

October 6, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Trusting God

Acts 12:1 – 25

Last week we looked at the fact that chapter 12 of Acts tells us something about the providence of God. By providence, I mean God's sovereign rule over all things in creation for His own will and pleasure. Jerry Bridges, in his book, *Trusting God* puts it this way: **Providence is God's constant, unceasing care for, and His absolute rule over all creation for His own glory and the good of His people.** God never seeks His own glory at the expense of the good of His people; and He never seeks the good of His people at the expense of His glory. His glory and our good are bound up together. And that means that all people and all events and every circumstance are working toward one end – that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. God is not surprised or taken unawares by the things evil men do in this world. He wasn't dismayed by Jame's execution or Peter's imprisonment. In fact the triumph of the gospel is served both by suffering and persecution and by timely rescue. **In all the persecution and murder and imprisonment and prayer and judgment – what we see is the providence of God –** we see the mighty hand of a sovereign God.

And that should encourage us. That should strengthen our hearts and increase our trust in God. We should understand that the circumstances surrounding our lives are no accident – they may be the work of evil men, or the result of our own stupidity and disobedience, or they may be the product of a sin-sick world – but all of it is held firmly in the mighty hands of a sovereign God. Everything is subject to His will – even our disobedience. Even the evil of wicked men, is subservient to His plans – and nothing can touch His children unless He permits it. God is the sovereign ruler of human history and of the personal history of every one of His redeemed people. No detail of your life is too insignificant for Your heavenly Father to attend; and no circumstance is too big for Him to control. **What that means is that we can trust Him.** If there is a single event in all of the universe that can occur outside God's sovereign control then we cannot trust Him. But nothing is outside His control. We can trust in His providence whether we are killed like James or rescued like Peter.

A huge problem in the life of a believer is trusting in the providence of God. We worry because we don't trust Him. We fret because He doesn't seem to be coming through. The root of all our worrying and anxiety and fretting is unbelief. If you're worried and anxious and fearful, you really don't trust God. In the book of Hebrews, the author uses the example of the people of God, rescued from the oppression of slavery in Egypt, to teach us something about trusting God. He tells us that most of the people who came out of Egypt died in the wilderness. They perished because they really didn't trust God. Every time a problem arose they looked at the situation and concluded that God was not trustworthy. They were three days from one of the most spectacular rescues in the history of the world – Pharaoh's army was obliterated in the Red Sea, they were free and on their way to their own land. And then they went three days without water and concluded that God wanted to kill them. They doubted His love for them, they were suspicious of His plans for them and they were skeptical of His faithfulness to do what He promised. Over and over they refused to trust in His providence.

In their minds God became their enemy. Every time He put them in a situation where they had to trust Him, their response was to get angry and blame God. Instead of praying about everything, they complained about everything. When difficulties arose, when trouble came into their lives, when things didn't go like they wanted, they saw it as God's failure to care for them. And although Hebrews was written to Christians long ago, it is the eternal word of God to us right here and right now. We are those Israelites, miraculously saved out of bondage to sin and rescued from hell, and we are being led by His sovereign hand to our eternal home. And we are just as skeptical, just as suspicious, just as full of doubt as they were. And we need to embrace with our hearts and our heads the foundational truth of God's providence. Trusting God is foundational. To restate Hebrews 11:6 – Without trust, it is impossible to please God, Because anyone who draws near to God must believe **both** that He exists **and** that He cares enough to respond to those who seek him

So the providence of God stands over this text as the backdrop to everything. But before we move into the next chapter, I'd like to consider three questions this text raises in my mind at least, in the light of this truth. Number one, considering that already in Acts we have two periods of persecution, believers arrested and imprisoned, and at least two people, Stephen and James, killed because they followed Christ, should we expect persecution and suffering for the sake of Christ in this life? That is, are persecution and suffering a necessary part of being a Christian? And then, what part does prayer play in this? Or to put it another way, if God is sovereign over all, why pray at all? If He indeed ordains suffering and persecution, should we presume to tell an omniscient, omnipotent Sovereign what we need or what we would like to happen? And finally, how should we understand Herod's death by worms? That is, why does God strike Herod down for accepting the praise of the people when He didn't do anything to Herod when he murdered James?

First of all, **are persecution and suffering a necessary part of being a Christian?** Or should we see suffering and persecution as not God's perfect will but His plan B, so to speak? I don't want you to have any doubts about this. The Bible is clear – Paul tells us that those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Peter tells us not to be surprised by the fires of suffering and persecution. James tells us to count our suffering as joy. Jesus was always telling His disciples, '**When** persecution comes...' never '**If** persecution comes...' And He kept saying things like 'If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you'. At one point He gave His disciples the heart warming message that: '**I send you out as sheep among wolves**'. What sheep would ever have a reasonable expectation of getting out of **that** encounter alive? Without going overlong on this, clearly we are to expect suffering and persecution if we truly are Christ-followers. God uses persecution in the Christian's life simultaneously to **work out His will on the earth and to conform us more into the image of Christ**.

