

God...Absent From Human Affairs?

Job 30:20; 31:35-37

Thank you for inviting me to share with you this morning/evening.

People of the Word is part of our Building Community family so I want to say it's good to be "home" and thank you for your commitment to belong, grow, and serve.

It was a great joy this past week to dive into the depth of these chapters, mining the nuggets of God's Word. My walk has been challenged and my appreciation for your dedication has grown as well.

There is no substitute for an in-depth study of God's Word. Jesus prayed (John 17:17), *"Sanctify them (i.e. make them like me Father!) by the truth; Your Word is truth."*

Slide - Continuing with the mining analogy, our memory verse is taken from the 28th chapter and verse 28, *'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.'*

Bullet - To fear the Lord, to respect Him, to yield to Him that's where our treasure is! That is where true riches are found. *"I have treasured the words of the His mouth more than my daily bread"* (Job 23:12).

Job went to great lengths to describe man's quest for riches stating in verse 3 (chapter 28) that *"he searches the farthest recesses for ore in the blackest darkness."* In verse 10, *"he tunnels through the rock...he searches the sources of the rivers and brings hidden things to light."* In verse 12, *"but where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? The price of wisdom is beyond rubies* (verse 18).

Verse 23, *"God understands the way to it and **he alone** knows where it dwells."*

Chapter 31 was especially challenging and inspiring was it not? When God said to Satan back in chapter 1 verses 8-9, *"Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."* Chapter 31 is what God was referring.

31:1 - "I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a woman." An appropriate opening verse for men as it relates to where our integrity begins.

As Job proceeds in defense of his character, the qualifications for church leadership found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 came to mind; as well as the introspection of Ps. 139:23-24, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting"* (see Job 31:33).

Thank you Carol for the copy of your notes from your lecture last week. They are outstanding. It was a pleasure to read them. They served me well as a springboard for what we are about to discuss here today.

SLIDE: I have entitled this talk, "Is God Absent From Human Affairs?"

Based on Job's plea for God to hear his case. Can't I have my day in your court oh God?!!! Quite a bold request!!!!

Job 30:20; 31:35-37

BULLET - *"I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me..." "Oh, that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing...I would give him an account of my every step; like a prince I would approach him."*

SLIDE - In the 23rd chapter, Job asks the \$64,000 dollar question, "**Why** does God seem to be absent from human affairs?"

BULLET - The *who, when, where, and circumstance* questions are relatively easy. It is the *WHY* question that is so difficult.

Suffering is a universal fact of human life. Is there a baby born who doesn't enter the world... crying? The witness of history and our daily lives testifies to the daily suffering endured by the human race. But, how does all this pain fit into the divine order of things? That was Job's question.

N.T. Wright (Evil and the Justice of God, page 19) asks the question is a slightly different way,

"If there is a god, and if he is a good, wise, and supremely powerful god, then why is there such a thing as SUFFERING? Even if you're an atheist, you face the problem the other way around: is this world a sick joke, which contains some things that make us think it's a wonderful place and others things which make us think it's an awful place, or what?"

Is God a *good* God?

SLIDE - The Psalmist wrote in 73:1, "**Surely God is good to Israel...**" In what sense is God good? The scriptures teach that God is THE source of all goodness. In other words, we only know what is good from what God has declared to be good. See again 28:23, "*God understands the way to it and **he alone** knows where it dwells.*" Otherwise, it is just my word, or opinion, against yours. This is dangerous. The multiple genocides of the 20th and 21st centuries attest to this.

Throughout church history theologians have debated this question of God's goodness. They asked, "Is God under law?" i.e. "Is there some cosmic law of goodness that even God is required to obey? **Or**, is God outside of law, apart from law, free to act in any way He so chooses?"

Both ideas: that God is under some independent standard that exists outside of Him, or that God is a maverick to the law accountable to nothing have been rejected by orthodox Christianity.

BULLET - The biblical concept is this:

There is a law of goodness that even God must obey and by which God Himself is judged. That goodness, however, is not something apart from Him. The ultimate norm for goodness is the eternal character of God Himself.

So, when we say that God is a law unto Himself we mean that God **always** acts and behaves according to His nature, His own character, and that character is altogether holy, all together righteous.

SLIDE - One more technical concept...Theologians distinguish between the **BULLET** - *justicia interna* and the **BULLET** - *justicia externa* of God. That is, the internal righteousness of God and the external righteousness of God. That distinction means that what God does externally is **ALWAYS** perfectly consistent with what He is internally. His behavior is pure because His being is pure. There is a perfect consistency between the fruit and the tree.

