

Lent 3 – Faith in the sovereignty of God

Theresa wrote last week of how our faith is strengthened through knowing the extent of God's unconditional love for us. Being sure of his love though is more difficult when we are faced with trouble or hardship. Retaining faith in those circumstance requires a secure understanding of God's sovereignty.

Psalm 62:11-12 reads "One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard: 'power belongs to you, God, and 'with you, Lord, is unfailing love; and 'you reward everyone according to what they have done.'"

God is a God of unfailing love. He is also a God of unbridled power and he rewards everyone according to what they do. So why is it that this loving, powerful and just God allows we, his beloved people, to suffer and why do those who clearly do good often suffer the most? Where is the reward that this Psalm speaks of? Grappling with these questions can move us towards a place of greater faith and contentment but for that to happen we must approach them with humility. Many have used these questions as a weapon against God or as a means of proving his non-existence. One of our problems when dealing with this subject is that we only consider our individual perspective. The fact that God loves me does not preclude His love for the whole of his creation. If I don't get my way, I suffer, but there are times when I must not have my way for there are occasions when having my way compromises the well-being of others and the environment in which I live. In our individualistic culture we need to be prompted to remember that our own well-being is tied up with the well-being of the entire creation. Whereas Individuals are likely to see things mainly from their own perspective, God sees the bigger picture. In particular he does not want anyone to be lost, good or wicked (see Ezekiel 18, particularly verse 32) and acts in whatever way it takes to salvage a creation, damaged and abused by human rebellion. Individual suffering in this age it seems, is necessary to

secure the best possible salvation for the whole of creation in the age to come. We therefore need the faith to accept that it is for God to determine the best way of working things out. In other words, he is sovereign. His rule and not ours is the one that counts. In many ways it is ludicrous to think otherwise. Isaiah writes, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

It is wrong therefore, to place human limitations on God. When considering the matter of what a loving God is like we must first acknowledge that human beings do not fully understand love. When considering the actions of an all-powerful God we must remember that God will not use power in the same way that human beings do. God’s power is constructive not destructive. The human tendency in the application of power, is to strengthen that which supports our own particular vision and destroy that which opposes us. God is more willing I think, for the sake of the wholeness of his creation, to transform all that opposes him rather than destroy it. Human constructs of love and power then, are inadequate to describe the love and power of God. If we say that a loving God should do this or that, or question how God can possibly be loving or powerful when certain things go on in our lives, we make him out to be subordinate to us. We are in effect stating that our ways and our thoughts are higher than his. It is an example of the primary sin, which is to attempt to replace the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of the self.

Pause now to read and reflect on the words of [Isaiah 55:6-11](#)

To deal with the whole business of how we might appreciate the sovereignty of God, I need to turn to Job. The story of Job begins with a challenge made by Satan to God. Satan claims that Job has faith in

God only because things are going well for him. The challenge is that in the face of unexplained hardship and suffering, Job would deny the sovereignty of God. Throughout the story Job suffers many dreadful setbacks. Through it all he does not deny God, but he does question him, reflecting the trait of human nature to feel a need to make sense of suffering. We often try to do so in simple terms of cause and effect. Job's story raises the naive and common belief (put forward by Job's friends) that individual suffering is in some way a proportional consequence of individual sin. To his so called friends, Job's cure could be found through repentance of sins that in reality, weren't actually present. The point of it all is that we cannot always make sense of suffering because we do not have the mind of God. Faith is about trusting God in every circumstance even if those circumstances are uncomfortable or downright painful. Faith is not about believing that God will do whatever we want him to, which has been the error of some elements of the church's healing ministry. Faith is about bringing our circumstances to God, being real about how they are affecting us and asking for his mercy to bring relief. Whether or not that relief comes in the way that we might like, has to be down to God. In the healing ministry we have to remember that being cured, is not an indicator of the strength of a person's faith. We should note that Job came to the point of trusting in God before he was healed of his physical illness and before his material wealth and family circumstances were restored.

The lesson that Job (and even more so his friends who thought they had it all tied up) needed to learn was that God's actions cannot be questioned by mere mortals. Job hears the words of God in a series of questions laid out in chapters 38-41 that highlight the futility of thinking that we know better than God. Questions such as:

- Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? (38:4)
- Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place? (38:12)

- Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep (38:16)
- Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for days of war and battle? (38:22-23)
- Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion's belt? (38:31)
- Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane? (39:19)

And in a statement laden with stinging irony, God challenges Job.

'Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendour, and clothe yourself in honour and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at all who are proud and bring them low, look at all who are proud and humble them, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit you to you that your own right hand can save you.'

It is worth reading the entirety of Job 38-41 to appreciate the way in which the poetic nature of the writing strengthens the central message. By the end of it Job understands that he is in no position to argue with God. His response is one of humility and acceptance of God's sovereignty.