Nik Ripken, a missionary for many years in hostile, God-hating, Christian-persecuting countries, was interviewing some Russian pastors one time on life under the Communist regime and the stories of persecution and suffering were heartwrenching – and yet at the same time incredibly encouraging as those same stories detailed the mercy and goodness and faithfulness of the God they served. At one point Nik gently chastized these pastors saying, 'Why haven't you written these stories down so other believers might be encouraged by God's grace in your lives?' One of the older pastors took Nik over to the large picture window that looked out on the sun that was just then rising in the east. And he asked Nik, 'Have you ever gotten your children up in the dark taken them to stand in front of a window like this and said, 'Now watch closely children. The sun will come up in the east in just a few minutes – it's really going to happen – watch carefully'. Of course Nik replied that he'd never done that. Of course the sun is coming up in the east – the sun always comes up in the east! 'Nik', the old pastor said, 'This is why we haven't written books or made movies out of these stories of persecution. For us, persecution is like the sun coming up in the east. It happens all the time....There is nothing unusual or unexpected about it. Persecution for our faith has always been – and always will be – a normal part of life'.

Persecution and suffering are a normal part of a Christian's life. We should expect this. And sometimes it has a happy ending – Peter is released. And sometimes the ending is not so happy – James is killed. But both work in God's planning to accomplish His purpose in the world. Difficulties and trouble are the very things that work to further God's purpose and at the same time work transformation and strength into our souls. A life of ease and comfort ultimately make us fat and flabby and useless. Heaven is not filled with couch potatoes. As our trials become deeper so does the well we draw from. Job said "When He has tested me I will come forth as gold." So we need to view everything as coming from God – the good and the bad – all of it given to us in His divine providence. Because God has allowed it for a reason we cannot see right now. He is sovereign – He holds the reins – everything is filtered through the pierced hands of our Savior for our good and His glory.

On January 9, 1985, Pastor Hristo Kulichev, a Congregational pastor in Bulgaria, was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached in his church even though the state had appointed another man the pastor whom the congregation did not elect. His trial was a mockery of justice. And he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment. During his time in prison he made Christ known every way he could. When he got out he wrote, **"Both prisoners and jailers asked many questions, and it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free."** (Herbert Schlossberg, Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph, p. 230)

And then, we come to the question of prayer. What part does prayer play in the sovereignty of God? Or to put it another way, ***if God is sovereign over all, why pray at all?*** If He indeed ordains suffering and persecution, should we presume to tell an omniscient, omnipotent Sovereign what we need or what we would like to happen? How should we understand the role of prayer in the purpose of God? Last week we examined – and debunked – the notion that James was killed and Peter was released because Peter was prayed for and James was not. And we understood that was not the point of the story. You see, God's plan was to let James be martyred and to rescue Peter through the prayers of the church. God was not wringing His hands over James and saying to Himself, 'Well I won't let that happen to Peter!' Instead, the Bible is silent on the role of prayer in the matter of James, but speaks loudly to the fact that the prayers of the saints were the means through which Peter was released.

First of all we need to understand that the Bible teaches that God ordains everything – even persecution. We have the tendency to think that God looks after the big stuff, but we're in charge of everything else. We won't spend a lot of time on this but I want you to look at the teaching of Scripture:

Matthew 10:29-30

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered." God ordains the fall of sparrows and the hair on our heads.

Psalms 139:16

"...in Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." God has ordained the duration of our lives.

Acts 4:27-28

for truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your plan had predestined to take place.

Proverbs 16:4

"The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble." In His universe, He ordains the meaning and goal for everything – even the wicked.

Proverbs 16:33

"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." We throw the dice but God ordains the outcome.

C.H. Spurgeon put it like this: *'I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes – that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens – that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall of...leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.'*

So it should be clear to us that God is sovereign and omniscient, and omnipotent, and He ordains everything according to His will. But the Bible also teaches that He has also ordained that we participate in His sovereign design through prayer. We see this all throughout Scripture, but particularly in the life of the apostle Paul. In Romans, Paul wrote this at the end of the letter: *Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.* **Romans 15:30-32**

Couldn't God, by the exercise of His will, simply remove the threat to Paul? Couldn't He cause Paul's message and gift to be received warmly by the believers without prayer? Couldn't He have sent the angel to rescue Peter without the church praying? The answer is obviously, and emphatically, 'Yes'. ***But the fact remains that He didn't.*** He got the church to praying for Peter; and He got the Romans to praying for Paul, and He answered. ***And His answering the prayer He inspired and the things He wanted to see happen, gave Him glory.*** Because the result was, Peter was released; and when Paul related the things God was doing to the church, they began glorifying God; Paul's gift and message were accepted; the evil, disobedient Jews were thwarted by the unbelieving Gentile Romans; Paul's life was spared; he was given access to preach the gospel to the very centers of power in that region; (Felix the Governor and King Agrippa) and to the center of the Roman Empire, even some of Caesar's own Praetorian Guard and household, and from there all over the world.

