

EXPLORING MORE ABOUT GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

(SUNDAY, AUGUST 11, 2019)

Scripture Reading: Psalm 44:17-26; Romans 8:28-38

INTRODUCTION

Much of social media and the internet is a total waste of time, but sometimes you come across things that are thoughtful or at least make you think.

On Twitter a week ago or so, someone posted a picture with a smiling teenage girl holding a Bible.

On the top of the picture were the words: War, disease, death, destruction, hunger, poverty, crime, and corruption.

Then at the bottom of the picture was the phrase, "All part of God's plan."

This is the same, old, recycled argument that we call the Problem of Evil.

There are many variations of this argument.

How do you respond to this argument?

We recognize this is an emotional argument more than a thoughtful argument.

One part of our response is to think about the point that is being made.

Because of all this evil, we cannot accept the idea of a sovereign God.

So, this means that wickedness in the end is what rules and will triumph?

Is this more comforting to say?

You can deny God or His sovereign power, but does that now provide a solution for evil?

Does denying God, help anyone suffering from war, disease, death, destruction, and other evils?

R. C. Sproul in his booklet, *Does God Control Everything*, wrote:

"If God is not sovereign, God is not God. If there is even one maverick molecule in the universe - one molecule running loose outside the scope

of God's sovereign ordination - we cannot have the slightest confidence that any promise God has ever made about the future will come to pass.”¹

I do understand that people can be troubled with the idea that God is sovereign and yet we see the presence and reality of evil.

The error is not recognizing evil but making man the standard.

We read in Isaiah 40:27-28:

27 Why do you say, O Jacob, And speak, O Israel: “My way is hidden from the LORD, And my just claim is passed over by my God”?

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, The Creator of the ends of the earth, Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.

The truth that God is sovereign and has an eternal plan is not in conflict with the reality of evil.

It does mean that in the end evil is not the victor. Evil does not get the last say!

I want us to see the presence of sin and evil and the curse, the reality of suffering, and the sure knowledge that God is sovereign as we look at the familiar but precious chapter, Romans 8.

This great chapter of comfort also powerfully presents the reality of sin, suffering, and the curse.

We will begin with verses 1-8

1) THE POWER OF THE FLESH, ROMANS 8:1-8

We often consider these verses focusing rightfully on God’s work of deliverance and salvation.

And we must never miss what Paul’s focus is in these verses, but here I want to focus on what Paul says about the natural condition of the heart.

14 times in verses 1-13, Paul uses the word flesh.

¹ Sproul, 36.

And 19 times in this chapter, Paul uses the word Spirit.

This is one of the great contrasts of this chapter.

It has been a while since we studied Romans 7 and 8.

The word flesh in Scripture can speak of our physical reality.

In other cases as we see in verse 1, 3, 4, and 8, the word flesh can be a little more difficult to define.

It is more than just our sinful human nature.

Flesh according to Douglass Moo is a “power” under which a person lives.

Flesh here is a power of the old-age in Adam that is set against the power of the Holy Spirit.²

Perhaps we could use the idea of going to a military boot-camp. When you enter a boot camp for basic training, those who are in charge can make you do just about anything.

You don't have the option of discussing what you are asked to do. The drill sergeant commands and you better do what is demanded.

Life in the flesh is determined or governed by three powers – sin, the law, and death.

There are a lot of details to consider here, we are focusing on the reality of evil.

Because of Adam's fall, all men enter the world under the power of sin, death, and rebellion against God's law.

To those governed by the flesh, even God's good law provokes rebellion.

Let's focus on verses 5, 7, and 8.

Verse 5 shows that those who are in the flesh have their entire view of life and reality then shaped by the flesh and the rebellion of this world. You could translate verse 5 to read, **for those who live according to the flesh have their worldview shaped by the things of the flesh.**

² Moo, 418, footnote 51.

And then verses 7 and 8 show how clearly impossible it is for those controlled by the flesh to ever please God or obey Him.

The carnal mind or the mind controlled by the flesh is at war with God. It is not subject to God, nor can it be subject.

Those controlled by the flesh have zero ability to please God.

So, to answer the question, if God is sovereign why is there so much evil in this world, we can answer and say that men who are in the flesh have no desire to please God and are focused entirely on themselves and sinful pleasures. All sorts of evil come from this as Jesus stated in Mark 7:20-22.

Clearly Scripture shows that men are not robots. The bondage of sin and death is not an excuse for evil.

John Frame writes,

Imagine Adolf Hitler, staying before God's throne and saying, "I couldn't help the evil things I did. I was morally unable to do good. I was such a rotten person that I couldn't help sinning." An earthly judge would not take such a defense seriously, Would God accept it?³

No, God would not accept this excuse.

Second, let us focus on verses 18-25 and the groaning of creation.

2) CREATION SUBJECTED TO FUTILITY AND CORRUPTION, ROMANS 8:18-25

There is so much richness in every part of Romans 8. I am focusing on the explanation for suffering.

Paul has already presented the fact that men and women apart from the grace of God and the work of the Spirit live in terms of the power of the flesh.

