

Sovereignty and Suffering

Job 12

Intro: [“Does God Cause Pandemics?”](#)¹ That’s the title of a recent article by David Baker.

“Is God in some way behind the current coronavirus pandemic? Is He sending us all a warning? Or is it just an example of life being out of control in a world full of problems?”

A few weeks ago Tom Gombis, professor of New Testament at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, answered that question with an article entitled [“God is Not in Control”](#)².

“To say things like 'God is sovereign and in control of this situation' is 'not a faithful representation of how Scripture portrays God's sovereign kingship'.”

His argument is that Jesus is not actively ruling over **this** world, but the world to come. God gave authority of this world over to man and allows people to do what people do. Consequently, this creation, this world, is literally out of Gods’ control.

“The nature of Christian hope is *not* that God is in control.”

The only hope and comfort a Christian can have is that we will one day go to heaven where Jesus actually IS in control. Consequently, God is not in any way behind or responsible for Covid19. He does not cause pandemics.

This will seem reasonable to many professing Christians, primarily for two reasons.

1. When we look at the world we live in, there are many things we could point to that would seem to support his claim. Random tragedies, vicious rapes and murders, devastating tsunami’s, earthquakes, hurricanes and pandemics would all seem, to the human eye, to argue that this world is clearly not being run by a loving, omniscient, omnipotent, sovereign God.
2. To say that God is not sovereign over all the events of this world seems to get God off the hook. There is no need to try and reconcile the idea of God’s sovereignty and the pain and suffering of this world. We can just say that God empathizes with us, He wishes it were different, but He’s not in control.

This morning, we are going to hear Job’s thoughts on the topic.

I. The Setting

In chapter 12, Job is responding to the speech of Zophar, the third friend. Zophar’s speech is very much like those of Bildad and Eliphaz. It is just another expression of what

we have been calling “The System”. The system is the theological and philosophical conviction that the moral universe is ordered along very simple lines.

- God is sovereign – all powerful and all wise.
- He gives blessings to good people and punishes evil people.
- Job’s suffering is *prima facie* evidence that he has sinned.

And so Zophar’s counsel is for Job to repent so that God may bless him once more.

11:14 If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,
and let not injustice dwell in your tents.

¹⁵ Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;
you will be secure and will not fear.

Job’s response to Zophar is 3 chapters long as Job first speaks to his friends (chapter 12) and then to God (13-14). This morning we are looking only at chapter 12.

II. Job’s Response

Job responds to Zophar first with a rebuttal (1-6) and then an affirmation (7-25).

A. A *Rebuttal* (1-6)

Job begins his rebuke with a sarcastic defense. His friends are acting like Job is clueless about the ways of God and that they have wisdom. They have it all figured out.

² “No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you.

³ But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you.

Who does not know such things as these?”

Job’s argument with his friends and their shallow application of “the system” to Job’s circumstances, is that it ignores the actual facts of his case.

⁴ I am a laughingstock to my friends;
I, who called to God and he answered me,
a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock.

Job’s argument is simply this: The system doesn’t account for suffering like mine. I was a just and blameless man. I called to God and he answered me, he approved of me. But now I am ridiculed and derided, as one from whom men hide their faces.

The system doesn’t fit with real life – not mine, or the world around us. If God unfailingly blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked – why are the tents of robbers at peace and those who provoke God secure (vs 6)? They aren’t sitting in the ash heap! I am!

B. An Affirmation

Job then affirms his conviction concerning the full sovereignty of God. He begins by pointing out this doctrine is such an indisputable reality that even the animals know it.

⁷ "But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you;

⁸ or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

⁹ ***Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?***

Job fully accepts and affirms the sovereignty of God over every aspect of this world.

1. Over Life and Death

¹⁰ *"In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind."*

Every breath of every creature on the earth is held in the hand of God.

2. Over Natural Disasters

¹⁵ *"If he withholds the waters, they dry up;
if he sends them out, they overwhelm the land."*

Droughts and floods do not happen by chance but by God withholding and sending.