This is something that Job in chapter 31 could not claim. Yes, he may have demonstrated external righteousness, but was his internal righteousness perfectly consistent? No!

SLIDE - Romans 3:10-19 argues that...

*Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. Paul then quotes the Old Testament, "There is no one righteous, not even (Job) one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one... "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that **every mouth may be silenced** and the whole world held accountable to God.*

Job will be silenced a bit later in chapter 40-41.

Allow me to do say something in answer to the question, "*Is God Absent From Human Affairs?*" that may sound a little shocking to you. It may not, but it could.

Suppose that Jesus walked through those double doors, walked right up to you, looked you straight in the eye and made a promise to you. Here's the promise: "For the rest of your days in this world, I'm not going to allow anything bad to happen to you. That all that is going to transpire for rest of your days is going to be good."

Quite a promise. How would you feel about that?

The shocker? We don't need to have Jesus walk in the room and say to us that the only thing that will ever happen to you for the rest of your life are good things because he has already said it.

We don't have to fantasize about Jesus walking in here with this qualifier...if you are a believer, a Christian, that whatever is going to happen to you will be good because he has already said it.

Does that sound strange?

In like manner, God has already said to the unbeliever that nothing that will happen to you for the rest of your life will be good. Everything that happens to you will ultimately be a tragedy.

All right. Let's unpack that concept during the remainder of our time together.

There is a distinction between the **proximate** and the **ultimate**. The proximate is that which is here, right next to us, close at hand. It is near, part of our experience. I'm referring to the horizontal plain. And on the horizontal plain, the proximate if you will, we deal with bad things every day. Sin is bad. Pain is bad. Suffering is bad. The death of a loved one is tragic to us.

My mother-in-law died young of cancer. My sister-in-law is battling breast cancer. My father-in-law is dealing with cancer. Karen and I are wondering not if, but when we will have to deal with it.

The bible doesn't sugarcoat that. The bible doesn't refer to evil as an illusion, that we must pretend that it doesn't exist. No. The bible strongly affirms the stark naked reality of pain and suffering, tragedy, and affliction.

SLIDE - Jesus said, (John 16:33) "*In this world **you will** have trouble.*" He didn't say, "*you **might** have trouble.*" Nope. It's part of the package.

As Carol aptly said last week, "we can't avoid tribulation, adversity or affliction, but if we understand that these things have purpose, that nothing intrinsically evil can come to the child of God, that only a wrong reaction to them can injure us, and that we can actually grow in spiritual maturity from them, THEN we have it made."

SLIDE - What is perennially voted the most popular verse in the New Testament among Christians?

Romans 8:28

BULLET - And **we know** (apostolic optimism) *that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

At first pass, we say, okay there are all kinds of things that happen to us in the proximate realm that are bad, that are tragic, but God stands over and above the proximate realm. God is on the vertical plain transcending this horizontal veil of tears in which we live and He has the power to take every bad thing that happens to us and make it contribute ultimately to our good. Is that what Romans 8:28 is saying? I think so.

Think about it for a moment. If ultimately all these proximate miseries, tragedies, grief's, sufferings, and bad things are taking place...if God is ultimately using these things to bring about a good then ultimately it is good that they have happened to us. Do you see that?

Now, I don't know if the man born blind in John 9 or the martyred wife of James in Acts 12 or those who were killed by Pilate as they were presenting an offering in Luke 13 or those who were at the wrong place at the wrong time when the tower fell on them also in Luke 13 would have agreed at the time. I have no doubt they do now.

Jesus responded in John 9 in reference to the man born blind, *"this happened (the man's blindness) so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."*

To those who questioned Jesus about those who Pilate killed or those whom the tower fell upon, he gave no answer as to why.

Here is the exchange,

Luke 13:1, Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." 6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. 7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 8 " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

The Heavenly Father never allows anything to happen to us that is not for our ultimate good. **If we believed that, we could face anything.**

There is a brand of Christianity that I believe is a distortion. It teaches that God only wills health and prosperity for his followers. All of the sorrow, death and pain is the result of the devil's work among us. As if the devil had the power to frustrate the sovereign authority of God.

We know that not to be true from our study of the book of Job. If we have learned anything, it is that God is sovereign. The devil must request permission, and only if God grants that permission, is he allowed to function.

Some years ago, a pastor was interviewing a couple on television who had experienced an unthinkable tragedy, their child had been killed in an accident. The couple was trying to be heroic in their Christian testimony like Job (13:15), *"Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him."* They were testifying that they still put their hope in God even though this tragedy had befallen them. The pastor was trying to comfort he said, "we know that God doesn't have anything to do with death. God has nothing to do with suffering."

Really?

