



Acts 4:19-28

We are one year and a few months past the devastating earthquake and tsunami that virtually wiped out the Northern coastal towns of Japan and killed 19,000 people. In terms of the death toll from the Asian tsunami in 2004 or the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the disaster in Japan was much smaller. But whatever the tragedy, whether personal or global, we all struggle with the question of “why”? Why did this happen? Who is to blame?

Last Sunday I said that the Lord is sovereign over everything including the famine that Naomi experienced which forced her and her family to travel to Moab where her husband and two sons died but where she met Ruth, who followed her back to Bethlehem who then married and Ruth gave birth to the grandfather of King David. But I also said that the Lord is sovereign over not only famines but also earthquakes, tornadoes and tsunamis.

We know God is in control but practically speaking, what does it mean if we say God is sovereign over something like a famine? Did God actually cause the famine? Naomi and her family went to Moab and survived but what about the other people who starved to death because of the famine? Did God cause the famine which caused them to perish? What about disease and illness—is God sovereign over them? What about sinful choices of human beings—is God sovereign over them?

Last week’s topic raised all manner of questions so I decided to take one more week to speak on the subject of God’s sovereignty but also include the related topic of human responsibility. This is no mere academic study and I hope you can see the massive relevance this has to our daily lives. For example, we are fond of decrying evolution because if it were true it would mean that we are nothing but globs of animated flesh stumbling our way through a purposeless, sad existence of a life. In the same way, if we fail to understand that God is sovereign over every movement of every atom in the universe, then we can only conclude that there are some things that are beyond God’s control. And if there are some things which are beyond God’s control, then an enormous part of our life is purposeless and meaningless. It would mean that evil things

happen in a random chaotic manner for no reason other than it just is. But if God has control over everything, then everything has meaning and purpose.

However, most people fail to ascribe this much sovereign power to the Lord because they fear such a position would turn us into mindless robots and helpless puppets with no free will and meaningless choices. Is there a balance between these two? Can we have it both ways—where God controls everyone and everything and injects it with meaning and purpose but at the same time we are genuinely free moral agents and every thought and every decision really does matter? Yes and yes. This is what the Bible teaches and we must understand it.

I want to anchor us in what I think is the most important text on this topic. Please turn to Acts 4:18. This passage picks up right in the middle of the arrest of Peter and John by the religious authorities.

So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” 21 And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old. 23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?

26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Try to put yourself into this story. If you had just been arrested by these powerful religious leaders—and it wasn't the first time they had been arrested—after your release, what kind of prayer do you think you would pray first? I think my thoughts would have turned toward thankfulness to the Lord for sparing my life. There is no doubt in my mind that the focus of my prayer would have been centered on the danger I had just experienced and my gratitude for my release. But the prayer of these disciples is nothing short of earth-shattering. The entire prayer and what happened next is all very important, but for the purpose of this message I want to focus on verses 25-28 which can be outlined in three parts

1. Quoting of prophecy from Psalm 2 (25-26)
2. Fulfillment of prophecy (27)
3. Explanation of how prophecy was fulfilled (28)

1. Quoting of prophecy from Psalm 2 (25-26)

They quoted from Psalm 2:1 but notice how they introduced the Psalm—*who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit*. First they named that King David as the author of the Psalm which anchored this passage in an important historical context and it proved the identity of the author. Secondly it clarifies that “the mouth of David” actually spoke “by the Holy Spirit.” This perfectly matches what we said in our series on the reliability of the Bible. Do you recall the quote from 2 Peter? “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Here is again is this mysterious and glorious cooperation with God in the writing of Scripture. This is a bit of review but you will see in a moment how this cooperation relates to the topic of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.

2. Fulfillment of prophecy (27)

This scene in the book of Acts took place a very short time after Jesus’ ascension and the birth of the church so it did not take the disciples very long to understand that they had just witnessed the fulfillment of this prophecy from Psalm 2. *for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel*. There was no question in the minds of the disciples that Herod and Pontius Pilate were the raging Gentiles and the kings and rulers who were gathered together against the Lord’s Anointed. This prophecy had been fulfilled right before their very eyes. It most certainly was not the only fulfilled prophecy but it was important to them at this point in time.