Here we also see in accordance with Genesis 3 the futility, the corruption, and the groaning of creation.

³ Frame, 819.

The word creation used in these verses is found 19 times in the NT.

Sometimes the word means a person.

Mark 16:15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

In other cases the word means the totality of what God created.

Let's look at 3 verses here. First, verse 20.

Rom. 8:20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope;

The word translated as futility is only used a few times in Scripture.

One commentator uses the illustration of a satellite that is spinning out of control, not fulfilling its intended purpose.⁴

The frustration or futility that is demonstrated throughout creation is not part of God's original intent for His glorious universe.

But notice from verse 20 that the verb subjected is used two times.

Creation was subjected to futility.

Because of Him who subjected it in hope.

God was the one who subjected creation to its futility. But God brought this subjection to creation with hope.

Here we consider how we see both the evidence of God's incredible wisdom wherever we look in creation and yet we see the evidence of futility or frustration.

There is disease, disaster, and death.

Stephen Fry is a British broadcaster and angry atheist.

He was asked several years ago in an interview on Irish television, what he would do if he found himself at the "pearly gates" after his death.

⁴ Dunn, 470.

His response:

"I'll say: bone cancer in children, what's that about?" he said.

"How dare you. How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that's not our fault? It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil.

Later he also stated:

"Yes, the world is very splendid, but it also has in it insects whose whole life cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind.

Why? Why did you do that to us? It is simply not acceptable."⁵

This sadly is another example where men think themselves to be gods.

The suffering that we see is indeed horrible.

It is not made better by our own delusions and ideas.

Verse 21 states:

Rom. 8:21 because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

The word corruption in some versions is translated as decay.

Verse 21 states two amazing things.

One, creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption or decay. Two, it will be brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

We do not believe that the entire earth and matter will be destroyed in the coming of Christ but transformed and renewed.⁶

Creation will share in the glory of Jesus Christ and those who are united with Jesus Christ. The glory of creation and its restoration is based on the glorification of God's people.

Third we look at verse 22.

⁵ The Telegraph: Article by Victoria Ward. 31 Jan 2015. Accessed 8/10/19.
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11381589/Watch-Stephen-Fry-brands-God-utterly-utterly-evil.html>

⁶ Moo, 517.

Rom. 8:22 For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

Paul again uses personification to stress that this time of waiting is not easy.

Now creation is not giving birth.

Rather creation suffers – a suffering that is best compared to the suffering a woman who is in the process of giving birth.

It is possible that Paul uses this language again in connection with Genesis 3, though the pain of child birth is found in other passages.

Paul uses two verbs in verse 22 that contain the preposition translated as together or with. The best understanding is that all of creation groans together.

In the words of the Phillips translation, it is a symphony of sighs.⁷

Let's focus next on God's sovereign purposes even in the midst of suffering as we look at a few points in verses 28-39.

3) GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY EVEN IN SUFFERING, ROMANS 8:28-39

J. I. Packer in *Knowing God* in the chapter on God's Wisdom uses the illustration of watching trains at a busy station in England.

Studying the movement of trains from a station only gives you a general idea of the overall plan and movements of the trains.

However, if you are taken up into the control station, you are able to see the diagram of the track layout. Here you get to understand and see the big picture of how the trains move and stop in a particular order.

Packer says the mistake that is commonly made is to think that this is an illustration of what God does when He gives us wisdom – that we somehow start to have a deepening insight into the providential meaning and purpose of events

⁷ Moo, 518.

going around us, as ability to see why God has done what he has done in a particular case and what He is going to do next.

He writes:

Such people spend much time poring over the book of Providence, wondering why God should have allowed this or that to take place, whether they should take it as a sign to stop doing one thing and start doing another, or what they should deduce from it. If they end up baffled, they put it down to their own lack of spirituality.⁸

The wisdom and understanding God gives to us is not focused on the mystery of why but rather on the how.

How are we to live in light of suffering and challenges that we don't always understand?

Now another thing to again state is that we can only go so far in our understanding of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

We cannot answer every single question.

But this doesn't mean that we are left with doubt. It just means that we can only go so far this side of eternity.

Let's focus on verse 28 for a moment.

Rom. 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.

This verse certainly does not explain all the details, but doesn't it provide an incredible foundation for the believer?

All things work together for good because God has an eternal and exhaustive plan that involves all things that take place.

And how should we define the words **all things**? What is included in this category? All things!

I see no reason to limit what this includes which is part of the greatness and glory of this passage.

⁸ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 102-103.

Is there anything in your life that goes beyond this category? Could you possibly face something that would go beyond God's work described here?

Without in any way trying to limit this verse, I think Paul does have a specific focus in terms of suffering.

I don't think his prime focus would be on teddy bears, ice cream cones, and boats on beautiful lakes.

Verse 17 speaks of suffering with Christ. Verse 18 also speaks of present sufferings. Verse 35 speaks of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and death itself.

God certainly uses more pleasant blessings also as part of His great work, but I think there is an emphasis on difficulty of all shapes, sizes, and colors. God in His infinite glory and wisdom is able to bring good to those who love Him and are the called according to His purpose.

