

No Doubt About It; No Comfort In It
(A Believing Agnostic's View)
From the sermon series: The Mystery of God's Sovereign Grace

Text: Ecclesiastes 3: 11, 19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. Ecclesiastes 3:11 ,RSV

For man is a creature of chance and the beasts are creatures of chance, and one mischance awaits them all: death comes to both alike. Ecclesiastes 3:19, NEB

I begin today a series of messages that will focus on God's purpose in human history, thus, God's purpose in human life. I entitle the series, "The Mystery of God's Sovereign Grace," with deliberate intention. I use the word "mystery" because the truth of God's purpose is not accessible to unaided human reason. Great minds have speculated and reflected on the purpose of God; volumes have been written and endless debate has been engaged in. Yet, God's purpose cannot be discovered by human reason.

Still, the purpose of God is critically important to us all and we all know those significant junctures in our lives when we have cried out in frustration, "If only I knew what God's purpose is!" And the Bible says much about the will of God and God's purpose, but its truth is available only to those who trust that word, those to whom the Spirit of God addresses the Word.

Mystery as I use it does not deny the possibility of knowing the purpose of God and acting within it; it only denies that human reason can master that reality by its own effort.

I use the word "Sovereign." Sovereign means in its adjectival usage, "standing out above others, excelling in some respect, supreme, paramount, principal, greatest or most notable." Sovereignty means "supremacy, pre-eminence in respect to excellence or in respect to power, authority and rule."

Especially the Reformed tradition has been noted for its stress on the Sovereignty of God – a characterization that has sometimes become a caricature. I do not speak of the sovereignty of God, although I do not deny it, but, rather, I speak of the sovereignty of *grace*; that word, too, is of critical importance as we discuss the will and purpose of God, because we are speaking not of an absolute Who, by the use of raw power effects His purposes, but of a God Who exercises His power in gracious, personal relationship.

God's purpose and will is a mystery; it can be discerned only by revelation, received by faith. God's purposes will be effected; God is God. God's purposes will be effected graciously; God's dealing with us is personal, respecting our personality.

One can trace the debate that has raged over the centuries on the relationship of God's will and human will. It is an old theological question and in the terms in which it has been debated, it can never be solved. Theologians on both sides of the issue have refused to leave it where we begin – in mystery. Rather, the mystery has been dissolved one way or the other, either by referring everything to the will of God and reducing the human person to the status of powerlessness, or by asserting human freedom at the expense of God's sovereign rule. The debate always ends unsatisfactorily because the two parties are viewed in such a way that what is gained by one is at the expense of the other.

The whole dogmatic edifice has been challenged in the last three centuries. If we begin with the Enlightenment, which revolutionized the thinking of the continent in the 18th century, then we can see how the question has been handled to the present time with a radical shift from the older understanding of the will of God.

The older orthodoxy was clearly on the side of God's sovereignty. John Oman writes,

A doctrine both of God and of man of the utmost simplicity and definiteness was possible on the old dogmatic basis. God was the absolute and direct might and all He did without error or failure; and man was the creature of His hand, directly fashioned and needing nothing for his making but the word of power. Then to deal with the Omniscient was to have infallible truth, to deal with the Supreme to have absolute legislation, to deal with the Omnipotent to have irresistible succour. Faith was acceptance of infallible truth, justification coming to terms with absolute legislation, regeneration the inpouring of efficacious grace; and the whole dogmatic edifice stood solid and foursquare. (*Grace and Personality*, p. 19)

Oman continues,

So long as God's only adequate dealing with man is thought to be by the might of omnipotence directed in an unswerving line by omniscience, we

shall be apt to regard the underpinning of the old foundation, at all costs to facts, as a work of piety;...

But that conception of God's way of working is precisely the assumption which needs to be challenged.

First, we shall never inquire humbly into the actual way of God's dealing with His children, if we commence by laying down regulations for it *a priori*.

Second, the regulations are much more determined by the idea of how an absolute force would act than by any notion of God as Father.

Third, either the sphere of direct operation of omnipotence and omniscience is so restricted to special experience of special persons that religion ends where our bitterest need of God begins, or, failing that restriction, is so extended in indifference to good and evil, that God is only another name for the cosmic process.

Fourth, could we succeed in restricting its sphere to matters of revelation and personal salvation, we should still be left with the unanswerable question, why, if this is His only adequate method, the Almighty should employ the inferior which admits error and follow so extensively, possibly so exclusively? (p. 24F)

Using a beautiful image, Oman suggests that we have misconceived God's manner of working with us, His children. Rather than Omnipotence directed by Omniscience, God deals with us in a gracious personal relationship which takes seriously the freedom and responsibility with which He endowed us. He writes,

God does not conduct His rivers like arrows, to the sea. The ruler and compass are only for finite mortals who labour, by taking thought to overcome their limitation, and are not for the Infinite mind. The expedition demanded by man's small power and short day produces the canal, but nature, with a beneficent and picturesque circumambulancy, the work of a more spacious and less precipitate mind, produces the river. Why should we assume that, in all the rest of His ways, He rejoices in the river, but in religion, can use no adequate method save the canal? The defense of the infallible is the defense of the canal against the river, of the channel blasted through the rock against the basin dug by an element which swerves at a pebble or a firmer clay.