3. Explanation of how the prophecy was fulfilled (28)

Here is the really cool part—the explanation of how the prophecy was fulfilled. Have you ever thought about what it takes for a single prophecy to be fulfilled let alone hundreds of prophecies? Parents—how many times have you told your kids that you would be available to do a certain activity with them only to have something come up that was beyond your control. How do you answer this question from your kids? “Hey mom—can we go to the park today?” A wise mother would not make empty promises to her children by saying, “Yes, I know you have been wanting to get to the park for a long time. I’m sorry we haven’t been able to get there but I promise that we will go this afternoon.” What are some of the things that could interfere with the fulfillment of this promise? The most obvious problem is that it could rain that afternoon. Maybe the car won’t start. Maybe a good friend will call with a huge problem and mom can’t tear herself away from the phone. (Kids, does that ever happen to you—when mom is on the phone for a really long time and you can’t seem to get her attention? ☺) Maybe one of the kids will get sick and then everyone needs to stay home.

There are any number of things that could happen which would prevent this family from going to the park that very afternoon and the point is that most of them are outside the control of the parent. In order to fulfill this one promise, this mother would have to be in sovereign control over things like the weather, cars, traffic, illness and disease and perhaps a hundred other things that probably would not interfere but have the potential to interfere. Taking your kids to the park is understandably a very simple example but that’s just the point; if fulfilling a simple promise like this—in which the time between the promise and the fulfillment is only a few hours and the distance traveled only a few miles—ultimately requires sovereign power over dozens and dozens of possible outcomes, then how much more does God need to have sovereign power over all

things in order to fulfill a promise or prophecy that will take place hundreds or thousands of years in the future and contains a near infinite number of possible outcomes?

This is no doubt why the disciples explained how this particular prophecy was fulfilled by saying, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*. The “hand” of the Lord is a symbol of his power and authority. The Lord obviously had a plan and the very nature of a prophecy is that it is predestined. Predestined simply means that the event in question has been predetermined with an absolute guarantee. This thing, this future event will take place. However in order for Herod and Pontius Pilate to have played their parts in the fulfillment of this prophecy, God would have had to predestine and guarantee that they would act in this precise manner—that they would harden their hearts and agree to crucify the Messiah.

Now here’s is where it really gets tricky. Let me ask you a few questions about this story. Would you say that Herod and Pontius Pilate were robots and puppets in God’s hand or were they free moral agents with real human choice? On the Day of Pentecost, Peter made it clear that they possessed free will. “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, *you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*” (Acts 2:23).

Were Herod and Pontius Pilate responsible for their decision to crucify the Messiah? Absolutely. Jesus made this point clear when he said, “For the Son of man goes as it has been determined; *but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!*” (Luke 22:22) But if they—and all of the Jewish leaders, Roman soldiers and angry mob were all freely expressing their will, how did God predestine and guarantee that they would do what he planned for them to do?

Some people will say that God knows the future and since he can see what will happen and so he gives people little nudges and promptings to move in a certain direction. But how can nudges and promptings guarantee specific actions by specific people hundreds of years into the future? The simple answer is that it cannot.

Let’s go back to our illustration of going to the park. I mentioned reasons why the promise might not be fulfilled—if it rains, if the car breaks down, etc. But how would God be able to guarantee that this family would be able to go to the park one afternoon if he wanted them to do so? We all know that God controls the weather so he could guarantee that it would be a nice, sunny day. He has sovereign control over inanimate objects like cars so things like that would not be a hindrance. But what if the mom suddenly decided she just did not want to go to the park that day? God can’t force the mom to go the park because God doesn’t force anyone to do anything because if he did, we would be puppets and robots, or so some people say.

