

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH III: 1-2

(Reading: Job 40:1-14; 42:1-6; Ephesians 1:1-14)

What God Has Planned To Do

The book of Job gives us the inspiring example of a believer who was faithful. Despite the terrible things the devil was allowed to do with him, Job kept his integrity. Whether it was through all his possessions being ransacked, his children being murdered, and then he himself being afflicted with the most painful sores all over his body, he held fast to the Lord.

At the end of the book Job is given twice as much as the enormous wealth he had at the beginning of the book. God was pleased with him because he said and did what was right.

But didn't our readings from Job cast a different light on his relationship with God? Because Job had been having a wrong assumption about God. He had been believing that God needed to prove Himself to us. It's only when Job comes to acknowledging that God is God and that he is completely and utterly dependent upon Him that the book can end.

Congregation, Job came to see what Article 1 of the third chapter of the Westminster Confession states. For the Bible says that God is in total control. Ephesians 1 verse 11 says that He is working out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will. Even the very evil which seems to be as far away from His character as anything could ever be, is part of His plan. In the words of the title to our sermon, this is about **WHAT GOD HAS PLANNED TO DO**.

How Christians Have Tried To Avoid This

As we look at **WHAT GOD HAS PLANNED TO DO**, we note, first of all, **HOW CHRISTIANS HAVE TRIED TO AVOID THIS**. You see, this has not sat easily with many Christians throughout the ages of church history. Because they perceive this contradiction between who God is and what's happening in this world, they try to excuse God by giving mankind some kind of independence in what he does. They don't agree with what the Westminster says here.

One example of this is found in Frank Peretti's books. He is a popular Christian author who has written books such as 'Piercing the Darkness' and 'This Present Darkness'. They are riveting reads. These books are about the terrible battles that Satan and his hosts are fighting against the saints. They really highlight the vital importance of prayer. But it brings across prayer in such a way that it's the prayers which win the victories. So it's what the believers do that enables God to act. This way if something goes wrong it's because there wasn't enough faith.

So their answer to pain and misery in anyone's life is that they have to believe and then they'll be fine. And if they do believe then there cannot be any shred of doubt!

Another example is found in a teaching that has become very popular called 'Open Theism'. It says that God takes risks in providentially creating and governing the world. Risks that mean sometimes things turn out differently than the way God wanted them to. For instance, Adam and Eve's sin was "something 'strange to God' in that it was not planned." So God had "to adjust his project in response to this horrible: - and surprising - "turn of events."

All these teachings severely limit God, though. And it gives us a relationship to Him which is almost that of needing each other. It has led to songs sung in Christian churches where we lift up God because if God's people aren't praising Him He can't do His work.

This is the error that Article 2 addresses. For some Christians say that God chooses to save those who He sees as having the power to believe. But this too takes away from God's predestination

and foreknowledge. I mean, does God know for certain what will happen before it happens? Of course He does!

If God knows that a thing is sure to happen before it happens then what makes it certain? God makes it certain! God foresees with certainty only because He guarantees the certainty.

This is what 2 Thessalonians 2 verse 13 confirms. For Paul says there, "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth."

God doesn't choose us because He foresees that we will believe, but He foresees that we will believe, because He has chosen us. That's why Ephesians 2 verse 9 can say that works don't count at all!

These believers who say it's at least partially up to us haven't come to the conclusion of Job. While they may say the Calvinist God is harsh and unyielding they have turned Him into a Sugar-Daddy.

They haven't come to that realisation the German philosopher Heinrich Heine came to. Because he said, "As soon as religion seeks help from philosophy, its doom is inevitable. Trying to defend itself, it talks it way further and further into its own destruction. Like any other absolutism, religion must not justify itself."

You see, God won't justify Himself. But don't so many try to convict Him on this very point? How many times haven't you heard that cutting question, "But if God is so loving, then why is there suffering in this world?" And so, in the second place, we see WHAT GOD HAS PLANNED TO DO with HOW UNBELIEVERS REACT TO THIS.

How Unbelievers React To This

It's a question that will have been asked again thousands of times over what happened in North Carolina. How could God allow what happened to that little girl? And whenever there's some natural disaster, like that terrible cyclone that hit America or the typhoon that killed so many in Asia, it's always called 'an act of God!' Oh, they know who to blame alright! The very God they don't believe in!

So, let's use their own argument. They say God's responsible. Because He does such terrible things they want no part of Him. You see what's happening? If God is indeed so powerful why would you not want to believe in Him? And if He's the One who doesn't change, as James 1 verse 17 affirms, don't you have to change if you want to get on side with Him?

Article 1 is clear. It begins, "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass." We can't start anywhere else but here. It's God's own Word. As Proverbs 16 verse 33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."

The unbeliever needs to see why he can see in the first place at all! He has to be brought to realise that while things are bad they're not so bad that he doesn't know that they're bad! He has a choice after all! And yet he can only come to the point of salvation by being brought low because of the realisation of his sin!

This is shown by a story about a theistic philosopher and an atheist philosopher. They first met when they were debating on the question of the significance of God's existence. During the course of the debate the atheist insisted that since all events in the universe are random and mindless, the pursuit of questions of meaning in suffering was itself meaningless and irrational.

The other responded that such a view lack empirical credibility since one could not possibly live out such a creed in the real world. He said that men and women faced with profound injustices or misery have always cried out 'Why?' Such questions, he argued, appear to be a necessary consequence of our nature as self-aware beings.

