

The Comfort of Providence

(Knowing God Through Suffering Lesson #8)

I would venture to say that whatever you may have gained in your understanding of God's providence from last week's lesson, much of it remains shrouded in mystery, in the working out of God's providence. The issue of sovereignty of God/man's responsibility remains illusive because the Bible presents it to us in a way that forces us to believe/hold on to matters we cannot reconcile.

Therefore our conclusion must be that we are unable to reconcile the truth as presented due to our finite understanding. We do not have a contradiction, but a mystery.

Though they be incompatible in our mind, they are perfectly compatible in the mind of God. Our responsibility is to maintain all that God has revealed with a proper Biblical balance and proportion. {The love of God, the person of Christ}

Carson, "The mystery of providence defies our attempt to tame it by reason. I do not mean it is illogical; I mean that we do not know enough to be able to unpack it and domesticate it!! We must be content to live with our limitations by assessing whether we are comfortable in joining the Biblical writers in utterances that mock our idolatrous devotion to our own capacity to understand."

Are we prepared/comfortable to embrace truth that we don't have an answer for?

Like Paul in (Rom 9:19-23).

Here is my point. You must learn to embrace mystery/tension/things you won't fully understand if you have any hope of receiving comfort as you experience the outworkings of God's providence in your life.

To know Him/to trust Him when you are called to navigate the deep waters of suffering and persecution.

Although much of God's ways in providence are past finding out, that can still be a great encouragement to us. Mystery does not necessarily point to frustration and despair. There can be much to encourage us because all is not shrouded/hidden in mystery. Some things are very clear, and it is those things revealed in the mystery of providence that give us great comfort and encouragement.

And that is our mission. (1 Cor 13:12) "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

Before we take up the comfort we draw from God's providence, I want us to consider together two very practical matters in Christian living that will help us to properly and accurately embrace the tension we often face in our experience.

- I. Learning to Embrace the Tension of God's Providence
As established in last week's lesson.

First: Prayer

We know that God is absolutely sovereign!

Not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will. (Matt 10:29)

He has decreed all things and all that He has decreed shall come to pass!

He is Creator of all things/we are dependent creatures.

{Immutable/unchangeable/eternal/all powerful/all knowing/all seeing}

But this glorious God is personal/interactive with what He has made and He has called us into a living/loving relationship with Him through Jesus Christ, and He invites us, yes desires us to seek Him in prayer. Ask Him to do things we cannot do. Tell Him our thoughts/tell Him we love Him.

And then you hear a voice out of the ditch on the right side of the darkness. {God is sovereign/He will do what He has decreed. Thy will be done.}

Then the other ditch on the left calls out. {God will do something you ask. He will change His mind/change course. You can alter history/if you believe.}

As we have said many times, safety is between those ditches. Yes, we know God is sovereign, but we also know He is responsive to the cares of His people.

(Ex 32) One of the most remarkable prayers in Scripture as Moses intercedes with God after the golden calf incident. This prayer of Moses illustrates the point of holding both truths. Son of God/Personal responsiveness of God.

Read (vs 7-14)

Then of course we are faced with this conundrum, "God relented/changed His mind." Properly understood (I believe) is the encouraging truth that God weaves the prayers of His People into the fabric of His eternal decrees. {Often uses His people's prayer as second causes to accomplish His decree.}

Application being, even with the reality of that tension, we pray/we seek the Lord/we cry out to God. "Our Father who art in heaven."

Prayer is relational NOT mechanical.

Our adoption more than legal.

We have the Holy Spirit sent to our hearts crying "Abba Father." (Gal 4:6)

We have the HS to help us to pray.

Secondly: Evangelism

{Another area in which we live out our faith with a similar tension}

Ask: Can someone identify the tension?

God is sovereign in choosing (electing) His people (sinners). (Eph 1:4) "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."

Man is responsible to believe. (Mk 1:15) "and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;[e] repent and believe in the gospel.'"

{Ditch on the right: God is sovereign. He will save whom He wills. Ditch on the left: Man is responsible to respond, to choose Christ.}

And here again, where is safety? Between those ditches/between those polar opposites. The apostle Paul was never stymied by those truths.

(Acts 18:9-10) "And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.'"

{How do you nurture your children. How do you pray for your children?}

We must learn to embrace the tensions of Scripture and we must cultivate a comfort level with that as well.

Clear texts of Scripture should function in our lives the way they function in the Bible. We avoid denying one in order to affirm another. We hold both.

{We pray & interact with a sovereign God. We speak truth to the dead.}

As we embrace those tensions/as we become comfortable with them, we will grow and mature, become more stable in the midst of things that happen in our lives that we cannot reconcile/we cannot explain.

