

Job 1:13-22; John 9:1-7
Our Comfort in Trouble
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Let me begin today by explaining what I am trying to do. I have been preaching a series through the book of James, and our most recent text included the command, "Submit to God." My sermon last week was largely an examination of that command. To submit to God means, of course, to submit to God's will. Yet the concept of submitting to God's will can be confusing if we don't clarify that we as finite creatures have to view God's will from two distinct perspectives. The first perspective is what we call God's decretive will or God's secret will. This is God's planned purpose for all of history. We believe that God has purposed and decreed everything that happens down to the smallest detail. We believe that God has planned and is working everything that happens for His own glory and for the ultimate good of those who love Him. God sovereignly accomplishes His plan either directly by effecting it Himself or indirectly by permitting some created free agent to effect it. We don't know the details of God's decreed plan until they occur, and for that reason we call it His secret will. Whatever happens in history is the outworking of God's secret, decretive will.

We find a mention of God's decretive will in our Lord's prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane:

Luke 22:42

42 ... “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.”

When Christ there referred to His Father’s will, He was referring to God’s decreed purpose and plan for history. Jesus stated that He did not desire to experience in His humanity the severe suffering of the cross as an atoning payment for the sin of God’s people, but His greater overriding desire was the accomplishment of God’s purpose in history in the redemption of a people for Himself.

We find another mention of God’s decretive will in 1 Peter 3:17:

17 For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Peter there refers to God’s will as God’s predetermined plan for our lives and reminds us that this can include suffering.

The second perspective is what we call God’s revealed will or God’s preceptive will. This is God’s revelation of what He takes pleasure in because it most conforms to His own wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. God’s revealed will is what is truly right and good as God defines right and good. It is called God’s preceptive will because it consists of God’s revealed precepts or commands, including both law command as in the ten commandments and gospel command as in, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is called God’s revealed will because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. God’s revealed will is the holy rule of life which God has revealed to us as the

way of life He takes pleasure in. God is delighted when we submit to His revealed will, and God is grieved when we don't.

We find an obvious reference to submitting to God's revealed will in Psalm 40:8:

8 "I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart."

We find another reference in the Lord's Prayer petition, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And yet another in Jesus' statement, "For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother."

Now we submit to God's secret will and God's revealed will in two different ways. We submit to God's revealed will by accepting that God's rule of life is the best way to live, indeed the only right and proper way to live, and by trying by God's grace to live that way.

We submit to God's secret will by accepting 1) that God is in full and complete control of whatever happens, and yet at the same time 2) that God is not to be blamed for anything evil or sinful that happens, and 3) that God is working whatever happens to His own glory, which is by far the greatest possible good of any good which can be accomplished in history. In fact, the glory of God is in a category all to itself because it alone is the final good, the ultimate intrinsic good, the foundational good which is good in and of itself simply because it is.

What I want to do this morning is to examine submitting to God's will from the perspective of His secret, decretive will. And what I plan on doing next week is to examine submitting to God's will from the perspective of His revealed, preceptive will.

What I want to consider today as an example of an outworking of God's secret will is the recent tsunami. This was a tragic occurrence in which over 200,000 people died. I believe that God is not to be blamed for this loss of life. I believe that any grief I feel over this loss of life is dwarfed by God's grief over it. I also believe that God planned this event and is working it to His own glory. This attitude is what I mean by submitting to God's decretive will. I want to examine submitting to God's decretive will under three headings: the riddle, the responsibility and the reason.

First, I was to discuss **the riddle** in the sense of a paradox and also in the sense of a mystery that is beyond our understanding. I also want to begin by looking at our passage from Job. I chose the passage from Job for today because it mentions a tragic loss of life involving a so-called act of nature:

Job 1:18-22

- 18 While he was still speaking, another also came and said,
"Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in
their oldest brother's house,
- 19 "and suddenly 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 are dead; and I alone
have escaped to tell you!"

- 20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.
- 21 And he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."
- 22 In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.

Now there are those who do not respond to such occurrences the way Job did. Some have responded to the recent tsunami by saying they no longer believe in God. This is a self-contradictory reaction which can only lead to despair. Here is the riddle in the sense of a paradox: some people say they no longer believe in God because of the tragedy of this event, and yet this event is tragic only if God exists. We have to think honestly about the implications of a universe where God does not exist, a universe where the ultimate and lasting reality is an impersonal cosmos with no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no mind to know and to remember, and no heart to feel.

If there is no God, then there is really nothing special about human life or horrendous about human suffering. Human life is sacred only because humanity is created in the image of God. Deny God, and there is nothing unique or special about human life. Human suffering becomes only a series of biochemical stimuli in a meaningless world. If the human race is nothing but an evolutionary fluke that arose from a primordial soup, if the human being is only a sophisticated biological organism or a complex organic machine, then what is so tragic about the loss of human life?

Beyond that, deny God and the very concepts of good and evil lose all meaning. If there is no reality beyond the material world of energy and matter, then any sense that something is good or evil is a naive fantasy and illusion.

In contrast, acknowledge God, and evil is evil, and human life is special. Unanswered questions still remain, but they are mysteries we can live with through faith. How can God be in sovereign control of history without being to blame for the evil that occurs? I cannot fully answer that question, but then why should I expect to fully understand God? The eternal is simply beyond our full comprehension. His thoughts and ways are above our own. How inscrutable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

Here is the riddle in the sense of a mystery we have to live with by faith. God is able to create free agents, both human and angelic, who make real decisions for which they alone and not God are responsible. Yet God is able to do this without losing His sovereign control. I don't understand how God is able to do that. Doing that is beyond not only my ability to do but also my ability to comprehend. But does my limited comprehension limit what Almighty God can do? Of course not! We must accept this mystery in faith, or else we descend into a cold, impersonal world where the tragic has no meaning.