At the time, the two philosophers begged to differ. That is, until a year or so later when they met again in a more private setting. It turns out that several months after the initial debate, the 'unbelieving' philosopher had lost his daughter in a terrible rape-murder. He now confided in his former opponent that despite his intellectual commitment to atheism, when his daughter was killed he found himself unable to resist the impulse to cry out 'Why?' In his head, atheism seemed reason enough; in his experience it collapsed. The thought that his daughter's life had been lost to a universe of "blind, pitiless indifference" was unbearable and unliveable.

He's close to being saved, because he's been humbled. And if the Lord does convert him he will be completely brought low.

As we can see with Mark Talbot. Mark had a terrible accident when he was 17. It left him severely disabled for the rest of his life. He went through all the hopes of healing and trying to understand why it happened to him.

Looking at Scripture he came to know that nothing happens to us - nothing good and nothing bad - that doesn't ultimately come from God's hand. And he said that it is often right after some complication of his accident - a messy fall or something worse - that he feels God's love and care for Him most intensely. His sense then is not that God will "patch things up" and "make them better" in spite of what has just happened. Rather, he says, it is then that God's love and care for him explains what has just happened to him, no matter how bad in one sense it really is.

Romans 8 is so powerful about this. Verse 28 there says, "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

And haven't Christians with the most severe disabilities been some of the greatest witnesses of God's love? What about Fanny Crosby and Joni Eareckson Tada? They who you think would have the most reason to be angry with God thank and praise Him that He humbled them through it!

And so, in the third place, we look at **WHAT GOD HAS PLANNED TO DO** by **HOW WE ARE BLESSED THROUGH THIS**.

How We Are Blessed Through This

This is where the Westminster points us, for it puts God where He truly belongs – both as the God who can do all things and the God who does do all things. And it puts us where we belong, for we are also responsible here.

Article 1 points out the will and the liberty we have. As it continues on after having confessed that God is sovereign, "yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency or second causes taken away, but rather established."

What this means is that while God is completely in control yet we are totally to blame! 100% God's sovereignty and 100% man's responsibility. Another mystery! But again we can only say what God has said. Otherwise we don't know and show the truth.

Here we can answer the unbeliever further with, because it's our sin that has brought suffering into the world. It's our breaking with God which brought all this misery into the world. And the world won't be right again until the Lord ushers in the new heavens and the new earth.

It's realising that the answer's not us which opens us up to what God really wants us to know in this doctrine. It's this teaching which is shown in a 14th century story called 'The Hermit and the Angel.'

This story tells of a hermit and an angel who once set out on a journey together. The angel was in human shape and clothes, but he had told the hermit about whom he was.

The first night they stopped at a humble home by the roadside, where, for the love of God, they were given food and shelter. In the middle of the night the angel got up and strangled the baby child of their host as he was sleeping in his cradle. The hermit was amazed and horrified at what his companion did, but since he knew he was an angel he didn't say anything.

At the end of the next day's travel they were entertained at a mansion in a city. And when they left there the angel stole the beautiful golden cup out of which his host had drunk the wine at dinner.

On the next day's journey they were crossing a bridge over a deep and dangerous stream when they met a pilgrim. The angel said to the pilgrim, "Can you show us, good father, the way to the next town?" When the pilgrim turned to point out the road, the angel picked him up and flung him over the parapet of the bridge into the river. Seeing that, the hermit said to himself, "This must be a devil I'm travelling with, because all he does is evil!" But he said nothing to the angel.

That night, as darkness came on, snow was falling. They heard the howling of the wolves in the forest. In the distance they saw a light in the window of a cottage, and making their way to it, they asked for refuge. The surly master of the house with oaths and curses turned them away from his door. "There's the pig sty," he said. "That's the place for dirty beggars like you!"

So they spent the night in the pig sty among the swine. In the morning the angel went to the man's house and thanked him for his hospitality. As a gift he gave him the stolen goblet.

Well, that hermit was really furious! "Get out of here you wretched man!" he cried. "You pretend to be a messenger from heaven, but all you do is repay good with evil and evil with good."

Then looking at him with compassion in his eyes, the angel said, "Listen, short-sighted mortal. The father of the baby boy had been breaking God's commandments to heap up wealth for him. If that boy had lived he would have become a spoiled brat, wasting his life in riotous living and debauchery. My act which seemed to you so cruel saved both parent and child.

The owner of the golden cup which I took was becoming a drunken sot. The loss of his cup is making him think, and he's changing his ways."

The poor pilgrim whom I threw into the river was about to commit a terrible sin, when I interfered and sent him safe to heaven. As for this man who drove God's children from his door, he is, indeed, pleased with the goblet I've given him, but hereafter he will burn in hell."

When the hermit heard these words he bowed his head and murmured, "Forgive me, Lord, that in my ignorance I misjudged You." And so he came to see what Job saw.

May we too see that. While we on this earth may so often not understand it, let's realise, by faith, whose plan it is. And then we trust the hand it's in!

Believer, you know that you remain responsible for your past, present, and future sins. Yet you also know that, while you must be working out your salvation with fear and trembling, God is working in you. As Philippians 2 verse 13 says, "it is God who works in you to will and to act

according to his good purpose.” He who has chosen to appoint you to eternal life will complete the work he has begun in you. In the words of 1st Corinthians 15 verse 52, “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,” he’ll transform you into the likeness of His sinless Son. Then His will will be done - on earth as it is in heaven!