

Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense



Suffering

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The Comfort of God's Sovereignty

I didn't know that I could feel so out of control. I am a doer and a planner. I tend to have a project-oriented way of approaching life. I know exactly what I want to accomplish every day, how fast I need to work, and all that needs to be in place to finish my task. I tend to hate delay and chafe against interruptions. I am always aware of everything I need to control in order to get things done. And I know the people I need to support my efforts. You wouldn't generally characterize me as "controlling" in the negative sense of what that means, but you would surely see me as task oriented and maybe on my bad days a little too much of a self-sovereign.

Then I got sick. I want to take you back to those first moments that I wrote about in chapter 1. That first hour in the emergency ward examining room is a case study in loss of control. Suddenly things got very serious. Five physicians were poking, prodding, and pricking me from seemingly every direction. I was told that my questions couldn't be answered and that I wasn't going to leave the hospital anytime soon. Suddenly my life was

in the hands of people I didn't know, my body was doing things it shouldn't do, and the rest of my life and ministry was on hold. As they wheeled me to a longer-term room, I was having trouble processing it all. Processing is what I do, helping people make sense of their lives from the perspective of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I wasn't processing; I was reeling. I was bombarded with so many questions that I was confused.

I could feel my life being yanked out of my order-loving hands. Then those horrible spasms started. My body shook and cramped, with accompanying spikes of intense pain, and I had no ability to turn it off. I never thought that I would be afraid of my own body, but I was. I was so out of control that everything else important to me faded into insignificance. All I could think of was surviving the physical trauma that had invaded my body. Just when the spasms began to subside, the doctors visited my room with dire descriptions of my diagnoses.

I kept asking the doctors when I would be released, but they evaded my question. I wanted to get back to my routine and my project-oriented lifestyle. Little did I know of the multiple surgeries, hospital stays, and months of convalescing that would become my life for a long time. Little did I know that I would never again be physically the same. I was in the throes of something I had no power to control, and other than doing what the doctors told me to do, there was nothing I could do about it.

Suffering Clarifies Who Is in Control

Hardship has the power to burst the bubble of our self-sovereignty. I don't think I'm alone in saying that I'm tempted to give myself comfort by convincing myself that I have more control over people, places, and things than I actually have. We want to believe that if we eat the right things and do the right exercises, we can control our health. We buy into thinking that if we parent our children well, we can guarantee that they will

turn out all right. We want to believe that if we budget well, invest wisely, and save carefully, we can assure a good financial future. We want to think that if we dedicate ourselves to a loving marriage, we can secure its health and permanence. These are all good things to do, but the assumption that doing them controls outcomes is just not true.

From the very first breath of Adam, the Bible confronts our delusions of and desire for control. It is clear that Adam and Eve were not created for independent, self-sufficient living but for dependent, others-reliant living. And, like Adam and Eve, we don't have what it takes to make it well on our own because we don't have the power to supply all we need for this to be possible. Adam and Eve weren't made to make up their own rules and to live as they thought best. They were made to live inside the boundaries of the rules and purposes of someone greater. And they weren't placed in a world that would submit to their commands and do their bidding. They were called to be the resident managers of a world created and held together by the sovereign power of God.

Yes, we've been given many natural intellectual, emotional, and spiritual gifts, and if we exercise them as God intended, we can do much to help our lives be relatively comfortable and stable. But we can't take credit or blame for things we had no power to produce. If I were in control, there is no way I would have allowed physical travail into my life. In fact, I will make a confession. If I were in control, I wouldn't let difficulty of any kind, big or small, into my life. Hardship confronts us with our tendency to assume that we're in greater control than we really are, and because we think we are, we take way more credit for the good things in our lives than we should. The opposite is true as well. Because we assume greater control than we actually have, we blame ourselves for things we have no power to cause. A loving wife of an unfaithful husband haunts herself with

questions about what she could have done to keep him from wandering. Good parents blame themselves for the spiritual and relational rebellion of their children. People who have invested with untrustworthy investors kick themselves for being so trusting. Even children tend to find reasons to blame themselves for the separation of their parents. In all these cases, people are adding to their suffering by assuming power and control that they didn't have and never will have.

