

## I. Introduction

Throughout this class, Kent and I have been attempting to lay a biblical foundation to help us know God more through suffering and persecution. The purpose of laying a biblical foundation, as we have been considering various forms of suffering along the way, is to attempt to prepare our minds and hearts so that when we are experiencing suffering, we are not losing heart, but knowing God and trusting God more deeply during suffering. But it is important to have a solid foundation first. As we have done this, God's sovereignty has been mentioned on more than one occasion, and the goal of the class today and the one that Kent will lead next week, is to spend a concentrated time on considering God's sovereignty. To continue towards the goal of having a biblical framework to know God, we must wrestle with the mystery of God's sovereignty. I say wrestle, because there will be times when we will not be comfortable with God's sovereignty. But if we don't wrestle with what the Bible has to say about it before the difficulties come, we put ourselves in a dangerous position to stray into error and unbelief and possibly blaming God for the suffering we are experiencing instead of having a posture of trust in our heavenly Father during the suffering. And the reason God's sovereignty can be an uncomfortable thing to consider in the context of suffering, is because, in our humanity, we can find ourselves in times where we are tempted to ask God why without getting an answer. We also know deep down, even if we don't admit at times, that we bear responsibility for our actions and, sometimes, our actions have consequences that may have a role to play in the suffering that is being experienced. So, we must have a solid foundation so we can avoid blaming God for our actions while still acknowledging His sovereignty. And the Bible clearly lays out both of these as true. We will first define the truth of what the Bible says about God's sovereignty and human responsibility, examine passages that clearly put the two side by side, and then consider some applications as it pertains to knowing God through suffering and persecution. First, we will define terms.

### a. What is compatibilism?

Carson introduces the word compatibilism. Compatibilism means that the Bible as a whole and in specific texts assumes that the following two things are true, and these two things are true simultaneously. It will be helpful here to read how Carson defines these and then we will go to Scripture.

i. God's Sovereignty

God's sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.

ii. Human responsibility

Human beings are morally responsible creatures. They significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.

We feel tension here. Tension can be uncomfortable, but this is tension that we must come to terms with to continue to build our biblical foundation because the passages we will go through present both as true at the same time.

b. An emphasis on God's goodness

Before we get to the specific examples, it is worth emphasizing again the Bible's overall emphasis on the goodness of God. God's sovereignty has limitless reach. However, He is never presented as an accomplice of evil or standing behind evil the same way He stands behind good. We saw an example of this we Nathan took us through the review of the book of Job. Let's keep that in mind as we turn first to the book of Leviticus.

II. Biblical Examples

- a. **Leviticus 20:7-8 – “Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you.”**

In this passage we see our first brief example, where God is commanding His people to do something, to consecrate themselves and be holy. This is placed right next to the certainty that it is God doing the work of sanctifying. Two true statements. One might ask, what is happening here? Are the people acting or is God acting. The answer is both. The people have the responsibility to follow the command of the Lord, and the Lord in His sovereignty is doing the sanctifying of the people who are responsible for acting. Let's turn next to I Kings chapter 8

- b. **I Kings 8:46-50; 58 - “If they sin against you – for there is no one who does not sin – and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy far off or near, yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, ‘We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,’ if they repent with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them...” vs. 57-58 - “The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our fathers. May he not leave us or forsake us, that he may incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his rules, which he commanded our fathers.”**

In this passage we have Solomon offering his prayer of dedication of the temple. We see first that he prays acknowledging the warnings that have been given to the people of Israel about idolatry and what would happen if they did not follow the Lord in verse 46. He then asks God to hear the people when they act and repent in verses 47-50. In those verses, Solomon is speaking about the responsibility of the people to follow the Lord, the consequences of what would happen when they did not follow the Lord, and asking God to act based upon the actions of the people in repentance when they are turning again back to the Lord in repentance. All of those place an emphasis on the actions of the people in disobedience and repentance. Then, in verse 57-58, after the offering as Solomon is closing the dedication, he is acknowledging in his petition that it is the Lord who inclines the hearts of the people toward him to obey. Does this negate the responsibility of the people to act as Solomon prayed in the earlier verses? No. These two things are presented as true in this passage simultaneously.