3. Over Political and Religious Leaders

¹⁷ *He leads counselors away stripped, and judges he makes fools.*

¹⁸ *He looses the bonds of kings and binds a waistcloth on their hips.*

¹⁹ *He leads priests away stripped and overthrows the mighty.*

God makes foolish the wisdom of the wise and overthrows the mighty.

4. Over Nations

²³ *"He makes nations great, and he destroys them;
he enlarges nations, and leads them away."*

Who made Persia and Greece and Rome and America great? God did! Who destroyed Persia and Greece and Rome, and can at any moment do the very same to this nation? God! All these things are from the "hand of the Lord". That's what Job believes.

What he can't understand is "Why"? Why has God dealt so harshly with him? It is not the *reality* of divine sovereignty that troubles Job – but the **mystery** of it!

What Job's three friends refuse to acknowledge is that there is a vast mystery to the sovereignty of God. Their system places God in a neat and tidy box and then labels the

events of life in tidy moral categories. But that is a gross misrepresentation of both the facts of life on the ground and the reality of God in all His Sovereign mysterious, Incomprehensible ways. There is a vast mystery to God's ways.

"My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

That is just true by virtue of the fact that God is God. Consequently, when God appears to Job in chapter 38 and following, he does not explain his sovereign ways to Job, He reveals the glory of his deity! He doesn't tell Job why He did what He did. He simply invites Job to consider the vast, mysterious reality of God as God! And when He is done, Job has no more questions. He repents.

Job 42:3 "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Job didn't need the answers. Seeing the reality of God as God was enough.

III. Our Understanding

Why did God give us this book of Job? He did it for a reason, for a purpose! God wants us to have a better understanding of what He is like. He's revealing himself to us! We, the reader, stand in a different place than Job. We read Job's words, but we have access to something Job did not. We have access to the conversations taking place in heaven between God and the Devil. And there we gain great insight into the **way** God sovereignly rules over this world.

A. *The Way God Rules*

I'm going to read and summarize a section taken from "*When God Weeps*" by Joni Eareckson Tada. She asks the question: "Who or what caused Job's suffering?", and points out that there are a variety of causes behind Job's devastation, all of them real!

1. **Natural forces:** Lightning strikes and windstorms are clearly involved – very likely nothing that we would call miraculous. A weatherman today could look at the meteorological data and explain the high and low pressures systems that "caused" these devastating weather phenomena. According to the Bible, bad weather burned up Job's sheep and servants and killed his children.
2. **Evil people:** The Sabeans and Chaldeans that stole all of Job's livestock and killed all his servants most undoubtedly had no sense that they were carrying out

some heavenly plan. They were driven by greed and callous disregard for life. They are responsible for their actions and will one day answer for them before the judgement throne of God. Evil men caused Job's suffering.

3. **Satan:** We know, from chapters 1 and 2, that the Devil is clearly involved. In fact, God "gives" Job into Satan's hand (Job 1:12, 2:6) and then the Devil gets to work.

Now the Bible doesn't say that Satan controls the weather but, as Joni Eareckson says, "He sponsored the storms". He was, in some way, responsible for their effects. However, we can clearly ascribe the actions of the Chaldean and Sabean raiders to him. The Bible tells us that fallen men are slaves of the Devil to do his will. Paul calls Satan "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4). And the Apostle John says that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). So, Satan was clearly and directly behind the wicked actions of the Sabeans and Chaldeans – and he also will give an account for his evil on the last day.

4. **The decree of God:** On the deepest level, without taking anything away from the reality of the other causes or the culpability of the other actors, the fact stands that what happened to Job was according to God's will. God is the one who directed Satan's gaze to Job. God is the One who gave Satan permission to do what he did. Without denying the agency of all the other causes, God is the first cause. And the book of Job is book-ended with affirmations of the same.

If you remember, Job was able to immediately recognize and embrace this truth.

"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. (1:21)

"Shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil (or trouble)? (2:10)

The book of Job ends with another affirmation of God's hand in his suffering.

