

ACTS: To the Ends of the Earth

Study 9: How to Respond to Persecution

READ Acts 4:23-31 and Psalm 2 and **LISTEN** to the [sermon](#) by Pastor Craig.

After Peter and John are told not to preach in the name of Jesus anymore, the church “lifted their voices together to God” (v. 24). Often when we are faced with difficulties of life, such as persecution, trial, or crisis, our immediate reaction is to pray for relief. The early church shows us otherwise. Flowing from their view of God who is so high, so powerful and so sovereign comes a prayer for boldness to press on proclaiming Christ despite all opposition.

Big idea: Respond to persecution by remaining united in prayer, convicted of who God is and what he has called you to do.

Questions:

1. Remind yourself of what you learned last week. In v. 23, what did Peter and John report to their friends? How did the people respond and why?
2. In what ways does the beginning of the Lord’s prayer, in Matt 6:9-10, provide the structure for their prayer in vv. 24-30? Why is this structure useful for us to follow?
3. In v. 24, they begin by affirming God’s sovereignty as creator. What does this mean and what are some implications of this?
4. Why did the church quote Psalm 2:1-2 in their prayer?

5. **Challenge Question:** How should we understand vv. 27-28, where it says, wicked men crucified Christ, doing “whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place”? Does this mean that God is the author of evil, or that no evil can take place outside His directing it for His purposes, or something else? See the article, “God’s Providence and the Place of Evil”, below for help.

6. Why must we affirm God’s sovereignty, even over evil? What may be some implications of believing that evil events are not in God’s sovereign will?
7. What would you normally pray for when persecuted or experiencing trials? What does the church pray for and what is their main emphasis?

How does God answer their prayers?

8. How might you experience persecution for your faith today? In what specific areas of your witness for Christ do you need to pray for boldness?
9. What lessons have you learnt from this study that could aid your prayer life?

STOP AND PRAY:

Praise: *God that no evil can thwart the plans and purposes of God in your life*

Confess: *your fears in not boldly sharing your faith when opportunities come*

Pray: *that you might prioritise daily times alone with Jesus in prayer and the Word*

God's Providence and the Place of Evil

by Pastor Craig Baxter

Any believer who has experienced any form of suffering finds comfort in Paul's words in Romans 8:28, where it says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (ESV). And yet in saying that "all things work together for good" for the believer we are introduced to the theology of Divine Providence. The word *providence* does not occur in Scripture but nevertheless represents truly a biblical doctrine. Wayne Grudem identifies God's providential actions as "the outworking of the eternal decrees that he made before the creation of the world" (*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical doctrine*, 322-23). The scriptural support for this is vast. David declares, "in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps 139:16). Not only are our days determined, so too is our eternal destiny, for we are told that God "chose us in him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1:4). Even the most random of all things is determined by God, "The lot is cast into the lap, but *every decision is from the Lord*" (Prov 16:33). These verses, along with Romans 8:28, create a major issue: if God determines all things, how do we account for evil and suffering in the world? Does God actually cause the evil actions that people do? If he does, is not God responsible for sin?

We must confirm from the outset that God does not and cannot sin, for this would be contrary to his nature. However, what is determined by the three following examples is that God did, indeed, cause evil events to come about and evil deeds to be done. But, as Grudem confirms, "Scripture never shows God as directly doing anything evil, but rather as bringing about evil deeds through the willing actions of moral creatures. Moreover, Scripture never blames God for evil or shows God as taking pleasure in evil."

The story of Joseph

Firstly, in the story of Joseph, Scripture identifies a list of evils Joseph's brothers inflicted upon him in selling him into slavery (Gen 37:4, 5, 8, 11, 20, 24, 28). Yet, later Joseph declared to his brothers that "*God sent me before you to preserve life*" (Gen 45:5), and "*you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good*" (Gen 50:20).

The story of Job

Secondly, in the story of Job, God gave Satan permission to bring harm to Job's possessions and children, and though this harm came through the evil actions of the Chaldeans and the Sabeans, as well as a wind storm (Job 1:12, 15, 17, 19), Job looks

beyond those secondary causes and, with the eyes of faith, sees it all as from the hand of the Lord: "*The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away*, blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21, Italics added). Job here believes God has ordained the evil but is not the author of evil.

The story of Christ

Thirdly, in the crucifixion of Christ, the most abhorrent of all evils, God had "predestined" the actions of those who condemned and crucified him (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28), and yet holds those evil doers to account. This declaration is astounding.

In seeking to understand the outworking of man's evil actions through God's predetermined plan Augustus Strong is helpful when he states:

While man makes up his evil decision independently of God, God does, by his natural agency, order the method in which this inward evil shall express itself, by limiting it in time, place, and measure, or by guiding it to the end which his wisdom and love, and not man's intent, has set. (*Systematic Theology*, 220).

Strong's statement in no way negates the responsibility of the evil decisions yet attributes the determinative cause to God. This can be likened to a gardener with a water hose. While the gardener does not create the water (akin to the intent of 'evil'), he determines where, when, and how the water will be discharged and how much will be discharged. The gardener uses this water towards his own ends. So it is with 'evil' and God.

It is evident that God caused the trials of Joseph, Job, and the crucifixion of Christ, to come about, so that in the midst of terrible evil and personal suffering he worked all things out for the good of his people while holding those carrying out the evil to account. It is only when we understand the totality of God's providential control over all things, including evil and suffering, that we can be assured of the promise found in that beautiful text, "We know that all things work together for good, to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose." If anything, including the free will of man and the evil man does, is outside of God's control then this promise fails. Unless we have a clear grasp of this doctrine we will continue to be utterly perplexed at the evil and suffering in the world and begin to believe that God cannot be in control. However, in spite of all that has been said, we must confess that we will never fully comprehend why and how our Lord does the things he chooses to do, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8). Yet, we can concur with John Wesley, who said, "One of the greatest evidences of God's love to those that love him is, to send them afflictions, with grace to bear them." In this we take heart.