Then Oman asks the crucial question:

And the question is whether God ever does override the human spirit in that direct way, and whether we ought to conceive either of His spirit or of ours after a fashion that could make it possible. Would such irresistible

might as would save us from all error and compel us into right action be in accord either with God's personality or with ours? (p. 25F)

Again, he declares:

All infallibilities presuppose an idea of grace mechanically irresistible. But a direct force controlling persons as things is no personal relation between God and man ... (p. 26)

Oman rejects such a mechanically conceived notion of Grace and an idea of God "that poses Him as omnipotence directed by omniscience, thereby overriding the personality of the human person. Rather, he affirms that God and the creature He has fashioned in His own image are bound in a gracious personal relationship.

The old argument always started from the wrong conception of the relationship of God and His child.

The illuminating fact which makes us persons and not things, is that we are nothing except what we receive, yet we can receive nothing to profit except as our own ... (p. 33)

Oman will join an absolute moral independence and an absolute religious dependence. They are not opposites, but necessarily one and indivisible.

This is the theme we will be focusing upon as we hear the biblical witness from the Old Testament. We will begin with a rather familiar passage from a rather obscure Old Testament book, the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is a somewhat obscure Old Testament writing. We do not know the author and we cannot fully endorse every claim made in these chapters. The writer was a bit of a cynic and he really has no grasp of the grace of God, although he is a keen analyzer of the human condition. I remember my professor of preaching warning us to beware of the uninspired sayings of inspired persons. By that he was pointing out that not every expression from the lips of biblical characters represents God's truth. Ecclesiastes is a fascinating piece, but it is not the Gospel.

Ecclesiastes was not soon nor easily accepted into the Jewish canon of scripture. Tradition points to Solomon as the author, but this is doubtful. Yet the connection with his name probably helped gain it acceptance into the canon. The writing ends commending belief in God, obedience to His commandments and the reality of judgment. But throughout it is a vivid picture of the vanity or emptiness of human existence. Judaism reads this work on the fourth day of the Feast of Tabernacles, perhaps on this day of joyous festival, to remind people that life and its joys are fleeting and everything has its season. This work reminds us that to whatever heights of hope and faith the soul may rise, the fact remains, as

the writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, that "here have we no continuing city." (Hebrews 13:14)

There is an attractiveness about this Old Testament writing for, while it does not share the secret of God's grace as we know it in Jesus and the hope that we have in light of the resurrection, nevertheless there is a kind of clarity of thought, honesty of observation and integrity of mind which we cannot help but admire. His straightforward acknowledgement of the tragic dimension of life is a healthy corrective to shallow optimism and superficial piety which is at root a denial of reality and thus basically unhealthy and unhelpful.

The writer of this book had no doubt about the existence of God, or about His sovereign sway, but he found no comfort in it. God was in control but the human creature had no knowledge as to what He was doing or where things would end. The writer cannot always be believed; he was an agnostic - a person who simply doesn't know. He never takes a position or makes a commitment because he is never certain of anything.

Still, he is a "believing agnostic;" he believes in God's power, rule and control, but it's all an enigma to him. To be an agnostic is not very satisfying, but it's not terribly irritating, either. But to be a believing agnostic is to be not satisfied and constantly agitated. To be a believing agnostic is to believe too much to let it rest, and not enough to get anything out of it. To be a believing agnostic is one who surveys life, finds no clue as to its meaning, no sense of its direction, no feeling of grace, no succour, no sustaining or everlasting arm underneath, no kind of peace that the Eternal God is one's refuge, but still with kind of a haunting feeling that God is and God's in charge and God's about something, and God will make it happen, but God only knows what.

Now, the writer to the Ecclesiastes is really quite a person. Really, I like him. He is so honest. And when is the last time you ever found any honesty in the Church? The nice thing about the writer to the Ecclesiastes is that he has intellectual integrity. He dares raise the tough questions. He believes that God is and God will get on by Himself all right, without him defending Him, but in the meantime, he's got some real tough questions before the Almighty. He says, in effect, "You know, I believe You are, but if You're so smart and so powerful, how come life is such a mess?" The writer had a candor about him and integrity about him that pious church people too often lack.

