

Gratitude and the Sovereignty of God

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But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Psalm 115:3

Introduction-The example of Israel in the Wilderness: 1 Cor 10:1-13

- The Scriptures are clear that we are to be students who study the Old Testament, giving special attention to the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert. Note the sins committed by the Israelites in the desert: Lust, idolatry, sexual immorality, tempting Christ. Included with these is "complaining." While the others we would readily classify as grievous, complaining is often trivialized, allowed, and sometimes encouraged within the community of believers. We must heed the example of Israel lest we too wander in unbelief (Heb 3:12-4:2).

Principles Undergirding Gratitude

- The Bible teaches that 100% of the world is under God's control (Isaiah 45:5-7; Dan 4:35). It also teaches that humans are held responsible for their actions 100% of the time (Luke 12:1-5; 1 Cor 4:4,5; Rev 20:11-15). However, the finite mind of man desires a (unbiblical) continuum totaling 100%: Divine sovereignty + human responsibility equating the sum total (100%) of control and/or responsibility. This, however, leads to Islamic fatalism on one end of the spectrum, and atheistic autonomy on the other end. The doctrine of complete Divine control and total human responsibility is an infinite (yet logical) truth that doesn't neatly fit into our finite brains. This is true wherever the divine and fleshly meet. We see this in the biblical teachings on prayer, the incarnation of Christ, or the divine inspiration of Scripture. This sermon presupposes complete human responsibility as it focuses on God's sovereignty over and in all things.
- **Principle #1-God is Infinite and Immutable**-In all His divine attributes, God *is*, and *is* perfectly and infinitely. As we contemplate and meditate on who God is, we soon ought to become lost in awe, wonder, and adoration. Abject humility is the natural end of one who has probed the vastness of an infinite God with the boundaries of a finite mind. In regards to His immutability, the Bible teaches that God can know no change (Mal 3:6; James 1:7). Consequently, He has revealed in the Bible His unchangeable disposition both to the believer and unbeliever. To the believer: Ultimate love, mercy, and goodness. To the unbeliever: Ultimate wrath, punishment, condemnation, and hatred. Before the trials of life come, we must draw sharp, biblical distinctions of who God is and how He has chosen to relate to His beloved children. Once we have established these distinctions, we must do so knowing that they will never shift, change, or vary.
- **Principle #2-God has foreordained all that comes to pass**-God works *all* things (His providence) after the counsel of His will (His foreordination) Eph 1:11. To what extent has He foreordained? Is it constrained to the "big" things, such as Joseph, Jesus, redemption, and the election of rulers (Gen 45:5, 50:20; Acts 4:27,28; Rom 8:29,30; Dan 4:17)? Or, do the Scriptures teach that God has a plan encompassing all that He has created? Indeed, *whatsoever* comes to pass has been foreordained by God, whether we regard that event as one which is "small" or one which is "accidental" (Matt 10:29; Prov 16:33; Job 36:32; 1 Kings 22:28,34; Mark 14:30). The foreordination of God is absolute, unconditional, holy, and wise. All events are interrelated, where cause leads to effect, and effects become causes. All of His creation is a beautiful tapestry moving towards God's foreappointed end which shall bring forth the manifestation of His glory and the accumulation of this praise.
- **Principle #3-God providentially brings to pass all that He has foreordained**-From the tiny atom to the angelic seraphim's, God is intimately concerned with every detail in the affairs of man and in the course of nature. His providential control is over and in the physical world (Nahum 1:3), the animal creation (Matt 6:26), nations (Daniel 2:21), individuals (Ps 37:23, Prov 16:9), free acts of men (Ex 12:36, Phil 2:13), sinful acts of men (2 Sam 16:10,11), and the "chance" happenings of life (Prov 16:33). If it happens, God foreordained it. If He foreordained it, He will bring it to pass. If He brought it to pass, it was because it pleased Him (Eph 1:5). Knowing his perfect attributes, His love for His children, and His sovereignty over all things, we ought to find comfort and assurance in His pleasure as we see His will continually manifested in all of life.