Therefore, if the decision of one mom on one day is outside the sovereign control of God, how could God predestine something as intricate as the crucifixion when a few people had to play key parts and hundreds had to follow the general plan? What if Pilate was in a good mood that day and decided to pardon Jesus and let him go? What if the crowd did not turn on Jesus that day because if you remember, the Pharisees never acted to arrest Jesus for years because they feared the crowds. This passage in Acts 4 says the same thing: *they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people*. When the crowds turned against Jesus they Pharisees mustered the courage to arrest him and demand his crucifixion. But what if the crowds still loved

and worshipped him that day just as they did on Palm Sunday? If God can't control one person how can he control a mob of people?

You can see the difficult dilemma this creates but we need to move toward a solution. The simple answer is that God actually does control all of these people. Now don't panic on me and storm out of the building. We have already established that men and women are free moral creatures who are fully capable of sinning and are held full accountable for their sin. I only gave you two verses to support this but I think from the rest of Scripture we know that it is true. But now I want to demonstrate that at the same time that men and women are free moral creatures God is also controlling their actions. Both are equally true.

Lying and deceiving spirits

There are endless Scriptures that demonstrate that God controls the actions of people. In the days of the kings, King Ahab was consulting his prophets to determine if he should go to war. King Jehoshaphat insisted that they seek the counsel of the prophet Micaiah because he was known to be a true prophet. Listen to the words of Micaiah.

And Micaiah said, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; 20 and the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. 21 Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.' 22 And the LORD said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.' Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you." (1 Kings 22:19-23)

Ahab listened to the prophets in whom the Lord put a lying spirit because it was the Lord's will that Ahab would die in battle. In order for this to happen, the Lord had to control a large group of prophets by putting a lying spirit in them and make them do and say things that they otherwise would not have said.

A similar example is seen in Ezekiel. *And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel (Ezek. 14:9).* This is an interesting example because not only does the Lord put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of the prophet, he then destroys the prophet for having spoke a false prophecy. This shows that God does control the actions of people but that he still holds them accountable for their free actions. This does not imply that every false prophet has been deceived by the Lord but merely that he does have the authority to do so.

Now if you or I deceived someone so that they in turn deceived others, this would be a sin but it is not wrong for God. That may sound strange to you, but we are actually used to such things if you know your Bible. God often does things like send plagues and other disasters which wipe out tens of thousands of people at a time. Now if we got hold of a biological weapon, released it in a major city and 20,000 people died, we would be guilty of mass genocide but God can do such things from a state of pure holiness as part of his overarching plan.

Harden hearts

Most of us know the classic example of the Lord hardening the heart of Pharaoh. Moses repeatedly went to Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go,” but we read this in Exodus 9:12. *But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them.* The Lord was obviously in control here as he was the one actually hardening Pharaoh’s heart. But hang on! Most of you know the other half of the story and you will be quick to say, “Yes, but Pharaoh hardened his own heart first therefore God just helped him along the way. And this is correct—we are told several times that Pharaoh did harden his own heart. *But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said* (Ex. 8:15)

But that still isn’t the end of the story—or should I say the beginning of the story because long before Moses even appeared before Pharaoh, the Lord made a promise to Moses saying, *When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go* (Exodus 4:21). God predestined that he would harden Pharaoh’s heart so we can say that God was the first cause in the story. He hardened Pharaoh’s heart because in Genesis chapter fifteen, the Lord prophesied that the Israelites would be slaves in Egypt and after 400 years he would *bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions* (Genesis 15:14).

After God freed them from slavery in Egypt and they entered the Promised Land, the Israelites entered into an extended war with all of the Canaanites in the land. The purpose and predetermined plan of God is described in a single verse.

Joshua made war a long time with all those kings. For it was the LORD’s doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the LORD commanded Moses (Joshua 11:20).

In this story, God hardened the hearts of hundreds of thousands of people, once again, in order to fulfill his promise to them and accomplish his predetermined plan. After all, it is called the Promised Land and God’s activity of hardening human hearts was part and parcel of this grand plan.¹

Perhaps the most clear passage of all appears in both the gospel of John and Matthew. *39 Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, 40 “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them”* (John 12:39-40).