We mask things over; we rationalize on behalf of God; we make excuses for God. When life is lousy, we don't dare say, "Life is lousy! Where in the world are You?" With the writer to the Ecclesiastes, it comes right out. He says sorrow and joy, tears and laughter, building up, tearing down - all of those marvelous things that he lists in the first eight verses which are so familiar and so popular that people ask them to be read at funerals and at weddings. The poetry is great. But, what is the issue of it all? He says, "God has put eternity in my heart - just enough so that I know there's something going on. But it beats me what it is."

He observes life and he says there really ought to be some connection between good conduct and proper reward. If you're a good guy, things ought to come out right, and if you're a bad guy, things ought to come out badly. But, he says, "Not the way I see it. I see good guys with bad things happening to them, and I see bad guys winning the Lotto Jackpot. From what I can observe in human experience, things don't come out right. Faithfulness and loyalty and steadiness and hard work and honesty and integrity and all of those good things you preach saying that things will work out nice - not the way I see it." And he said, "I don't know. I can't really see a lot of advantage of being human rather than a beast. And who knows if the human spirit goes up and the spirit of the beast goes down?"

Now, you can read the whole book and you will find a few more positive statements sprinkled throughout, but by and large the conclusion of this writer is that all is vanity. He had no doubt about it - God is and God's at work and God's got a plan and God's got a program - no doubt about it, but no comfort in it, because as far as he's concerned, it escapes him totally.

Well, for him, there is a mystery of sovereignty, but no grace. I like him. I like his honesty, and his insight into the human situation is a lot more honest than one generally hears from the pulpit. But, I'm afraid that his observation has left him not just patient with the rhythm of life, but caught in the web of fatalism which has left him weary, living on the edge of cynicism, draining him of energy, leaving him depressed.

That is where an awful lot of us are an awful lot of the time. I think there is a whole pack of religion in the land that could be characterized as "No doubt about it, but no comfort in it." There is a lot of our religion that is just going through forms, an automatic response, a sense of obligation and duty - the feeling that maybe there's something in it and if there isn't nothing lost. It probably won't hurt. There is an awful lot of religion that could be characterized as not a doubtful kind of response, but certainly a comfortless kind of issue where God is maybe the center of the great machine, maybe a life force. Perhaps one could simply resign one's self to whatever will be, as the stoic. "Grin and bear it." A kind of noble resignation to the inevitable. But, as far as figuring it out is concerned, it's arbitrary, capricious, chance, no kind of rationale, no movement, no direction, no discernible goal.

God? Yes. Mr. Gallup comes and says, "Do you believe in God?" "Yes." What? 95%? Maybe 98%. There aren't many good, red-blooded atheists in the world. Must be something. Takes a lot of faith to believe there's no God, or something like that!

Now, that's a dismal way to live. Some supreme power putting me on the pan, testing me to see what's in me. No, thanks. What a dismal kind of Sovereign this is. Totally lacking in any great, any redemptive purpose, any loving embrace. It's a biblical witness, though. Ecclesiastes had a hard time getting in the canon, but

it got there. It's there, and there are a lot of us there, too, if we would be honest enough to admit it and to write it down like this writer did.

Well, obviously, I can't leave it there. But, neither do I want to leave there too quickly. I can't send you out into the rain that dismally, but I don't want to take you out of it too quickly until you have felt the question, until you have honestly asked yourself, "Does that characterize my religious experience - no doubt about it, but no comfort in it?"

How differently one like the Apostle Paul experienced the whole gamut of the human situation. He said, "I've learned how to be abased; I've learned how to abound; I've learned to be content in the whole human situation, with all of its ups and downs." So he shared with the Church at Philippi. That was in the wake of looking into the face of the ascended, reigning Christ, who had also lived in the depths of human darkness, but had been raised by the power of God. The same apostle writing to the Church at Rome said, "I am convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God, the God Who works all things together for the good of those who love Him." Now, we can't stay with Ecclesiastes in the Christian Church, but it's good for us to hear the questions, to sense his honesty and his agony and to admit that a lot of the time we're weary too, drained of energy, paralyzed by a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, having no doubt about it, but sustaining no comfort in it.

I point you, rather, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus who said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father," the light of the knowledge of the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That God, Who has been with us in the depths, is the One Who is persuasively but ever so gently and always graciously moving us toward the heights. Stay tuned in. Stay with it, because there's a lot more to come, and there are a lot more stories here that are filled with light and glory, so that maybe even we might move from having no doubt about it, but no comfort in it, to the place where we can honestly rest in the Lord.

Let us pray.

God, our Father, we shuffle through life, too often with our shoulders bent and our eyes on the road. We lack the energy; we live without a dream; we're not captivated by a vision; our life is gloomy, at best. God, set us free; encounter us. May there be a rift in the heavens; may a light break through; may a light surprise us, the surprise of Grace, that will enable us to lean and to rest and to praise Thee. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Reference:

John Oman. *Grace and Personality*, 1917.