Let's turn next to I Kings 11. Sadly, just three chapters later, we see Solomon turning to idols and what God tells him is the repercussion of his actions.

- c. **I Kings 11:9-13, 29-39; 12:1-15 - "And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the Lord commanded. Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, 'Since this has been your practice and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your sone, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem that I have chosen.'" jump down to verse 29 29-35, "And at**

that time, when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him on the road. Now Ahijah had dressed himself in a new garment, and the two of them were alone in the open country. Then Ahijah laid hold of the new garment that was on him, and tore it into twelve pieces. And he said to Jeroboam, 'Take for yourself ten pieces, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon and will give you ten tribes (but he shall have one tribe, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city that I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel), for they have forsaken me and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites, and they have not walked in my ways, doing what is right in my sight and keeping my statutes and my rules, as David his father did. Nevertheless, I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, but I will make him ruler all the days of his life, for the sake of David my servant whom I chose, who kept my commandments and my statutes. But I will take the kingdom out of his son's hand and will give it to you, ten tribes.'" and then let's turn to chapter 12:1-5. "Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. And as soon as Jeroboam the son of Nebat heard of it (for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. And they sent and called him, and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, 'Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you.' And he said to them, 'Go away for three days, then come again to me.' So the people went away."

We see first that the Lord is angry with Solomon for his actions, and He tells Solomon what the results of his actions would be. God is holding Solomon responsible for what he has done. Yet he

is showing mercy to David in that the results of Solomon's sin would fall on his son and not during Solomon's lifetime. After that, we didn't read this section, we see that there are adversaries that are raised up against Solomon during the rest of his reign in verses 14-40 which includes the account of Ahijah speaking with Jeroboam. When Solomon finds out that Ahijah had spoken with Jeroboam about the split of the kingdom, Solomon seeks to kill Jeroboam and Jeroboam flees to Egypt. After Solomon dies, Rehoboam takes the throne and Jeroboam returns from Egypt. What is interesting about this return is that Jeroboam does not go to Rehoboam and claim his rule over the 10 tribes because Ahijah had told him that it would happen. He goes with the people and tells Rehoboam that if he does better than his father, he and all the people would serve him. Rehoboam does not do that, he actually promises that he will be harder on the people than his father was. And in chapter 12:15 we see why this happened, **"...It was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfill his word..."**

Someone could drop into this account with no knowledge of what God told Jeroboam through Ahijah and say Rehoboam what are you doing? But when we look back we see that God told Solomon that all this would happen. Rehoboam's foolish decision to abandon wise council was the instrument to make it happen. Does that negate Rehoboam's responsibility? No! He had the opportunity in front of him to choose wisely. The person God said would receive 10 tribes was the one who said, "We will serve you." And yet it is Rehoboam who makes the choice. Ch 12:15 does not alleviate Rehoboam of his responsibility and again we see a person's actions and God's sovereignty in telling Solomon what would happen beforehand in the same passage as both being true. For one more Old Testament example, let's turn to Isaiah 10:5.