Suffering causes us to scan our lives and face the fact that we control very little. So we mourn not only our suffering but also what it has forced us to admit about ourselves. Our loss of the illusion of control also adds to the fear that accompanies suffering.

But realizing we are not in control is also one of suffering's biggest blessings. It's one of difficulty's paradoxical comforts. The fear and pain of being out of control stand before us as doorways to something very good. It's only when we give up the delusion that we've been or can be in greater control that we can find rest in the One who is in control in our place. Suffering proves that helplessness is the portal to help. It is only when we abandon our independence that we find rest in one greater. Hopelessness is the only doorway to hope. When we forsake our trust in our power, we're then ready to entrust ourselves to the power of another. Our smallness and weakness aren't our greatest dangers; the greatest danger is the delusion that we are bigger and stronger than we are or ever will be. Here is suffering's paradox: the very things we would do anything to avoid, the very things that confront our understanding of who we are, and the very things that cause us the most pain become the very things that usher into our lives the blessings of the help, hope, peace, and rest that we all long to experience.

I want to examine one more thing before I unpack the comforts every sufferer can find in God's sovereign control of all things. I want you to think with me about mystery. God does

things that will remain a mystery. God brings into our lives life things that confuse us. At times we struggle to reconcile what God has said with what he's done. Sometimes God's declaration of who he is seems to contradict what he has ordained. Sometimes God's plan doesn't make sense. At times God appears bad, even though he tells us he is good. At times it is hard to live in the tension of what God has promised and what he has brought our way. There are passages in life when we live with more mystery than clarity. We all face times when we cry out for answers that we'll never get but that seem impossible to live without. Painful times come when we cry, "Why?" "If only _____," or "How long?"

Everyone faces moments when a cloud of mystery covers theological clarity. In these moments we don't want a theological outline or a set of wisdom principles. We cry out for an answer that will dispel the mystery that has us in its emotional and spiritual hold. At times we are tempted to withhold our trust until God gives an explanation. There are times when we're tempted to believe that we won't be able to trust until we are able to understand, that our peace of heart is dependent on mysteries being solved.

Here's the problem. God's secret will is called his "secret will" because it's secret. In his Word God graciously defines his character, and unfolds his grand redemptive plan, but he doesn't explain himself when it comes to the details of how and why he rules his world the way he does. This means that embracing the truth of his sovereignty doesn't remove the confusion of mystery from our lives. So rest and peace of heart will never be found in understanding what God has ordained for us and his world, because we'll always lack understanding to some degree. God knows that we are incapable of carrying the burden of sovereign knowledge that he carries, so he lovingly protects us by telling us

what we need to know: we are to rest in him and live as he has ordained, while he protects us from what would overwhelm us.

When our children were young and I had to say no to something they wanted, they would say, “Daddy, why? Why?” I knew that they wouldn’t be able to understand my reasons, so I would say, “Daddy would love to tell you why, but you would not understand. You can get mad at Daddy and say, ‘My daddy is a bad daddy because he says no to me,’ or you can say, ‘I don’t know why my daddy said no to me, but I know my daddy is a good daddy who loves me.’” Then I would say, “Trust your daddy. I really do want what’s best for you.” Because we don’t understand, and because things around us or near us don’t always seem good, it is tempting to question the wisdom, love, and goodness of God. It is tempting to let our situational confusion begin to sow seeds of doubt, leading us to question truths that the Bible makes clear and that we have held dear.

When Job, who had lost everything, asked God for a reason for his suffering, seeking answers that we all tend to cry out for in the devastation of hardship, God didn’t give him answers. Stop and read Job 38–41 and then consider Job’s response. Rather than giving Job answers he wouldn’t understand and that his heart couldn’t contain, God answered Job by pointing to himself, to his presence, power, and glory. He knew that Job’s instinct was to seek answers, when what Job really needed was to seek God. Nothing good ever comes when a sufferer withholds trust in God because he’s unable to understand why something bad has happened. Yet there are moments when I am tempted, and you will be tempted, to do just that.

So where do we run with our questions? What do we do with our lack of answers? It never works to demand what you’ll never have. It never works to require of God what he, in his love and wisdom, knows it’s best not to give. So the rest of heart that every sufferer longs for never comes from demanding understanding.