Rabbi David Kershner is his best selling book titled: *"Why Do Bad things happen to Good People?"* He wrote the book after the tragic death of his son. In the book, he suggests one of two possibilities.

1. God is all-powerful and He is able to stop bad things from happening to good people, but He is not all-good and so therefore allows bad things to happen to good people.

Rabbi Kershner rejects this view. The Bible teaches that God is righteous and good and that He is a just judge over the earth.

2. God is good and He does not want bad things to happen to good people, but He is not all-powerful and He is not able to handle the heavy workload which confronts Him.

After all, God is overworked and underpaid and He just isn't up to the task of averting tragedy and so bad things will continue to happen to good people. This is the view to which Rabbi Kershner subscribes. Is this a biblical view?

This is what the pastor was saying. God is grieving spectator of the whole mess. He has nothing to do with death. Is that the case?

God have everything to do with death!

I think we can all understand what the pastor was trying to do. He didn't want to couple to blame God for the sin, the tragedy, the suffering and death. In his attempt to comfort the family, the thought that God is absent in such times comes across as hallow. Why?

A God who has nothing to do with the suffering we endure in this proximate realm is no comfort at all. The message of the bible is **SLIDE** - (Ps. 23:4), *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, (WHY?) for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."*

God measures in suffering. He redeems the world through suffering. The pathway of Christ was the via dolorosa – the path of grief/pain. It is through suffering that our redemption was accomplished. God majors in suffering.

To say He has nothing to do with it is take all hope from us.

N.T. Wright refers to three erroneous reactions to suffering:

1. We ignore suffering when it doesn't hit us in the face.
2. We are surprised by suffering when it does. What does the bible say? *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you"* (1 Pet. 4:12).

3. We react in immature and dangerous ways as a result. We have generated a culture of blame: it's always everyone else's fault, and I am an innocent victim. Or, we can project suffering onto ourselves and imagine we are to blame for it all.

The bible never promises that Christians will not suffer, but rather that we will suffer. But with that promise is that God will triumph in our suffering. He will triumph over and through our suffering. God will work over and above our suffering so that *in ALL THINGS God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

R.C. Sproul wrote a book titled, *Surprised by Suffering* based on the passage out of 1 Peter. In the book is a chapter entitled, Suffering as a Vocation. A vocation? What does he mean by that?

This. A vocation is a what? A calling. My calling as a Christian is to suffer. No exceptions. Aren't you glad you signed on?

A few weeks ago I entitled a study out of **SLIDE** - Acts 14:22, "**Signing Up? Be Prepared For Plenty Of Hard Times.**" It was based out of Paul's words, after he was stoned, to the church at Lystra,

"After proclaiming the Message in Derbe and establishing a strong core of disciples, they retraced their steps to Lystra, then Iconium, and then Antioch...urging them to stick with what they had begun to believe and not quit, making it clear to them that it wouldn't be easy: "Anyone signing up for the kingdom of God has to go through plenty of hard times" Acts 14:21-22 (MSG).

A few weeks ago, I was at the home of Harvie and Lesly Turrentine. Lesly battled cancer for a number of years. Towards the end, she was hurting. She looked me in the eyes as if to say, "why?" What was I to say at that moment? The only thing I could say, "I don't know." I don't know what God's purpose was in her suffering, but I do know it was holy. A week later she died.

The last thing anyone of us wants to hear in such moments is that our suffering is for **nothing**. That it happens by chance. That it was a bad roll of the cosmic dice.

The only way any of us will get through our pain is to draw near to God and say, "I don't know why you have visited me with this, but if this is in your call on my life, I will be able to survive it, because I know that You O Lord have a purpose in it.

SLIDE - Last week Carol shared, "God is there even when we don't feel him and He's working all things out for our good. Every disappointment is a divine appointment. His plan is to bless us, not blast us. He desires not to crush us, but to make us into the image of Christ."

I quoted Jesus earlier in John 16:33, "...*In this world you will have trouble.*" Here is the latter part of the verse, "*But take heart! I have overcome the world.*"

Joseph proclaimed in reaction to the hardship he endured from his brothers, "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*" (Genesis 50:20).

What jumps off the page in this verse? Purpose?

Finally, these words from Jeremiah, *"For I know the (ultimate) plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"* (29:11).

Our future is bright because God is with us!

One of my favorites...

In Christ Alone

Songwriters: Getty, Julian Keith; Townsend, Stuart Richard;

In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm

What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless Babe
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save

Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live

There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again

And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

***No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From a life's first cry to final breath***

Jesus commands my destiny

No power of hell, no scheme of man
Could ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I stand

I will stand, I will stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground, all other ground
Is sinking sand, is sinking sand
So I stand