John quoted this verse from Isaiah 6 because *Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him* (John 12:37). John was clearly stating that people did not place their faith in Christ because God had hardened their hearts and blinded their eyes.

To add one more intriguing layer to this passage, verse 42 reads *Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him.*

God controls all things and all people, yet in all of this we need to be perfectly clear that all that God does is right and just and perfect all of the time.

- God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one. (James 1:13)
- God is light and in him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5)
- the LORD is upright there is no unrighteousness in him (Ps. 92:15)

Here are four things that the Bible states as absolute fact.

1. God is perfect and cannot sin.
2. God has sovereign control over everything, including the thoughts and actions of every person.
3. Each person possesses free will and choice.
4. God holds every person accountable for their own sin.

We will never be able to fully reconcile these facts this side of eternity, but something that helps is to distinguish between God's perfect will and his permissive will. For example, God commanded that the Israelites not to marry foreign women. This was part of his perfect will. However as we learned from the book of Ruth last Sunday, the two sons of Naomi disobeyed God's perfect will but they were within God's permissive will. God allowed their sin to occur for a higher purpose—so that Ruth would become the great grandmother of David and be in the succession of Jesus.

This is a difficult subject but I assure you, it is not unimportant or merely academic. Let me leave you with five applications

1. Faithfulness to Scripture requires that we equally teach God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Scripture clearly teaches that God has absolute sovereign control AND that we are free moral creatures who are held accountable for our sin. If we are to be faithful to the Word of God will hold both of these as true because the Bible presents them as true, even if we will never be able to fully reconcile them in our minds and hearts.
2. If God does not have absolute control of everything, then much or all of your suffering and the combined suffering in the world is outside of God's control. If this untold suffering is outside of God's control then it is purposeless and meaningless.

This reminds me of the way my dad passed away. He was just starting his third round of chemo after going into remission from leukemia twice in three years. He was having a simply surgery to implant a stent in his artery to receive the chemo. My sister is a RN and happened to work at the hospital where he was being treated. She went to visit him in his room several hours after the surgery but when she got to his room, he was not there. She immediately called me to give me the news, which we assumed was probably not good.

She proceeded to the surgical area and discovered that he was still in post-op. The surgeon had accidentally punctured his lung and now he was slowly bleeding to death. He was still intubated but he was conscious so all my sister could do was to hold the

phone to his ear so I could talk to him. I cried on the phone, shared the gospel one last time and told him how much I loved him. He died less than an hour later.

When my sister first called to tell me he was not in his room as expected, I simply said to her, "Sis, no matter what happens, it's going to be OK." I had not developed my understanding of God's sovereignty to the point it is today but I feel that this is exactly what I was saying. God is in control. All of this has a divine purpose and it's going to be OK.

3. If God doesn't control everything, then not a single promise in Scripture will come true. This morning we sang a song about there being no more tears and sorrow in Heaven but this promise will never come true if God does not possess the power to make it come true.
4. All prayer is necessitated upon God's sovereignty. If he cannot control people and circumstances, then why bother praying to him for help?
5. If you object to God controlling people, then you lose the cross. The Lord controlled people in order to work out his sovereign, predestined plan to crucify his son and bring us salvation. If you think it's not fair that he is sovereign over everyone, then you are asking God to give up the cross.

I would like to close with a quote from Corrie Ten Boom.

Often I have heard people say, "How good God is! We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic, and look at the lovely weather!" Yes, God is good when He sends good weather. But God was also good when He allowed my sister, Betsie, to starve to death before my eyes in a German concentration camp. I remember one occasion when I was very discouraged there. Everything around us was dark, and there was darkness in my heart. I remember telling Betsie that I thought God had forgotten us. "No, Corrie," said Betsie, "He has not forgotten us. Remember His Word: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him."

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¹ In addition, we also have several verses where God intentionally brought disaster.
I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things (Isaiah 45:7)
"Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?" (Lamentations 3:38)
"Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?"
(Amos 3:6)