Job 42:11 Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for ***all the evil (disaster) that the LORD had brought upon him.***

Two specific things to notice:

- a) God's primary sovereignty over all things in no way detracts from the reality of the secondary causes. **(WCF 5.2)** The secondary causes are ***real***:
 - o The storm was "just weather" doing what weather does – following the natural course of laws with which God has created it.

- The Chaldeans freely chose their wicked actions like all people do.
 - The Devil also was acting freely according to his own desires and designs.
- The wicked men and the Devil behind them are truly and fully guilty of sin because they made their evil choices freely. And yet, they all, unwittingly, carried out God's sovereignly ordained purposes!

As Christians, we are not wrong to assign culpability to freely acting agents in this world. We don't simply shrug at great tragedies and evils and say, "Allah wills it." We can grieve the evil of wicked men and lament the tragedies of a fallen world *all while still holding firmly to the Sovereignty of God*. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, grieving their wicked, unbelief – and yet he never for a MOMENT doubted his own sovereign purpose at work.

- b) Secondly, nowhere in all of the book of Job, or in all of Scripture, does any author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, try to get God "off the hook" by denying his absolute sovereignty. God NEVER apologizes for his sovereignty!

Isaiah 46:9–10 I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'

That is a great comfort to those who know and love the Lord.

Joni, "What if your trials weren't screened by any divine plan? ... First, the world would be worse, much worse, absolutely intolerable. ... Left to his own, the Devil would make Jobs of us all. The Third Reich would have lasted forever. Your head would be mounted on Satan's wall above his fireplace."³

Piper: "If God is not sovereign enough to ordain and superintend and direct the suffering he allows ----- then he is not sovereign enough to rescue us from them or comfort us in them. There is no comfort to say, 'God had nothing to do with this.' Or, at the least, it is not the best comfort. Getting God 'off the hook', leaves you with a God that isn't in Scripture and can't do anything more in your life than empathize."⁴

Comfort will not come by trying to discern the divine purposes of God but by discerning the true character of God.

B. The Character of the God Who Rules

The Bible doesn't tell us much about Gods' *specific* purposes in the details of our lives, but it is full of revelation concerning the grand purposes – and in a way that reveals His character!

I was reading Romans 9 this week saw something there I had never noticed before. As Paul discusses God's utter and absolute sovereignty over salvation, he includes this incredible, Spirit given insight into the nature of the God who sovereignly rules.

Romans 9:22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—²⁴ even us whom he has called...?

In other words, Paul wants us to see God *desiring* to show, to the world and the hosts of heaven, two things: his wrath (which is his implacable opposition to and hatred of all that is evil flowing out of His infinite goodness) and his power. Why those two things? Because in this world those are the two charges men raise against God. We see the suffering of this world and we say, "God is not good or He is not powerful!" And Paul says, "God desires to show that he is both infinitely good and gloriously powerful. That's what He desires." But then why doesn't He??

Because He has chosen to "*endure with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction*". In other words, God sees and hears and knows all the evil, hateful, harmful actions of wicked men and women. But he patiently *endures* them! He doesn't show his wrath and power in response to man's sin. He endures it! He allows His name to be blasphemed. He allows people to deride his goodness and power and smear His Holy Name. He endures it! **Why?**

²³ "in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—²⁴ even us whom he has called."

Because he wanted to make known to you the riches of his glory.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the death of our Lord Jesus. Though He was God, He patiently *endured* the scorn and derision of wicked men in order to make known to you the riches of His glory. God exercises all his sovereignty because he loves you and has desires to show to you the riches of his glory.

Paul's first words in that sentence are so important. "What if?" What if this is the way God actually is? What if He patiently endures the evil, blasphemy of men, temporarily

hiding his goodness and power – in order to show you his infinite riches in glory? What if He is willing to suffer and even die at the hands of wicked men, in order to show you his riches in glory? What if that's what God is really like? Isn't that enough?

That doesn't tell us everything about God's reasons for doing what he does and for allowing what he does. But it's enough.

¹ <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/does.god.cause.pandemics/134591.htm>

² <https://tingombis.com/2020/03/26/god-is-not-in-control/>

³ *When God Weeps*, p. 83

⁴ John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*