

God's perfect providence; his strange ways with his people

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- [0 : 00] Well, we read this morning in the book of Psalms, in Psalm 138, Psalm 138, John Calvin, the great 16th century reformer, described the book of Psalms as an anatomy of all the parts of the soul. And what he meant was that when we read the book of Psalms, we find that it speaks to us about every condition in life. It speaks to us about our highs and our lows, our joys and our sorrows, our fears and our hopes, our failures. The book of Psalms, if we didn't have the book of Psalms to read and to sing, I just wonder how poor Christians would cope. It's very striking that 40%, 40% of the book of Psalms are laments. That's a high proportion, isn't it? You would think that perhaps the greater part of the book of Psalms would be about joy and delight. Well, there are Psalms about joy and delight, but 40% of the book of Psalms is about laments. Lord, life is hard. Lord, where are you? Lord, I'm overwhelmed. Lord, my enemies are abounding and crushing me.
- Lord, I'm crying out to you and you're not there. There's an honesty in the book of Psalms. And that's why we should know the book of Psalms well. And Psalm 138 is a deceptive Psalm.
- When you read the first six verses, you think, my, David's enjoying life. He's full of praise to God. He's full of delight in God. And then you discover actually that life for this man was hard and almost overwhelming. So we'll read Psalm 138, though the focus will be almost exclusively on the eighth verse of the Psalm.
- I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart. Before the gods, that is, before the high and the mighty in this world, I will sing your praise. I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your unfailing love and your faithfulness. You have exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame.
- [2 : 53] When I called, you answered me. You greatly emboldened me. May all the kings of the earth praise you, Lord, when they hear what you have decreed. May they sing of the ways of the Lord, for the glory of the Lord is great.
- Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly. Though lofty, he sees them from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life. You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes.
- With your right hand, you save me. The Lord will perfect what concerns me. Now, the translation you have, the Lord will vindicate me. It's not good. Just take my word for it. I don't know much Hebrew, but I know.
- The point is, the Lord will perfectly watch over my life. Your love, Lord, endures forever. Do not abandon the works of your hands. The Lord will be around him.
- [4 : 19] And that's very pertinent, isn't it? Interesting. Christian believers who take the Bible seriously are experiencing the hostility of the world.

It's not that the world wants you to tolerate it. The world wants you to bow down before it. And verse 8 really explains to us how David, experiencing the trouble that he's going through, is able nonetheless to praise God with such heart delight.

Because the Lord will fulfill his purpose for me. Come what may. Whatever trouble I'm in. Whatever hostility I face. Whatever hardship may yet come to me. God will perfect that which concerns me.

Now, these words of David have come to be known as the providence of God. Now, some of you, hopefully some of you at least, know something of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

[5 : 35] Question 11. What are God's works of providence? Answer. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving, and governing of all his creatures and all their actions.

Now, what that's saying is simply this. God is in control. It may not look like it. It may not feel like it.

But God is in control of everything and everyone everywhere. of everything and of everyone everywhere.

You see, for the Christian believer, life isn't a lottery. We're going to get to Psalm 138 in a minute. The Christian life isn't a lottery. Life in all its bewildering and often dark and deep uncertainties is ordained by God.

That's one of the foundational truths of the Christian religion. Puzzling, perplexing, absolutely. But the God we worship is the God who has ordained all things according to the counsel of his own will.

[7 : 00] And when you look out at the world, throughout its history and its present day history, you're left speechless. How is it that amidst all the ravages of life, amidst all the tragedies of life, amidst the Afghanistans of this life, are you telling me that the Christian God rules over all?

Absolutely. Unequivocally. Undoubtedly. Explain it to me. I know not how to explain it. But this I do know.

that the God who spared not his only son, who delivered him up for us all, and who looking at the cross of Jesus Christ on that day would be saying to themselves, this is the most magnificent act of love the world will ever see.

Who looking at the cross of Jesus Christ, an expiring, spit-dripping, blood-congealed figure, would have thought, my, what wonder of grace we behold on that cross.

The cross looked dark and mysterious and bewildering. We thought, the disciples said, we thought that he was God's Messiah, but well, no, he's crucified.

[8 : 29] He's dead. And yet, on that cross, God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

God was making atonement for sin for all who would ever believe in his son. That's why we need the eye of faith as we look out at the world we live in.

Because just with our own understanding, we would just see chaos and mayhem and absurdity and wickedness and vileness and all that's there. But overarching everything is the wise, sovereign, providential, predestinating purposes of God.

God will perfect that which concerns me. And we don't know what that means. We don't have an inside track into the mind of God.

We can often look at our lives and we say, Lord, everything seems to be falling apart. And the Lord says, trust me.

[9 : 51] Trust me. when everything shouts out to you, God has abandoned you. Trust me. It's this truth that upholds David and keeps him from being overwhelmed by his trouble and the wrath of his enemies.

If you like, he looks out at the life around him. He's in the midst of trouble. he's experiencing the hostility, the enmity of the wrath of his enemies.

And he says, I believe God. He places all his circumstances on one side and he places God on the other.

And he says, I've got a choice. I can believe what my circumstances are saying or I can believe in the character of the God who loves me. And David is saying, I believe God.

Through all the mysteries of life and life is full of mysteries. If you ever meet Christians for whom life is all sweetness and joy and delight, just run from them.

[11 : 16] They live in an unreal world. When I read the Bible, even our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, life was not even. It was filled with delights and joys, but dark, deep valleys.

There was even an occasion in the Savior's life, did you know this? There was even an occasion in his life when he cried out, O God, I have wasted my life, my whole life, has been a waste of time.

Now, maybe you're thinking, are you serious? Jesus didn't say that. Yes, he did. I'm almost tempted to say if you want to know, go and find out, but I'll tell you.

In the second servant song, Isaiah 49, where the promised Messiah says, Lord, I've accomplished nothing.

In his holy sinlessness, he looks at his life, his disciples, Peter, though they all leave you, I'll stay by you to the end, I'll even die with you.

[12 : 30] He leaves him. Judas betrays him, the rest run, and he's left alone. where did our Lord turn to?

Well, he turned to the book of Psalms, you'll remember, on the cross. Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? You know, for many years, I thought that the great wonder of that verse, Matthew 27, 46, quoting Psalm 22, 1, that the great wonder of that verse was in the word forsaken, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The son of your love, who has become the object of your wrath, why have you forsaken me? But the more I think about it, maybe it's just age, I think the great, great, great wonder of that verse is in the possessive personal pronouns, my God, my God, in the midst of all the darkness that's enveloping his human soul, he never lets go, my God, my God, he can't call God father, the sense of the fatherhood of God has been eclipsed from his mind, but he never lets go of the possessive personal pronoun, my God.

And really what I want to ask this morning is, how can David be so sure that God will perfect that which concerns him?

That God will not be deflected from his eternal purpose, which, as the New Testament unpacks for us, is to conform us to the likeness of his son?

[14 : 32] How can David be so sure? How can he be so sure? Because, do you notice he says, the Lord will perfect that which concerns me, your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.

David is confident that God will perfect, bring to ultimate perfection that which concerns him for two reasons.

Number one, because God's love is steadfast. Literally, it's the word chesed, covenant love. God has pledged to love us with an everlasting love.

And on this, David is saying, I rest my weary soul. That I am loved with everlasting love, led by grace, that love to know.

I remember years ago, maybe 15 now, sitting at a Banner of Truth ministers conference in England. And one of my dear friends, Ted Donnelly, from Northern Ireland, was preaching.

[15 : 58] And I forget, actually, much of the sermon, but one thing I remember powerfully and vividly that absolutely transfixed me to my seat.

He quoted the words at the beginning of Jeremiah 31, I have loved you with an everlasting love. And he quoted a comment by a Dutch theologian called Johannes Gerhardus Voss.

And Voss says this, the reason, the reason God will never stop loving you is because he never began. I have loved you with an everlasting love.

From times eternal he had set his love upon us. I remember sitting. I must have read those words in Jeremiah, which is my favorite Old Testament book, if you can have favorites. I must have read it many times, but I never stopped long enough to savor the wonder of the words, I have loved you with an everlasting love.

The reason he will never stop loving you is because he never began. and those words almost haunted me for the weeks and months that followed.

[17 : 21] I have loved you with an everlasting love and that love comes to its climax, to its ultimate expression in the cross.

love and love. The only begotten Son of God is given up in love that sinners might be saved, that he might bear in our place the judgment and the condemnation, the righteous judgment and condemnation that our sin deserved.

hear his love vast as the ocean, loving kindness as the flood, when the prince of life, our ransom, shed for us his precious blood.

You see what David is doing, he's placing alongside the darkness of his circumstances the steadfast love of God.

Now the cross of Jesus Christ does not give us an inside track on God's sovereign mysterious purposes. We don't behold the cross in all its glory and think, right, I've got it all now.

[18 : 40] I see why you're doing this and why you're doing that. No. But what the cross does is something better. It says, behold your God.

That's the those three words are what the Bible is all about. The Bible is not about you and it's not about me. It's not ultimately about your salvation or my salvation.

It's about God. Someone said to a friend of mine a while back, you know, I don't get this Christian thing that everything's for the glory of God.

That's just very selfish, isn't it? God. And my friend asked me, well, how would you respond to that? I said, well, my only response really is this.

My greatest good is bound up with the glory of God. When he is most glorified, I am at my highest and best.

[19 : 50] There's an inextricable link between God being glorified and the people of God being blessed and enriched. You see, in human lives, nothing more delights me than to hear people speak well of John.

I just love to see the delight that brings me. I couldn't tell you. Think of that exponentially and infinitely magnified. When Christ is honored, the people of God swell with delight and joy and praise.

And so that's the first reason, because of God's steadfast love. But there's a second reason, and he touches on that in the second half of the verse.

God's will not forsake the work of his hands. Now I think there are two aspects to this.

don't forsake the work of your hands. Keep me and hold me amidst all the trials and troubles of life.

Don't forsake the work of your hands. Having begun to build your kingdom in this world, Lord, continue to do so until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, as the prophet Habakkuk puts it.

[22 : 34] We'll look at it tonight. It's the first sermon ever preached and it was preached by God. God says to the serpent, I'm going to raise up someone from the seed of the woman and he will crush your head.

And I think David is saying, Lord, don't forsake the work of your hand. Continue to build your church and kingdom in this world. Let nothing hinder you. Let nothing deflect you from the work that you have committed yourself to and pledged yourself to.

You know what prayer is? Prayer is taking the promises of God and bringing them back to him. Lord, you've promised this, now do it. That's why we should know the promises of scripture, hundreds of them.

Now I know this is deeply problematic for many people and for many Christians. The sovereignty of God over all things and over all people everywhere is bewildering, absolutely, and it should for who has known the mind of the Lord.

For ten chapters he's been unpacking the riches of God's justifying, saving, loving Jesus Christ. And it's just piling up blessing on blessing.

[25 : 06] To him be the glory. You know what Paul is saying there? He's saying for ten or eleven chapters I've tried to explain the gospel in all its wonder. And here's my conclusion. I haven't begun to begun to begun to understand it.

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Who can understand it? But behind it all, the Lord is perfecting that which concerns his people.

you know, the example, the illustration is as old as, I was going to say as old as me, it's older than me. Some of you know what it is to make tapestries and when you're watching someone, I'm so handless, you know, I can conjugate verbs but I can't thread a needle.

And when you watch someone making a tapestry, you think, that's just beautiful. You just see it beginning to take shape and form.

[26 : 21] But then of course if you go to the reverse side, you just see a tangled skein of threads and you think you've got no idea what's going on on the other side.

And life is like that. we live the Christian life often perplexed, bewildered. The Bible is very honest, cast down, says Paul, but not forsaken.

Cast down, bewildered. I always metaphorically and sometimes physically run from Christians who have got answers for everything.

We're Christians not because we've got answers, for everything. We're Christians because the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. And sometimes all we can say to people is, I don't know.

How do you explain that? I don't know. God's a God of love. How do you explain that? I don't know. But I believe him.

[27 : 32] God's love. And that's why Job in the midst of all that he was experiencing that seems just unimaginable could say this.

Though he slay me, yet will I trust him. are you serious?

Yeah? Why would you trust anyone who put you to death? Because he loved me and gave his only begotten son to save me from hell and bring me to heaven.

and I'm willing to trust him until the day breaks and the shadows flee away and he gives me a new body and wipes away every tear from my eyes.

And he says to me, do you see it now? And I think, what do I know?

[28 : 49] But I think, we will all simply say, you did all things well.

May God bless his word to us this morning. Amen. This last hymn we're going to sing was written by William Cooper.

Not Cowper, but Cooper. He was a remarkable Christian hymn writer who experienced dark, dark depression most of his Christian life.

He was never able to escape from overwhelming darkness. And so when he wrote, God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform, he was writing out of the depths of his own experience.

dies, goodness, these things can be unusual.