Rest comes from putting your trust in the One who understands and rules all the things that confuse you. God is never caught up short. He never has a second of confusion. He never regrets what he's done. He is never confused as to what to do. He has no quandaries, and he never lives with unsolved mysteries. He rules all things, he knows all things, and there is nothing that he doesn't understand.

But there's more. The One who rules and understands everything is the definition of all that is right, true, faithful, loving, powerful, and gracious. His rule is always good because he is good. So it's very important to not allow the confusion of suffering to redefine for you who God is. Rather, we all need to accept the limits of our understanding, while we let God's declaration of who he is in Scripture define the hope we can have, because he is with us in our suffering and rules all the details of it. Hope is found not in trying to solve all the mysteries that suffering brings our way but in running into the arms of the One who has no mystery and offers us his presence, power, and promises.

Understanding the Comfort Found in God's Rule

For his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will among the host of
heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?" (Dan. 4:34b–35)

I love these words spoken by Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful ruler in ancient Babylon, after he'd been humbled by the hand of God. These are words of humble surrender and also of glorious hope for anyone struggling through the hardships and disappointments

of life. May these words be written on our hearts and give hope to us when nothing else in life can. I want to use these words as a backdrop for unpacking the practical, life-giving hope that God's sovereign rule offers to every one of his suffering children.

1. God's Rule Stretches from before Origins to beyond Destiny

It's hard to stretch our imagination far enough to grasp that there never was nor will there ever be a moment in the history of the universe that is out of control. God ruled from his throne before the universe was created and set in motion; God sits on his throne right now, and he'll continue to rule after the world as we know it has passed away. It may not look like it, you may not understand it, and you may quarrel with how he does it, but every second of the past, present, and future passes under his careful rule.

This is practical and hope giving for all of us because every second of our lives, from conception to final destiny, is under his sovereign management. Yes, we face things we never thought we'd face, and, yes, many of those things are very hard. No, we can't always discern why God makes the choices that he, in his infinite wisdom, makes, but we shouldn't allow hardship to lead us to conclude that something has gotten in the way of his rule. As Nebuchadnezzar rightly states, nothing in heaven or on earth can stop his rule or force him to give account for it.

His words paint a huge contrast between God and us, and we need to let that sink in. I can't even keep control of my car keys, let alone the things that give shape and direction to my life. But that shouldn't cause me to conclude that these things are out of control, because they are under God's control. His will is always done. His plan always succeeds. Everything in creation does his bidding. And he's infinitely wise and perfectly good. We shouldn't interpret suffering as evidence of his absence, weakness, distance, or lack of care.

This means that there's never a moment when I can't go for help, and there's never a moment when God is incapable of helping me, because he rules everything that needs to be ruled so that he can give me the help that I need. *Have you let suffering weaken your belief in the moment-by-moment rule of your Lord?*

2. God's Rule Is Global

When we go into a new location, a different situation, or a new community of people, we often experience anxiety. This natural anxiety is the result of the limits of our understanding and personal power when we enter a place we don't yet know or an experience we've never had. No wonder our minds race and our hearts beat a little faster. We wonder what we'll have to face, how we'll be treated, and whether we'll make it through.

Such is the experience of anyone who has ever suffered the unexpected. I had never been seriously sick; I had never endured a long hospital stay; I had never been too sick to do what God called me to do; I had never experienced intolerable pain; I had never endured failing, damaged kidneys; I had never had to face surgery after surgery; and I had never had to face the fact that I will bear significant physical weakness until I die. No wonder I was assaulted with grief and fear. No wonder I was a bit paralyzed by the impossibility of it all. No wonder.

It's here that God's global sovereignty is so precious. Your story will take you places you never thought you'd be. Your life will travel roads you don't feel ready to travel. You'll end in places far from what you would have chosen. There will be situations in which you wonder how in the world you got there. Wherever your story takes you, you'll never arrive there first, because your Lord is already there in sovereign presence and power, and he rules that place in infinite wisdom and holiness. He has the power to do what he wills, and the way he rules is always right.