I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

The final point I'd like to make concerning Job is that Satan was proved wrong in his challenge to God. Job through faith, wins a battle over Satan. Jesus does the same thing in the wilderness following his baptism. The suffering of his long desert fast and isolation gives rise to temptations to ease his situation in a human way. Jesus relies instead on the word of His Father and Satan is forced to retreat. Jesus does the same, only more completely, in Gethsamane and on the cross, overcoming the powers of evil as he submits to the way of his Father. Note that in the desert, Jesus is led to this place of suffering and temptation by the Holy Spirit and on the cross, by the will of His Father. When we have the faith to allow God's way to prevail, regardless of what that means for us, I suspect that we also win spiritual battles in the heavenly realms.

Peter writes 'dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12). If we choose to live as Jesus' disciples, we have to accept that things will not always go in the way we might plan. Even in ministry the way of God often seems irrational, but we must remember that the ministry is not ours but God's. Paul would not have considered imprisonment as a useful tool for church planting and evangelism, yet he writes to the church in Philippi 'now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole Palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear' (Phil 1:12-14).

In 1 Thessalonians Paul again writes, 'You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a

model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, the Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, your faith in God has become known everywhere. (1 Thess 1:6-8a). So here's a thing. Faith in the face of suffering has an evangelistic edge. It speaks of God to all around, even to those that might be our tormentors. When people see that we still hold on to God when things aren't going our way it is a witness to the reality and love of God and wins hearts and minds. Through it we participate in the furtherance of God's kingdom. This is why Peter says rejoice. We can do so not because of the hardships we face but because we participate in ministry of Christ and the restoration of his kingdom. It is though a ministry that also involves participation in suffering.

We will then face suffering, but we are not to be afraid of it. We have strength in the power of God to overcome anything the evil one might throw at us. As Paul concludes in his letter to the Thessalonians 'But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.' (1 Thess. 3:3).

Pause now to listen to the worship song, ['Sovereign over us.'](#)

*There is strength within our sorrow, there is beauty in our tears
And you meet us in our mourning, with a love that casts out fear
You are working in our waiting, sanctifying us
When beyond our understanding, You're teaching us to trust*

*Your plans are still to prosper, You've not forgotten us
You're with us in the fire and the flood
Faithful forever, perfect in love, You are sovereign over us*

*You are wisdom unimagined, who could understand your ways
Reigning high above the heaven, reaching down in endless grace
You're the lifter of the lowly, compassionate and kind
You surround and you uphold me, and your promises are my delight.*

*Even what the enemy means for evil, You turn it for our good
You turn it for our good and for Your glory
Even in the valley You are faithful, You're working for our good
You're working for our good and for Your glory*

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- ***What do the words of the song say about how God can work through suffering?***
- ***Bring to mind and give thanks for the times when you have received or seen God's miraculous healing take place.***
- ***Reflect on times of hardship and suffering that you have faced, where an immediate answer to prayer has not been forthcoming. Ask God to show you how he strengthened you during those times.***
- ***Reflect on times in your life where your faith in times of hardship has led to conversations with others about faith.***

As a final thought concerning this topic, we need to understand that God in his sovereignty, will not necessarily be predictable. God in his nature is unchanging. His love and faithfulness is eternal, but that does not make him predictable. I was reading the account of Judas' betrayal in Matthew's gospel. Judas was paid thirty pieces of silver by the religious authorities to lead them to Jesus at an opportune moment. Judas fulfils this task, but we read that later, when he saw that Jesus had been condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the money to the authorities, throwing the coins into the temple before going away to hang himself. The statement afterwards though is telling. 'The chief priests picked up the coins and said 'It is against the law to put this into the treasury since it is blood money' (Matthew 27:6) They were unable to go against their religious rules but could not see that they had already broken with the spirit and the

principles of the law of God by condemning Jesus to death. To them, the law of God was firmly bound within the tenets of their religion. To this day a consistent fault of religious systems is to put God in a box and tie it up with the shackles of human traditions and regulations. Those of us who follow religion should be aware of the risk of our faith becoming located in something other than God. And that something is usually religious practice or specific doctrine. I am not saying here that religion isn't helpful or indeed necessary. I am not ashamed to call myself a religious person, but I have to hold onto religion and doctrine with a light touch. My faith must be in God alone. The God who forgives to the extent, that he is prepared to take human form and through death and resurrection, defeat the powers of evil on my behalf. My prayer is that my religion helps me to find and know this God.

The art of Christianity then is to live by the principles or the spirit of the law rather than the letter of a law instigated through human systems and traditions. 'A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship God in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipper the Father seeks.' (John 4:23). This was Jesus' response to an observation from a Samaritan woman concerning regulations about where people should worship. Jesus is making it clear here that God cannot be pinned down to any human system or institution. He does though reveal to us the principles by which we are to live our lives. Belief in his absolute sovereignty gives us the faith to believe in the rightness of his ways as oppose to those of the world and to follow those ways even when to do so seems risky or difficult. That belief will also allow us to continue to put our trust in him even when the road ahead of us is rocky and even when we cannot see the end point.

NB. The film 'I still believe', currently available on Amazon Prime is worth a watch. It deals with some of the matters that I have outlined in this reflection.