How is this possible? God has a plan that includes all things. Let us consider this plan.

There are a number of key words in these verses.

The first word is the final word in verse 28 in our English translations – **purpose**. The word means that which is planned in advance.

The purpose of verse 28 is God's eternal will and plan involving His people and all that takes place.

Rom. 9:11 (for *the children* not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the **purpose** of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls),

Verse 28 also speaks of being called – those who are the called according to His purpose. This word connects back with the beginning of Romans.

Rom. 1:6 among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

The word called here means to be chosen to receive a special benefit or blessing. There is both a noun form in verse 28 and a verb form in verse 30.

Clearly our calling has no basis in our own worthiness or deservedness to be called.

Those who believe in God's sovereignty and election should be the most humble and gracious of people. Yes, those that God has called have been given an incredible blessing.

What a privilege to come to truly know the sovereign God. What a blessing to love God. Yet, how can those who have been given this blessing ever start to think highly of themselves?

Verse 29 further speaks of God's plan. We find two key words at the beginning of this verse - foreknew and predestined.

1Pet. 1:20 He indeed was **foreordained** before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.

God chose beforehand those who would be called according to His plan.

Additionally verse 29 speaks of God's predestination. The word predestined is very similar to the word foreknew. Both verbs in Greek share the same prefix - pro.

Here specifically Paul says we have been predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. We will later return to this phrase.

Before this let us give attention to verse 30. Verse 30 shows that what God determines to accomplish will certainly be done.

Three times emphasis is placed on those whom God has so graciously chosen.

Do you see the repeated use of the demonstrative pronoun **these**? These He also called, these He also justified, these He also glorified.

What we see in verse 30 is that God's eternal plan takes place in time and will culminate at the end of time as we measure it. And with this we again have assurance that God will indeed work all things together for our good.

God's eternal purposes come to shape in very real and often very different ways for His people.

Verse 30 first speaks of our calling.

In terms of calling there is both an outward calling that comes through the preaching of God's word, the reading of God's word, and the witness of friends and family.

There is also the effectual calling that comes through the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit.

All those who have been called this way have tasted of God's sovereign and amazing grace.

Every single believer who should marvel at God's calling. Being born in a Christian home is not in any way a guarantee of being called.

Growing up in a godly family and faithful local church are both great blessings, but they are not the same as God's effectual calling.

Consider for a moment how God sovereignly brought you to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

If God could orchestrate countless events to bring this about, then is there not firm assurance that God will continue to work out all things for your good?

Verse 30 continues by describing God's work of justification and further our glorification.

When God justifies a sinner, that sinner is declared now innocent and righteous because the righteousness of Jesus Christ is accepted as the sinner's righteousness. This is a work that is received through faith in Jesus Christ but it is not caused by a person's faith.

However could a sinner bring this to pass? **You would have a much better chance of performing your own heart transplant than standing before God as righteous through your own efforts.**

CONCLUSION

What is most glorious about this passage is that God determines to work out all things for the good of His people so that they will be shaped into the image of Jesus Christ, so that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

I think each of the three verses in this section refer to this great end.

In verse 28 – it is the word good.

In verse 29 – it is more fully expressed as being conformed into the image of His Son.

In verse 30 – it is our glorification.

Though most people in the world are totally ignorant of the central point of all history and the direction of all history, the fact still remains that the person and work of Jesus Christ, especially His work on the cross for us, is the center of all human history.

Nothing is more important, which is not to say that nothing else is of importance. There is importantly a background and history that we find in Scripture.

And all human history is directed to the day when the full glory of Jesus Christ will be made known, when all of creation will be transformed and restored, and when we will share then in the full glory of Jesus Christ.

Look back to verse 18. Paul was confident that the sufferings of this present time could not be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

That glory is our sharing in the glory of Jesus Christ. And yet now is a time of suffering and groaning.

Now is the time to bear the cross which our Lord and Savior commands that you take up in following after Him.

But taking up your cross is no easy thing. God's work of conforming us into the image of Jesus Christ means not just accepting the glory but also willingly accepting the suffering that He determines you are to bear.

Verse 29 ends by speaking of Christ being the firstborn among many brethren. The term firstborn speaks of the great position of honor and glory that Jesus Christ deservedly owns.

Our Triune God has determined that our Lord and Savior should be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

What a wonderful promise. And this is why you can be fully confident that God has a plan and is working out all things for your good. **The glory and honor of Jesus Christ is the foundation of this plan.**

Is this where your confidence lies? Is this how you are facing the troubles that will soon occupy your thoughts after you leave here?

Don't leave this place just knowing that this is indeed God's plan but leave earnestly seeking the help of your Lord and Savior to believe.

He is our Faithful High Priest who knows your weakness. He knows completely the difficulty of fully embracing God's plan of suffering. He will certainly give you help. Rest fully in Him.

Prayer

Closing Hymn: 501

Benediction: 2 Peter 3:17-18

You therefore, beloved, since you know *this* beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory both now and forever. Amen.