has, and looking beyond him to God for the cause. **God is sovereign over Satan's hand in calamity.**

God is sovereign over Satan's hand in sickness: *Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. And the LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason." Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand...So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.* Job 2:1-8

Again we see that interplay between God and Satan: Satan says to God 'Stretch out **your** hand' and God says to Satan 'Go ahead, stretch out **your** hand'. So whose hand brings the sickness? I have heard many people say that 'God doesn't make anyone sick – Satan makes people sick'. And they are right – partly right. Satan is evil and all his ambitions and intentions toward God's highest creation, humans, is evil. His deepest desire is to kill humanity and sickness and disease are one way to do that. And in God's plan and purpose, Satan is given the power to afflict us with sickness and disease. But his is not an unrestricted power. The truth that Job proclaims is that Satan can make no one sick unless God allows it. We saw that in the first go round. Satan's hand could reach out and touch everything of Job's – but not his person. Now God gives permission for him to touch Job directly.

This, however was too much for Job's wife: *Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"* Job 2:9-10 This seems to be a bit strong – in fact too strong for even a good translation like the NASB which translates the word evil as '**adversity**'. The Hebrew word is '**ra**' and in the Old Testament it is almost always translated '**evil**'. And while we would agree that evil is adversity – saying adversity instead of evil seems to take a little bit of the sting out of it when talking about God. But even at the end of this book, we read: *Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him.* Job 42:11 That is why, when Job attributed all his suffering to God and not to Satan, he does not err, he does not blaspheme, he is not irreverent. Instead the Bible says that: *In all this Job did not sin with his lips.* Job 2:10b This highlights the truth that **God is sovereign over Satan's evil hand in sickness.**

God is sovereign over Satan's power to kill: *And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." Job 2:6* The Bible continually affirms Satan's power to kill. Jesus told the Pharisees *You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning,* John 8:44a John also tells us that he comes only to kill, steal and destroy. (John 10:10) In Revelation we see that he even has power and authority to kill Christians: *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.* Revelation 2:10

But the Bible also affirms God's sovereign control of who lives and who dies: *"See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god beside Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of My hand." Deuteronomy 32:39* God is sovereign and no Satan, no demons, or wild beast or accident can kill anyone whom God wills to live. James tells us *'Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"-- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.* James 4:13-16 If the Lord wills we will live, and if He doesn't, we will die.

David Livingstone, who went to Africa for the cause of Christ and died there, was camped one evening on the bank of the Zambesi River, surrounded by fierce and blood-thirsty tribesmen who threatened to kill him. At any moment spears might come hurtling through the darkness, or perhaps the attack would come at dawn. Under great stress he wrote in his journal, dated January 14, 1856: *Felt much turmoil of spirit in view of having all my plans for the welfare of this great region knocked on the head by savages tomorrow. But I read that Jesus came and said, 'All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations -- and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' It is the word of a Gentleman of the most sacred and strictest honor, so there's an end of it.'* His confidence in the sovereignty of God fueled his missionary passion and fortified his soul against the danger, disappointment, and depression that came against him. He wrote another entry, later that night that summed it up: *'I am immortal till my work is accomplished'. God is sovereign over Satan's power to kill*

The suffering that Satan creates through wicked men and calamity and sickness and death are greater than any of us can comprehend. But evil is not ultimate – God is. Satan is not ultimately triumphant – God is. Let the word of God encourage you this morning and in the hour of suffering.

Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Lamentations 3:37

'...for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all My purpose,' Isaiah 46:9b-10

"Come, let us return to the LORD; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him. Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; His going out is sure as the dawn; He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth." Hosea 6:1-3

Therefore, if God is for us, who can be against us?...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Romans 8:31-37

Our good and gracious God,

Your ways are not our ways and Your thoughts are not our thoughts. Your ways are unsearchable and often baffling to our finite minds. You have chosen to give Satan freedom to do great harm and grievous affliction when it would be no injustice to him to destroy him now. Grant us to know without doubt and fear that You are supreme and sovereign over all suffering, all affliction, all calamity, all evil – just as You are sovereign over all that is good and right and lovely. Have mercy on us in our frail and fallible condition. Grant us the grace to trust that You are good in all Your works and all Your ways, and that You intend good for those who love You always. May we never doubt that goodness or Your sovereignty even in the most painful times. Fill our souls with the comfort that though we are torn, You will heal, though we are stricken, You will bind up – You will revive us and raise us up to live before You and You will surely come to right all wrongs and heal where You have wounded. Let this truth help steel our hearts against the fiery arrows of doubt and despair that trouble may bring. Fix our hopes so fully on the joys of heaven that we embrace all the good and adversity You ordain for us with glad and thankful hearts. May our everlasting memories of Your grace cause us to delight in You through Jesus Christ, spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.