The Nature of Complaint: Four Examples From the Desert

- In reading the account of Israel in the desert, it is easy to forget that the 40 years are extremely compressed in the few pages God has seen fit to pass down to us. In between the miracles we read about, life must have been very mundane and routine for the Israelites as they wandered in the scorching desert. It is in this arena of the mundane (folding laundry, driving to work, taking the garbage out, etc.) where the battle for a grateful or grumbling heart and mind is fought.
- **Example #1: Assigning Providence to Man-Exodus 16:1-8** - Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and accused them of bringing the people out of Egypt and into the desert. We are deceived and deluded if we think a horizontal complaint is not a vertical complaint. We cannot disconnect or compartmentalize our complaints. All events and people in your life have been

foreordained and brought to pass into your life through God's providence. When something occurs in time and space, then it is for His glory and subsequently your good as He conforms you into the image of His Son. To complain against man or events is a direct complaint against God.

- **Example #2: Lusting Beyond God's Provision-Numbers 11:1-6** - In yielding to intense cravings, the Israelites grew to detest the provision of God and longed for the leeks and onions of Egypt. They would prefer the slavery of Egypt over the freedom God had given them in order to satisfy the demands of their stomachs. They craved for that which God had not granted to them. God, not being a socialist, has found pleasure in ordaining inequality. He gives to some what He withholds from others. Do you crave that which God has ordained for another? Rest and find contentment in the inequality God has ordained for your life and so find His pleasure in it. Why is there inequality? "Yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in your sight." (Matt 11:26)
- **Example #3: Fear of Man Numbers-13:31-14:4** - We all must fear: It's not a matter of "if," but of "whom." Either we will fear God, or we will fear someone or something else. Either we will walk by faith in trusting God's promises (Num 13:2, 30) or we will walk by sight (Num 13:31) fearing what we see. That which you fear will be that which you end up serving. If you fear God, you will serve and worship Him. Those that fear man end up walking in unbelief towards the promises of God and seek to serve and receive the praise of men. Who are the descendants of Anak in your life?
- **Example #4: Assigning Mutability to the Immutable God-Deuteronomy 1:26-33** - Two points: First, note that the Israelites "complained in their tents." Complaining most often begins in the home, migrates from intra-family to inter-family, and eventually acts as a leavening agent infecting the entire church. To stop complaining in the church, we must first stop complaining in the home. Secondly, compare verse 27, "because the Lord hates us," to Deuteronomy 7:6-8. God had communicated His disposition towards His chosen people. He references them as His "special treasure," and that He had "set His love" on the Israelites (See also Ex 3:7-10; 4:29-31; 19:3-6). By assigning mutability to God, they were calling God a liar, shifting moral responsibility to Him, and establishing or justifying their own innocence. We must, before the storms of life (Matt 7:24-27) come and we're tempted to walk by sight, establish who God is and the extent of His favor towards those He has called out of darkness.

Application

- **Theology is the foundation for gratitude:** Flat tires are intensely theological. How we think, so we will be. In going away from here, we must not approach the particular events of life in a vacuum apart from a mind renewed by God's infinite and immutable love for His children, His foreordination of all things, and His providential control of whatsoever comes to pass. If we do, we'll be treating the symptoms rather than the illness itself, resulting in condemnation and discouragement. As we proceed from here, confessing the times we do complain and praying that God would grant us repentance, we must strive in faith to see that our minds are washed, renewed, and reformed as we see all the events of life through the filter of God's sovereign pleasure.
- **Take heed lest you fall:** We are assured in Scripture that "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil 1:6) The same God who initiated our justification also initiates and completes our sanctification. While we have this assurance of the Divine work, from the human perspective, we are commanded to be thankful and grateful: It is not optional. Complaining is a grievous sin in the eyes of God. For he who complains, the Scriptures say "take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." (1 Cor 10:12,13)

Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me. Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed, I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it. Isaiah 46: 9-11