We will come to know God better. The God who has (in grace) revealed Himself to us/dispensed with our filthy sins in the cross of Jesus Christ, and has promised (in all His sovereign/unchangeable purpose) “that we will never be tempted beyond our ability to endure.” (1 Cor 10:13)

“In knowing Him better, we will learn to trust Him; and in trusting Him we will find rest {peace/comfort/joy}.”

If you are at the point of being willing to embrace the tensions of God’s sovereign purpose as that unfolds in your experience, then you are ready to consider the comfort that we find in God’s providence.

II. Embracing the Comfort of Providence

Under this point I want us to consider together how the Biblical writers understand the sovereignty of God in the unfolding of providence in order that our thinking will fall in line with what is written. As we seek to know God/know His presence/purpose in our own experience, as we gain a more settled trust/confidence/comfort in His providential dealings with us.

1. The Scriptures teach that God’s sovereignty assures us everything is under control!

(Acts 4:23-28)

Therefore in light of the reality articulated in that prayer and in a multitude of other texts of Scripture, the apostle pens:

(Rom 8:28)

Properly understood, one of the most comforting passages in the Bible.

The primary theological perspective that puts teeth in that passage for our comfort is the sovereignty of God.

Think about the calming/comforting effect this truth should bring to us as we grapple with/struggle with the uncertainty that often clouds our thinking in the midst of some difficult/confusing providence.

We must come to grips with our limited perspective.

We must embrace Paul’s assurance that God is working for our ultimate good!

Carson, "To walk in the unknown with a God of uneclipsed power and unfailing goodness is safer than a known way."

Do you believe that? No other comfort in the midst of uncertainty.

2. We must learn from the Scriptures that God's timeframe and focus in the unfolding of providence is much longer than ours.

Naively we are more focused on the present, but the Bible paints a different portrait when it comes to God's focus.

- a) The Book of Ruth: Naomi and her plight. Ruth the Moabitess, determined to follow Naomi. Boaz, kinsman redeemer. Marriage. Book closes with Naomi holding in her arms a baby, not just any baby. Grandfather of Jesse, of David, etc.
- b) The life of Joseph: Sold into slavery/Potiphar/jail/cupbearer and Pharaoh's dreams. They meant it for evil, God meant it for good.

Here's the bottom line – God is intimately involved in every dimension of your life as His child. But He is in it for the long haul, and more often than not, that translates into a timeframe that can be uncomfortable. If nothing else we learn patience.

(Ps 131) "But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me."

3. The Scriptures teach us that with God there are no insurmountable problems/no surprises.

(Luke 1:30-39) (Heb 11:17-19) (Matt 19:26)

These accounts in the Bible are designed to build trust and confidence in God. Especially when things don't work out the way we expected/or at least hoped they would {marriage/church/etc.}

**There is comfort in trusting the God who can change anything/may be changing you, and if nothing changes, "grace is sufficient."

4. There is much comfort in knowing that the Bible clearly teaches that God is concerned and intimately involved with the little things of our lives and our experiences.

Now the reality cuts across the grain of our natural thinking does it not. {The God of the universe/creator and sustainer of the cosmos is concerned about me and about the little insignificant matters of my daily existence.}

(Matt 6:25f) Refer to (Matt 10:29)

The LJ in both contexts is demonstrating God's absolute sovereignty over every dimension of our existence in order to achieve our native tendency to be anxious and to fear. His argument from the lesser to the greater is designed to calm you/comfort you as you serve Him in whatever calling.

5. Concluding Thought

We have considered a number of Biblical lines of reasoning and my desire for all of us this AM is that we leave this section of our lesson (embracing the comfort of providence) convinced/encouraged/comforted in the grand reality that we have been trying to establish from the Bible.

This sovereign/transcendent/eternity/immutable God who decrees all that shall come to pass in this world and in my life, responds to me.

He is involved with my life/my needs/my hopes/my tears/triumphs/disappointments. He is "My Father who art in heaven."

Nothing too big/nothing too small, and to keep this grand reality thriving in your soul as you seek to know God through suffering.

Bathe your soul in the Psalms. (Ps 103, 42)

Prayers of Paul. (Eph 5, Phil 3)

Our Lord's prayer and life.

Talk to Him/Jesus Christ has torn the curtain. You are invited to the throne of the one "who lives forever, whose name is Holy, who dwells on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly in spirit. To revive the spirit of the lowly and revive the heart of the contrite." (Is 57:15)

That is the God of developing a theological framework for suffering, to know God!

Questions:

1. God is transcendent and intimate. Why is it important to remember both those Biblical categories?
2. Why is it so important to embrace mystery/tension/reality?
3. Why is it important to realize "its not all about us" when we find ourselves in the midst of difficulty?