David captures this well with these familiar words from Psalm 139:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me. (vv. 7–10)

Could it be that you've forgotten that the hard place you're in right now is ruled by your Lord of wisdom, power, and grace?

3. God's Rule Is Individual and Detailed

One of my all-time favorite Bible passages is Acts 17:26–27, which says that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.” I don’t know if I can give justice to the amazing reality that these verses capture, but I will try. When you think of God’s sovereignty, you shouldn’t mentally picture God on a throne somewhere off in the distant heavens organizing the big events of the universe. The picture Paul gives in Acts couldn’t be more different.

Paul wants us to know that God’s sovereignty is gloriously more than a “big event” rule. He wants us to know that God cares about and is involved with the details of our lives, and Paul gives us specific examples. He says that God determines our “allotted periods” and the “boundaries of [our] dwelling place.” You may read that and think, “What in the world is he talking about?” When Paul talks about “allotted periods,” he means the

length of your life, and when he says, “boundaries of their dwelling place,” he means the address where we live. Think of God as directly involved with the length of the life of everyone who has ever lived and the exact address of everyone who has ever walked the face of the earth! He is just that present and powerful!

But there is more here. God has chosen to rule this way to be near to each one of us. Sure, Paul believes in God's *transcendent* sovereignty, the fact that he exists above all, but here he is teaching the truth of God's *immanent* sovereignty, his nearness. Paul want us to know this because wherever we are, whatever we are going through, God is so near that we can reach out and touch him. He is sovereignly close. He is reachable, touchable, in your time of need. The God who is your hope in suffering is near because he has been and will ever be involved with even the little details of your life. His sovereignty guarantees that God is reachable in those moments when you think there is no helper who can reach you with what you need. *Are you in the habit of telling yourself that God's rule promises that he is always near?*

4. God's Rule Is an Expression of His Character

God's sovereignty would not be such a huge comfort were it not for the fact that his rule is an expression of his glory. His rule is an expression, not a contradiction, of his love. His rule is an expression, not a compromise, of his wisdom. His rule never betrays his grace. His rule is an extension of his justice. His rule pictures his holiness. He rules in mercy. His sovereignty is tempered, directed, and expressed by his character. Because of this, in all your pain and confusion you can rest assured that the One who rules over every hard thing you experience is trustworthy because he is perfectly holy, lovingly wise, and good in every way. *When you are confused by God's rule, do you remind yourself of his character?*

5. God Rules for Our Benefit

At the end of Ephesians 1 Paul assures his readers that God not only rules but he rules all things for their sake. He says that Jesus now rules over everything for the sake of the church. Let this sink in for a minute. In amazing grace God has chosen to expend his power and authority in a way that directly benefits his children. You and I may not understand it or think that we are experiencing it, but God's rule is benevolent and redemptive. He does what he does not just for his own glory but also for the glory of his children. His sovereignty has you and me in view. As he rules, he remembers us. He remembers every promise he has made, what we need, what we are going through, the broken, groaning world he's left us in, and what it's like to walk in our shoes. The One in charge of it all is for us and exercises that authority for our benefit. *Do you remind yourself that the One who rules everything, rules it all for your good?*

Yes, we all live in moments, locations, situations, or relationships that seem to be spinning out of control, but they are not out of control. Yes, they are way beyond the scope of our control, but they are under the rule of One who is not only in complete control but is also perfectly good in every way. By the grace of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is your Father. He exercises his sovereignty with a father's love for you. He hears your cries for help, and he stays near, and he is always reachable. He has authority you will never have, and he exercises it with a wise and loving heart for your benefit and the benefit of each of his children.

Review and Reflect

1. How has suffering forced you to acknowledge that you aren't in control?

2. What about the mystery of God tends to frustrate you? What about it do you find comforting?

3. Job in his suffering questioned God, but God simply pointed to himself rather than answer Job's questions. Why? Where do you see God's care in this response?

4. In your suffering, how have you allowed yourself to forget God's constant presence, rule, and character?

5. Paul Tripp reminds us that God in his goodness rules over all things for our good. How does this encourage you, and where have you seen it in your life?

Heart Reset

- Job 38:1–42:6

- Acts 17:26–27

- Ephesians 1:15–23