**d. Isaiah 10:5 - "Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!"**

God is pronouncing woe on Assyria here but He is also saying that Assyria is the instrument of His anger, and they are taking action as the staff in his hands. So why the woe? It is because of their pride. Verses 7-11 and 13-14 show the Assyrian pride in their boasts to conquer the world. But before we say, "Well, hang on a second, of course they'd be proud who would blame them? Why is God allowing this, this is a nation that does not know God," we should consider the nation of Assyria just a bit. From 2 Kings 14:25 we know that Jonah the son of Amittai prophesied somewhere around the time of King Amaziah, the son of Joash, king of Judah. We don't have an exact date on the prophecy referenced in 2 Kings, but the prophecy is referenced as having occurred and been fulfilled. In the book of Jonah, we see Jonah the son of Amittai being sent to Ninevah to preach repentance. Ninevah was the capital of Assyria. Isaiah chapter 1 tells us that Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. 2 Kings 15:1 tells us that Azariah, also known as Uzziah, the son of Amaziah, began to reign. The time between Jonah and Isaiah doesn't seem to be that long. We see that God sent word of repentance to Ninevah from a prophet that is referenced to be prophesying before the Isaiah comes onto the scene during the reign of Uzziah. The point of all this is to say that God did not pronounce woe upon the people of Assyria without having sent a prophet to them first to preach repentance and in the book of Jonah we see the king and the people repenting. And here we see the goodness of God on display. He sent one of his prophets to a Gentile nation. They repented, but by Isaiah 10 we see their pride on display and being held responsible for their actions while God uses them as the instrument of his fury in His sovereignty against the people of Israel. Assyria is punished not because they attacked Israel, but because of their pride in thinking they did it in their own strength. So here again we have the acts and responsibility of humanity alongside the sovereignty of God, and both are true. Before we consider some applications, let's look at a New Testament example.

- e. **Acts 18:9-10 – “And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’”**

Paul arrives in Corinth and is, apparently, afraid since the Lord told him not to be afraid. Corinth was known throughout the empire as being a notoriously immoral city. The encouragement to Paul comes after he is told to continue acting. The encouragement given Paul is that God has people that he calls His own before Paul even says a word to them. God does not say, “I have my people here, take a break and I’ll bring them to you.” He tells Paul to carry on. Paul had suffered a lot to this point, but the encouragement to keep acting and to be responsible to the work that God had given him was backed up with the sovereign promise that God had elect people in the city of Corinth that Paul was supposed to evangelize.

So, after reviewing the biblical texts that place God’s sovereignty alongside human responsibility, what does this mean as we build the biblical foundation to know God through suffering and persecution?

### III. Conclusions

- a. It is essential to hold this biblical tension of seeming opposites, simultaneously. Why? For instance, if we were to only look at the passages where it seems that God stands behind evil without also considering the truth of the goodness of God, then in times of suffering we may be tempted to view God as some sort of vicious being who causes suffering with a seeming randomness. Also, if we only have in view the passages that emphasize God’s limitless control over everything and ignore the passages that call us to pray, to repent, to have faith, to intercede for others; then in a time of suffering we



could resort to a sort of fatalism that places God at the center but actually are moving towards a thoughtless stoicism.

- b. In times of suffering, we often ask why. And while that may not be an entirely inappropriate question to ask, it usually leads to an attempt to logically figure out why something is happening. This tension must be maintained because the mystery of God's sovereignty is not something that we can logically unravel. That does not mean it is illogical, it means that we do not know enough to fully understand it. We live in a fallen world, and we have fallen reason and fallen logic. When we are able to hold both human responsibility and God's sovereignty in the tension the Bible displays, we are able to agree with the answer to the rhetorical questions of Isaiah 29:16 - **"Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?"** Of course, the answer to these is, of course not! But when we do not hold these two things in appropriate biblical tension, we are in danger of asking these questions in an accusatory way to God when we experience suffering.
- c. This tension becomes the comfort when we are suffering. Next week, Kent will go deeper into why God's providence is comforting. But without going into detail now, let's remember that God's sovereignty and providence always has God's goodness in view. Even when we do not understand and human actions that they are responsible for are an instrument of suffering, God is good. If we can hold this tension as part of our biblical foundation, we will be better equipped to experience well and know God through suffering and persecution.

### Questions

1. Why is it important to come to terms with the truth of biblical mystery?

2. How can we remind ourselves of God's goodness when we experience the providence of suffering?
3. How can we remind others of the tension in a helpful way when they are experiencing suffering?