In our passage from Job, we see that Job accepted that God was in control of the fatal wind storm. He said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." We also see that Job did not blame God for what happened. Job said, "Blessed be the name of the

Lord.” And the comment is made, “Job did not charge God with wrong.”

That brings us to our second point, and that is **the responsibility**. Who is responsible for such tragic events? The answer is, all those who rebel against God’s rule. Think back to Genesis one. There we read that the material universe when first formed was without form and void. It was a hostile, chaotic environment not compatible with life. Life is delicate, and there is a very narrow range of physical conditions within which life is possible. Over six days, God transformed the chaos into an orderly cosmos, into a friendly environment capable of sustaining life. And then God created life upon earth and commanded, Be fruitful and multiply.

When Adam sinned against God, a curse descended upon this orderly, controlled creation. Adam rejected God as His sovereign Lord and foolishly believed that he could be his own sovereign lord and survive apart from God. God’s judgment upon sin is to grant sin the independence it desires. To the degree that God in judgment withdraws from creation in answer to sin’s cry for autonomy, that is the common curse. To the degree that God withdraws His upholding hand from creation, creation descends back into chaos, and this world becomes hostile to life. To the degree that God continues to uphold creation in spite of humanity’s rebellion, that is God’s common grace. Thus God continues to make His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

God once destroyed the earth with water, but in common grace He now restrains the sea and imposes boundaries upon it.

Jeremiah 5:22

22 ‘Do you not fear Me?’ says the LORD. ‘Will you not tremble at My presence, who have placed the sand as the bound of the sea, by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass beyond it? And though its waves toss to and fro, yet they cannot prevail; though they roar, yet they cannot pass over it.’

Jesus is the sovereign Lord of the sea. Once in the midst of a storm on the sea of Galilee, Jesus rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace, be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And the disciples feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"

Yet on occasion, God allows the sea to rage and to overflow its bounds and to work havoc. This is the common curse. Just as there is common grace and special grace, there is also common curse and special curse.

Sometimes we experience pain or suffering as a direct consequence of something evil we do. A person is sexually promiscuous, and he acquires a sexually transmitted disease. That is a special curse. A person gets drunk regularly, and he develops liver disease. That is a special curse. The painful experience has some direct relationship to some sinful action. Other times there is no apparent direct relationship. This is the common curse.

The responsibility for the common curse belongs not to God but to Adam who sinned in the garden of Eden. Adam was the father of all humanity. Every human being who will ever exist was latently present with and in Adam when God created him from the dust of the earth. Even Eve came from a rib from Adam's side. Adam in the garden represented the totality of humanity, and in that federal sense, the common curse is the responsibility of all humanity, including you and me.

Humanity and not God is responsible for the common curse. And God sincerely and genuinely grieves over the suffering which results from humanity's sin. Our Savior wept at Lazarus' tomb, and God calls upon us, His people, to weep with those who weep in this world of sin and misery.

In our passage for today from John chapter nine about the man born blind, we see that the disciples did not understand very well the concept of the common curse. The disciples assumed that whenever anyone has some affliction, it must be a divine judgment for some specific sin. Yet how could this be true when someone was born with an affliction? Since this man was born blind, when could he possibly have sinned as a basis for receiving this affliction? Is it possible for a baby to sin in the womb and then to be judged with an affliction before he is born? If that is not the case, then what about the man's parents? Is it possible that he was born blind because of something sinful his parents had done before he was born?

No, Jesus said. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him."

And that brings us to our last point, **the reason**. Jesus said that God had a purpose for this man's being born blind. Back in eternity past when God was planning all of history, God had a purpose for allowing this man to suffer this particular manifestation of the common curse upon humanity. God ordained that this man would be born blind and would live in blindness up into his adult years so that Jesus would have this opportunity to perform this miracle for God's glory and for the advancement of God's kingdom.

We need to remember that God is so perfect, so wonderful, so awesome that there is no greater privilege than to bring Him glory, to manifest His greatness, and to advance His kingdom on earth. Our confidence in the midst of the difficulties of life is that God has ordained everything to work for His glory and for the ultimate good of those who love God. We rightfully mourn over the pains of this life, but we also take hope that God has a greater purpose in them. This man had suffered blindness from birth to adulthood, but there was a glorious purpose rooted in the eternal.

We find this same basic message in the book of Job. There was a purpose in Job's sufferings. It was to bring glory to God. Satan charged that Job was faithful to God only because God put a hedge around Job and shielded him from suffering. God responded by removing that hedge and permitting Satan to afflict Job. Job brought God glory by remaining faithful in the midst of his suffering.

We believe the sufferings of this life have a purpose. We believe that while the sufferings of this life are temporary, the rewards which God gives the faithful are eternal. We believe that in comparison with the greatness of the glory to come, the worst sufferings in this life are but a light affliction.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

- 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,
18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

As we think about the recent tsunami, let us not despair. Remember that God is in control. This too is part of His sovereign plan for history. He will somehow work this to His own glory and the genuine good of all those who love Him. He will somehow work this to the advancement of His kingdom and the discipling of the nations, thus bringing salvation and deliverance to this world.

As we think about the recent tsunami, let us also not grow bitter and jaded. Let us not presumptuously think that the suffering of others bothers us more than it grieves God. Remember God's response to human suffering was to experience it Himself.

John 3:16

16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Let us weep with those who weep. And let us point to the common curse as a warning of the special curse we all deserve because of our sins. Let us point to the common curse, the misery of this life, as a warning to all that we need Jesus. Only Jesus can deliver us from our sins and the judgment they deserve. Jesus became a curse upon the cross that we might be blessed of God with special grace. Only Jesus can deliver us from the misery of this life and the sin which is its root cause.