

Pondering the Pandemic

I believe that God is speaking to Bridgeway about His sovereignty during these days. In March Sam preached on Matthew 6:25-32 with one of his points having to do with sovereignty then this past week he felt led to open his sermon on Matt. 27:19 by taking us back to James 4:13-15 regarding sovereignty again. As soon as it became apparent the Chinese epidemic was going to become a worldwide pandemic God impressed upon me that He was in control. He called to my memory the old song "He's got the whole world in His hands" and reminded me of Job 38:13 that gives us a picture of Him holding the world by the edges and shaking it. Since then I have been awed knowing that we are seeing a very clear picture that God is, indeed, in control of His creation from one "edge" to the other! That reality is stunning to me!

Sam, in his Matt. 6 sermon gave 8 reasons why as believers, we should not worry about our economic or physical well-being or even how long we are to live. One of those reasons, and in my mind the paramount reason, was that worry shows a lack of faith in God's sovereignty.

I don't know about you but worry and anxiety are two issues that can grip me in normal times. I am one of those age-vulnerable COVID targets who is also a small business, businessman. If you mix an invisible microscopic bug that has the ability to take my family and me down physically with a shuttered economy that has the ability to take us down financially, you have a "perfect storm" for potentially causing me a major anxiety attack. Yet Phil. 4:6-7 doesn't "suggest" that we not be anxious but it commands us not to be..."DO NOT (an imperative!) be anxious for anything..." So the question today is can trusting in God's sovereignty in the midst of COVID 19 somehow enable us to obey Phil 4 and if so, how.

What do I mean by "God's Sovereignty"?

If we were to take a survey of Christians in the western world I suspect most would say that they believe that God is sovereign, but when you press them we find that sovereignty takes on a multitude of meanings depending on a person's theology. A definition of sovereignty that I believe expresses it best says that God's sovereignty is "the ultimate explanation for what happens in the world. It is the wise, just and gracious will of God". I once heard someone tell me during a conversation about sovereignty that they certainly believed God is in control but they would also like to think that they had a hand in their business success. To me that's like saying someone is half pregnant. One either is pregnant or they aren't. It is the same to me when speaking of sovereignty. Either God is in control or man is. Of course, we have responsibility but in the end the scripture clearly says that God is calling us to participate in His plan not the reverse.

Ps. 115:3 speaks directly to sovereignty: "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever (emphasis added) he pleases." I believe that when the Psalmist says God does "whatever he pleases" the "whatever" likely includes the hard things we encounter in life like this pandemic. That might be a tough pill to swallow yet Ps. 115 doesn't insert any disclaimers in the emphatic statement that God does "whatever he pleases". The scriptures define the "whatever" God is sovereign over. The Word says He is sovereign over things like our plans, the nations, world leaders, disease, life, death, evil, calamity, Jesus' death, our salvation, animals, nature, chance, our destiny, etc. Read about those in the following passages: Ps. 33:10-11; Is. 46:9-10; Dan. 4:34-35; Job 43:3; Job 2:10; Heb. 2:10; Prov. 16:9; I Chr. 20:6; Eph. 1:11; Ps. 135:6; Prov. 16:33; Ps. 139:16; Prov. 20:24; Ps. 75:6-7; Prov. 21:1; Job. 34:4; Matt. 10:29; Ps. 22:28; Mk. 4:39-41, etc.

Coming to grips with the fact that sovereignty includes God being in control of the hard things in life might cause you more concern than comfort. Edwards had a similar struggle:

“From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God’s sovereignty...It used to appear like a horrible doctrine...But...there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind from that day to this; so that I scarce ever have found...the rising of an objection against it...The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God.”

I join with Edwards in saying, “Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God”! When I contemplate the absolute sovereignty of God and the fact that nothing is outside His plan and His control (even our present circumstances) it brings me a deep inner peace that I cannot find in my health, my own abilities, my bank account, my stock portfolio, or anywhere else. When sovereignty sinks in you will find it either directly or indirectly on nearly every page of the Bible.

How can we find peace in our current situation by simply knowing that God is sovereign?

Is it enough to just know God is sovereign when we face our anxieties and fears? Sam’s sermon on Matt. 6 said it isn’t. He said we need to have “faith” in His sovereignty. We must trust that God is in control, believe His plans are “for our good and not our harm” (Jer. 29:11) and trust His plan even if we aren’t privy to His purpose for it. We need a Pauline faith that says that God is “working all things” (even a pandemic) for our good and His glory (Rom. 8:28).

So the question arises, if sovereignty is “wise, just and gracious will of God” how do we trust God as sovereign and explain that a pandemic is gracious? Jonathan Edwards dealt with the seeming paradox that can exist when you say that God is gracious, merciful and compassionate but who, at the same time, is sovereign over everything, even the difficult things in our lives like the pandemic. Edwards’ solution was to say that God views His creation through two lenses, one narrow-angled and the other wide-angled. When God sees the suffering and pain that we, even His children, go through encountering the difficult circumstances of our lives He views us through His narrow angled lens seeing our suffering and our struggles and grieves with us, weeps with us and feels deep compassion for us. On the other hand, when God steps back and views our circumstances like COVID 19 through His wide-angled lens He sees the bigger picture and how those circumstances are a part of a bigger plan He has to bring us ultimate good, a good we may not be able to see but God does.

So how do we get to a Paul-like faith that sees God as in control and working for our good in the midst of a pandemic? I believe the key is to trust in the many unbreakable promises that God has in his Word. Knowing and believing God’s unbreakable promises enables us to grow in our trust of His sovereignty. Piper, when someone asked him what to do when we don’t desire God, said that we must “drag ourselves” back to the Word. I think the same principal applies when contemplating the ramifications of His sovereignty. If you are having trouble trusting in sovereignty, “drag” yourself back to the Word and fill your mind and heart with all the promises God makes about His sovereign control over life. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you trust that “whatever” God pleases is really for your good. My Spiritual mentor in my younger days in the faith once told me that he read the Bible every day until he got a promise for the day. That might take him five minutes or an hour or two but once he found it he wrote it down on a piece of paper, put it in his pocket and pulled it out to read several times a day to remind him of the promise God had made to him that day. What kinds of promises does God make to us about His power over anxiety and worry? They are endless in the scriptures. Some of those include: Is. 41:10: “Fear not...I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”; Joshua 1:9: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened...for the

Lord...is with you wherever you go"; Is. 41:13: "...I...hold your right hand...fear not, I am the one who helps you"; Ps. 50:15: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you shall glorify me"; I Pet.5:7: Cast "...all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you"; Prov. 29:25: "...whoever trusts in the Lord is safe"; Ps. 27:1: "The Lord is my...salvation...the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid"; Deut. 31:6: "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear...for it is the Lord...who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you"; Ps. 34:4: "I sought the Lord, and he answered...and delivered me from all my fears"; Jn. 14:1: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God..."; Matt. 10:31: "Fear not, therefore; you are of more value (to God) than many sparrows".

The Bible is replete with God's promises that he has only the best for us and is working that plan through the circumstances in our lives, even when it doesn't seem like it. If we will trust his unbreakable promises that He is working everything together for our good we can say like Paul, "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39).

Questions:

- 1) When God looks at our present situation through his narrow-angled and wide-angled lenses what do you suppose he sees?
 - a. How do you think he reacts to what He sees through each lens?
 - b. Can you find hope, comfort and joy in what you think He sees and if so, how?
- 2) Do you see a demonstration of God's sovereignty over His creation in the pandemic?
 - a. If so, what do you see?
 - b. Can you see any good that has or could come from our current situation? If so, what do you see?