Ephesians 1:11 tells us: *"In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will," All things here must necessarily include even our prayers.* Prayer is the means through which God has ordained that His purpose be accomplished on the earth. Thomas Aquinas wrote: *"We do not pray in order to change the decree of divine providence; rather we pray in order to acquire by petitionary prayer what God has determined would be obtained by our prayers".* (Summa Theologicae, 2a2ae)

That is why, when Daniel discovered the promise of God in Jeremiah, to release the Jews from the Babylonian captivity after seventy years, he gave himself to fasting and prayer – **praying for the very thing that God had already ordained.** The sovereignty of God over all things, instead of stifling prayer, is the very thing that inspires prayer in the saints. The Bible tells us that God **will be** glorified in the earth – He **will** establish His kingdom here – His ordained purpose **will** prevail; and still **Jesus teaches the disciples to pray – 'Thy kingdom come – Thy will be done'.** Jesus told His disciples that *This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* Matthew 24:14 **But He tells them to pray for it:** *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."* Matthew 9:27 **This gospel will be proclaimed in the whole world – therefore pray for it.** Instead of sapping our will to pray, the fact that God is sovereign works to fuel our prayers that His kingdom come, His will be done.

And finally, **how should we understand Herod's death** by worms? That is, why does God strike Herod down for accepting the praise of the people when He didn't do anything to Herod when he murdered James? Why did Luke include this story here in chapter 12? I don't believe it was **just** to show that God will punish the wicked and vindicate the righteous, or that God will act against those who usurp His glory – although both are certainly part of the understanding here. I think it is included to help us understand that even when God ordains that evil men play a part in carrying out His purpose, they are not guiltless before God. Even though God ordained James death, Herod **wanted** to kill him – and he wanted to kill Peter.

God used the Assyrians in the very same way to punish Judah, calling Assyria, *'The rod of My anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath,'* saying, *'I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger Me.'* Isaiah 10:5-6 Furthermore, it is clear that the king of Assyria didn't have a clue that he was simply God's instrument to carry out His ordained plan: *'But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few.'* Isaiah 10:7 The point we're making is not that James had somehow angered God and God used Herod to punish him. The point is that God used Herod to carry out His plan. Why it was necessary for James to die at that point we do not know. Nor does Scripture tell us anything about God's divine reasons for that. What we should understand is that Assyria and Herod were both instruments in the hand of God to accomplish His will. Sometimes He rescues His people; sometimes He uses evil intent to open gospel doors. Sometimes these instruments are His rod of judgment against ungodliness, and sometimes He uses the evil that men plot in their own hearts to fulfill His purpose – just as He used Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the people of Israel to accomplish our redemption.

But however He uses those instruments – they are culpable – He holds them accountable in the end. That's what He did with Assyria. *When the Lord has finished all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. For he says: 'By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding'.* Isaiah 10:12-13 **And that is what He does with Herod: Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.** Acts 12:23 God has ordained suffering and persecution for His people as a means to fulfill His purposes. James' death was necessary in God's sovereign plan so that the word of God would grow and multiply. And regardless of how we feel about God's sovereignty, whether we are opposing God like Herod, or submitting to God like Peter, we will carry out God's purpose because **all things are working to bring about the result that God desires.** It does make a difference to you however, whether you serve God like Herod or like Peter.

So what do we learn from this? First of all God has ordained that suffering and persecution be a normal part of the Christian life. It is one of the means God uses to work His good in our lives and to bring glory to His name. Secondly, the sovereignty of God should work as an encouragement to pray more fervently because He has ordained that our prayers work to fulfill His purposes. Our part is to pray fervently, sincerely, and honestly, bringing our deepest concerns to the Lord. God's part is to hear our prayers and to graciously answer them in His own time, in His own way, according to His own will. And finally, we need to understand that God's purpose will triumph in the world, and we will serve His purpose, one way or another, and it does make a difference to us whether we serve His purpose like Herod or like Peter. And all this means that you can trust God – you can trust Him absolutely.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

From You and through You and to You are all things, to You be the glory forever Amen. You reign supreme over this universe, over this world, over nature, and all the affairs of men. Let this truth encourage us in times of rest and sustain us in times of trouble. Let us trust in Your wise providence whether we are killed like James or rescued like Peter. Let it fuel our prayers for Your kingdom to come, Your will to be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. Forgive us Lord for our apathy in prayer and our often neglect of it. Help us to cherish and jealously guard our times of prayer knowing that the Creator and Sustainer of all things gives heed to our prayers and advances His kingdom through our petitions. Grant that we would see the great place of prayer in Your purpose and plan. Pour out a spirit of prayer and supplication on Your people to pray as never before and ignite a fire in our souls to pray with confidence and certainty of Your triumph in the world, knowing that none of our prayers go unheeded in heaven. Fill our mouths with prayer to You and the gospel to the nations we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen