

The Sovereignty of God (3): Disciples

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[0 : 00] I'm sure that we all sincerely hope that the worst of the coronavirus pandemic is behind us. But even if it is, for many of us, the pandemic has left its mark upon our emotional and mental well-being.

After 18 months of uncertainty, what we now need is stability. We need to know that far from being chaotic, God is in control of all things.

That he's sovereign over his world and over all the situations we his children face. We need to know that our heavenly father loves us and that his plans are for our good.

Now, over the last few weeks, we have considered how the sovereignty of God played out in the lives of two of the Old Testament heroes of the faith.

Joseph and Joshua. God led them into difficult situations, but he did so for their own good that they might more fully rely on him as their heavenly father.

[1 : 12] However, this evening, as we move into the New Testament, into Mark 4, verse 35 to 41, we see the sovereignty of God playing out in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

Remember, their heavenly father loves them. And his plans for them are for their good, even if the situations they find themselves are not good.

Well, with that in mind, that of stability and security we find in the experience of the sovereignty of our loving heavenly father, I want us to see three features of this story this evening. First, the sovereignty of God sometimes takes you to the edge.

Second, the sovereignty of God sometimes doesn't seem to care. And third, the sovereignty of God always leads us to the grace of Jesus.

Firstly, or first rather, the sovereignty of God sometimes takes you to the edge. The sovereignty of God sometimes takes you to the edge.

[2 : 24] Some of us may wish we had been among the disciples of Jesus. Living with him. Learning from him. Listening to him. It sounds like a great idea.

That is until the idea hits the reality. Do you really want to expose yourself to the hatred of Jesus' enemies? The poverty of Jesus' followers?

The unpredictability of the situations into which Jesus would lead you? Well, maybe not so much after all, eh? In verse 35, we learn that after a busy day's teaching, Jesus commanded the disciples, saying, Let us go across to the other side.

Having been surrounded by crowds all the day long, having been questioned all day long, and having talked all day long, Jesus is tired, so he commands his disciples to take him across the Sea of Galilee by boat to the other side.

And so we read, And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. So after the tumultuousness of this day, Jesus now had the opportunity to spend some quality time, as it were, with the disciples, and to rest.

[3 : 44] All seemed well and good when they left the shore behind them. If the weather had been bad, the disciples, many of whom were fishermen, would not have set sail.

But we read in verse 37, A great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.

Set fair, the crossing across the Sea of Galilee wouldn't have taken very long. But a great windstorm had arisen, and the waves were so large that the boat was in danger of being swamped. Mark uses a word which literally means, A tempestuous wind whipping up a great storm. This is what the disciples met with, something that terrifies every fisherman.

Think of the storm in the Hollywood movie with George Clooney, The Perfect Storm. Waves big enough to swallow a boat. The wind howling like banshees in the night.

[4 : 47] There could be no seemingly more chaotic environment or situation. The waves are crashing in over the side of the boat. Winds are coming from all directions, sweeping west and east and north and south.

And as the disciples strained at their oars, struggled with the sails, and bailed out the boat, they would have been justified in thinking to themselves that no one is really in ultimate control of all this. That this storm has just happened randomly. That there's no need to look for a higher reason behind the storm. It just happened. Don't go looking for logic when there's only chaos. Stop trying to find a pattern of reason in an anarchic universe. Who knows why this storm in the Sea of Galilee blew up?

Was it because a butterfly was flexing its wings in the Amazon rainforest, which initiated a sequence of events? Who knows?

[6 : 00] And I guess we're not all so different. Why do bad things happen to good people? I find that a challenge.

Why do good things happen to bad people? I find that an even greater challenge. Why do so many of us struggle with mental or physical illness? Why do so many of us struggle with anxiety or loneliness?

Why for some of us does life seem to be one disaster after another disaster? You know it's true. For some of us, life seems to be a road of thorns.

What does others only ever smell like roses? Seemingly random events. You touch one of the seat tables on a commuter train.

And you contract the flu virus. It lays you on your back for two weeks. It stops you studying for your final exams. As a result, you don't do as well as you had hoped in your exams.

[7 : 09] And your employment options are narrowed. And all because you happened to get on that precise train, sit in that precise seat, put your hands on that precise table at that precise time.

It all seems so random. You become a victim of the curse of happenstance. A lot of Christians lose their confidence in the sovereignty of God because of their life circumstances.

They've been sold the lie that when you become a Christian, everything in your life becomes plain sailing. The opposite is often true. And what gets to them even more is that they become the victims of happenstance in the course of their faithfulness to God.

You got on that train because you were on your way into church on a Sunday morning. You only started developing mental illness after being the victim of bullying and abuse in the church.

The disciples had only found themselves on the Sea of Galilee because Jesus had commanded them to take him across to the other side. If they had disobeyed him, they'd now be sitting in dry land in safety, in each other's company, chewing on supper.

[8 : 44] But having obeyed him, having pursued the path of faithfulness, they find themselves in Dante's Inferno, Galilee style. Can you relate to that?

I can. But when you're in the path of obedience and faithfulness to Jesus, that's when you begin to run into difficulties at home and at work with your health or with your relationships.

You're tempted to throw up your hands and think to yourself, if God is in control and if he really is my loving Heavenly Father, then these things wouldn't be happening to me at all.

Perhaps that's the way you feel tonight. Perhaps for the last 18 months, you've been experiencing mental torture and you've been brought right to the edge.

As we saw last week from Joshua, God has given you far more to handle than you can possibly bear. You're at the very edge. The waves are filling the boat and you're going to drown.

[9 : 51] If ever there was an extremity, this is it. But listen, is there any comfort for you here? Rather than add to your anxiety, let me suggest two aspects of comfort we can explore.

The first is this. Others have been where you are today. Others have. Perhaps not in this precise situation, but similar situations.

And yes, even worse situations than you find yourself in. Think of Joshua. Think of Joseph. Think of the disciples. Think of Jesus. Other faithful Christians are where you are today.

You're a member of a rather select band of people. You are not alone. Really, you're not. And those who've gone before you are cheering you on from that great cloud of witnesses.

You can hear Joshua shouting from that great cloud. You feel alone with more to deal with than you can possibly cope with? I know just how that feels.

[11 : 02] And then from the other side, you hear Joseph shouting, you don't know what God's doing in your life? Neither did I. I know just how that feels. And then from over there, you hear the disciples shouting, you feel betrayed because now you're hurting and it's only because you walked in the path of faithfulness to Christ.

We know how that feels. You're not alone in being taken to the edge, you know. Or not by a long shot. But the other comfort for you here is that it's God himself who has taken you to the edge. This is your loving heavenly father's path for you. He's not playing chess with you and then throwing you away just like a chess master might sacrifice a pawn in order to take a castle. He is your loving heavenly father whose love for you and wisdom is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. If he's taken you to the edge tonight, then his purpose is for your good. Yes, even in situations which by no means we could ever call good, as Bill Dunlop reminded us, your father's purpose in leading you here is for your good.

[12 : 32] Ah, there may be times when you might have wished you were one of Jesus' disciples, but perhaps not so much here. But if ever there was a worked example of God's loving power at work, it's when God takes a weak human being to an end of themselves.

You see, the sovereignty of God sometimes takes you right to the edge. Second, the sovereignty of God sometimes doesn't seem to care.

The sovereignty of God sometimes doesn't seem to care. A number of years ago, the Reader's Digest, by the way, I don't get Reader's Digest, I read this in a book, the Reader's Digest said this just for my reputation.

The Reader's Digest run a competition to find the best definition of friendship. The winner was this. A friend walks in when everyone else walks out.

A friend walks in when everyone else walks out. It's not when things are going well you find out who your friends are, but when things are going badly.

[13 : 45] A friend walks in when everyone else walks out. So what kind of friend was Jesus to his disciples? Here they are.

They are struggling. They are terrified. They are panicking. They had never seen a windstorm like this on the Sea of Galilee before. The boat was filling up with water and no matter how hard they were bailing, it was still filling.

Things were going very badly for them. But what about Jesus? Well, according to verse 38, he was in the stern.

He was asleep in a cushion. Quite how anyone could sleep through such a storm is hard to understand. Unless you understand exactly how exhausted Jesus was.

They say of men of my vintage that we can fall asleep on the edge of a knife, but only Jesus could have slept through this kind of storm. But you see the point I'm making, do you not?

[14 : 52] The disciples are really struggling. God has taken them right to the edge. Yes, even over the edge. They can no longer cope. God's given them more than they can bear.

And what's Jesus doing? He's asleep. To all intents and purposes, the sovereignty of God seems to be asleep, and the sovereign God does not seem to care.

Just at the very point, you think you can't go down any lower, and that God must rescue you. You get more bad news, and down further you go, and all the time you're praying, and you're praying with tears, but the sovereignty of God does not seem to care.

God seems to be asleep on the watch. I guess this series of sermons transgresses all the evangelical cliches big time. I said things like, God sometimes gives you far more than you can bear.

Well, here tonight we say, sometimes God seems to be asleep. Sometimes God seems to be asleep. You won't find that on fridge magnets, or printed in bookmarks you can have in your Bible.

[16 : 05] Rather, you'll get an evangelical cliché like, God never gives you more than you can bear. Or, when you need him most, God will always be there for you.

But these cliches are just that. They're cliches. They're not true to experience. They make you feeling worse than you should when they prove themselves to be false.

Thomas Boston, that great Scottish preacher of the early 18th century, he cut across the grain of evangelical niceties.

One of the cliches that we often use, very sentimental, but just untrue, is that God feels closer to us in the valleys than he does on the mountaintops.

That it's when we're going through difficult times in life, God seems to be close to us. We've all heard this kind of evangelical nicety. That's all it is.

[17:09] A nicety. A cliché. In Boston's book, *The Crook and the Lot*, Boston takes us back to the bar of experience, and he blows that cliché out of the water.

Often what makes the painful situation a Christian is facing even more painful is that God seems very, very far away.

That for his own reasons, he doesn't seem to care. He seems to be asleep on the watch. While we're trying to keep the ship afloat, he's asleep on the cushion.

in the stern of the boat. I'm not trying to sugarcoat this because if I should try and you'll face hard times and you can't cope anymore, you'll feel that I've betrayed you, but even worse, you'll say that God has betrayed you.

There are times, are there not, when the sovereignty of God doesn't seem to care. Perhaps some of you have felt that way over the long months of the coronavirus lockdown.

[18:20] God was asleep while the virus was locking us all away and killing us one by one. Again, let's try and find some comfort here in this weird but peaceful image of Jesus fast asleep on a cushion.

Why could he sleep? was it not because he knew that his father was in control of the wind and the waves? Was it not because he knew that nothing could really harm him as long as his father was in heaven?

Let's get real. just because God seems far away doesn't mean to say that he is far away.

God is still sovereign over your circumstances whether you're recognizing it or whether you're not.

The challenge is this to still focus our minds and hearts on the sovereignty of God that we'd rather be asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat than panicking with the disciples.

God's in control of all that happens in our lives from birth to death for your good. Even when your boat is filling with water and you can't cope anymore the sovereignty of God sometimes doesn't seem to care.

[19:55] And then last the sovereignty of God always leads us to the grace of Jesus. always leads us to the grace of Jesus.

The purpose of Mark 4, 35 through 41 coalesces around the question in verse 41 who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?

Mark wants us to answer along with the disciples Jesus is the Messiah the Son of the living God.

God you will know that the gospel of Mark is rather like a jigsaw puzzle put the pieces together one by one and the final picture is that of a Jesus whose Messiah Savior King.

This episode of him still in the storm is another piece of that jigsaw puzzle fitting neatly in place.

Jesus is the Messiah. God is the Messiah and so from a technical perspective this passage is leading us into the grace and the glory of Jesus.

But it does exactly the same from an experiential lived out perspective. It strikes true to the experience of God's sovereignty at work in our lives from day to day.

[21:17] consider how it is that Jesus is woken and the manner in which the disciples could never have expected the manner in which he stilled the storm perhaps they expected him to put his shoulder to the plow and bail out the boat or to put his arms to the oars or to help them tack against the wind not into it.

Perhaps they didn't really know what they were expecting him to do they just needed him to help them when they were struggling and panicking not in a million years could they have predicted what Jesus would do next.

Because having stood up with great authority and with great poise he rebuked the wind and he said to the sea peace be still. Was this the kind of action the disciples expected him to perform?

having taken them to the edge and having seemed not to care a whit about them Jesus now leads them into the sufficiency the love and the power of his grace he demonstrates to them that while he refuses to be boxed in by their expectations he is more glorious and more gracious than they can ever imagine.

He has stilled the storm because whatever whatever it came from whether it was a butterfly butterflies winged the Amazon rainforest it was his storm his wind and his waves and while the fear and terror the disciples experienced was not good Jesus had carefully designed the whole situation to teach them the most important lesson of all we can trust them his grace will always be sufficient

for us he will always be faithful to us he's not linked or tied into our limited imaginations or our preconceived ideas of how and when and where he should work rather in his sovereign grace he explodes our assumptions and delivers us in through and from the circumstances we are facing he he takes us to the edge and for long enough he seems to be silent and not to care but then in what often seems to be a frightening rapidity he changes the whole situation round by a word of power or if he chooses not to change the situation he changes us he draws us to himself he latches us on to his grace like a newborn baby latches on to his mother's breast because this is the sovereignty of God at work powerfully overruling lovingly reassuring bringing us to the point where the disciples found themselves in verse 40 more awestruck by the greater power of

[24 : 33] Jesus than the lesser power of the storm that's where God's sovereign work in our lives takes us that's our heavenly father's purpose worship and praise trust and devotion but reliant upon God's saving grace toward us in Christ Jesus as demonstrated by him on the cross God punctuates our lives with opportunities to learn to trust more upon the sufficiency of his grace to be awestruck by the glory of his love love as we close let me very briefly apply these final truths about the sovereignty of God always leading us to the grace of Jesus in the first place this is a very easy thing to say very easy to say I just said it it is easiest to say in hindsight as we look behind us to see that although

God really did seem to be very far away when we needed him most in reality as we look behind us we can see that he was working all things together for our good it's easy for us to say but when you're on that boat with the storm howling around you that's difficult to feel let me advise you that in times like these you reflect back on past experiences of Christ's grace at work in your life let me advise you that to that end why don't you consider keeping a spiritual diary writing down your experiences of Christ's grace at work in your lives so that when in future you're facing even harder trials than you are today you can refer back to that diary you can have confidence that the grace that sustained you before will sustain you again

I've grown up in my computer called I Daily Diary it's my spiritual diary where I keep all these recollections secondly let me reiterate that when I say that the sovereignty of God sometimes takes us right to the edge I mean it I mean it if you have sucked in that malicious false form of teaching that says when you begin to follow Jesus everything sorts itself out in your life you need to get real and correct your thinking following Jesus is a call to take up the cross it's a call to obey him even if it means crossing a stormy sea being a Christian ain't always sweetness and light sometimes it's just plain hard correct your thinking and get real and from a practical perspective devote yourself in prayer to those in our congregation those in our family here in

Glasgow City who are going through these hard times devote yourself in prayer for them praying especially that these difficult circumstances would drive them to the hyper sufficiency of the grace of Christ in the gospel and then finally let me apply these truths about the sovereignty of God by challenging those who have not yet committed themselves to the grace of Christ those of us who are not yet professing Christians the Christian sees a higher purpose in their trials but do you the Christian finds grace to help in her time of need but do you though she may be younger than you though she may be less experienced than you though she may be less intelligent than you that Christian is trusting in the sovereignty of God but to you the world is not a chaos it's a kingdom God's kingdom put your trust in Jesus Christ right now let us pray