

Sovereignty & Unjust Suffering: Studies in Daniel, Part 1/2

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<http://lifemessenger.org/sovereignty-unjust-suffering-studies-in-daniel-part-1-2/>

Divine Sovereignty & Christian Suffering

In view of Christian experience and, indeed, that of Daniel, it must be asked as to how one responds to 'unjust suffering'. While 'unjust suffering' can manifest in many forms, the focus of this article is on persecution.

Perhaps the best way to view 'unjust suffering' in the book of Daniel is through the words and teaching of Peter:

Slaves submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of **unjust suffering** because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ... When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly....

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But if even you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit...

Dear Friends do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are **insulted because of the name of Christ**, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you **suffer as a Christian**, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgement to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ... So, then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. ...

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Pet. 2:18-23; 3:13-18; 4:12-19; 5:10

Divine Sovereignty & Abandonment

In handling unjust suffering, for example persecution, the bottom line is a total abandonment of life-and-limb to the faithfulness of God, who alone holds both the giving and taking of all life in his hands. Daniel's three friends were confronted with this when coerced to worship at the foot of Nebuchadnezzar's human colossus. In the face of death they could respond:

O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up (3:16-18).

They “entrusted themselves to him who judges justly”, believing whatever the outcome of their stand it would be according to the pleasure of God’s will—whether life or death. Like Christ, they could be “put to death in the body” but because of their faith, the regenerating power of God would “make them alive by the Spirit.” To suffer, when innocent, there must be a strong confidence, not only in the justice of God, his integrity, but also in the future rewards and reality of a eternal life and the future resurrection; for, often the deliverance is not in this life, but only through death; “Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. . . . These were all commended for their faith . . .” (Heb. 11:35-39). To suffer innocently, our lives ‘must not be counted dear unto ourselves’. Whether life or death, we stand. This is faith.

This same abandonment was demonstrated by Daniel, when, in the face of the royal decree prohibiting prayer to any god, except the king, he refused to inhibit his public confession of faith in the God of Israel by, as his habit was, opening the windows wide toward Jerusalem and praying, despite certain death (6:6,7). The envious conspirators who had manipulated the king into making the decree for the purpose of trapping their prey, found Daniel praying on his knees, giving thanks and asking God for help (6:10-12). The same courage, at the risk of life itself, is manfully displayed by Daniel’s friends’ refusal to bow to the gold image, of whom it was said by the heathen Nebuchadnezzar himself, “They trusted in him [the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego] and defied the kings command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God” (3:28).

Divine Sovereignty & Presence

This abandonment, and the ability to endure unjust suffering, are possible only if we are ‘conscious of God’. As Grudem comments on this,

It is not a stoic self-motivated tenacity which holds out against all opposition but rather the opposite, the trusting awareness of God’s presence and never-failing care, which is the key to righteous suffering. It is the confidence that God will ultimately right all wrongs which enables a Christian to submit to an unjust master without resentment, rebelliousness, self-pity or despair.[\[1\]](#)

It was Daniel’s focus on the Lord in an attitude of prayerful dependence as he asked for divine assistance that enabled him to stand firm in his faith with the confidence, that even in the face of imminent death, God would have the final glory and vindicate his own name. ‘God consciousness’, through a vital daily walk with the Lord, is the only key to handling suffering without reacting against the agent divinely chosen for our circumstances. God, the sovereign Lord, governs the degree to which we are exposed to adversity, and by which agency the suffering enters our lives. Both Daniel and his friends could have railed against Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar, respectively, but instead, they displayed grace and great dignity in the face of stinging injustices. This quiet consciousness of the overseeing hand of God in their lives was vindicated, in both cases, by the supernatural deliverance afforded them. God’s own name and honour is vindicated in the sight of these heathen kings despite their own pretensions to deity. Entrusting their lives to the Lord and to his care, released these men to witness to the mighty power of their God in sending supernatural aid to deliver from the ravages of the furnace and the mouths of lions. In fact, Peter asks,

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. (1 Pet 3:14-15)

The promise is, demonstrated in Daniel, that, “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” Even though we may suffer physically, even to the point of death, there is no harm that befalls us, for even in death there is victory. God’s overseeing hand that allowed the saint to suffer also guards their way into the eternal enjoyment of his wonderful presence. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28).

Divine Sovereignty & Judgement

Not only is supernatural aid powerfully released on behalf of the suffering saint, but ultimate and irrevocable judgement falls on the persecutors. If suffering is viewed as a redemptive judgement in the life of the saint so that, that “which perishes even

though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour” (1 Pet, 1:6-7), how will the unregenerate fair under the judgement of God. In fact Peter asks rhetorically, “... if it (judgement) begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” The answer is provided in Daniel, both in the three friends’ persistence in prayer and public confession of faith despite the king’s decree (ch.6). Nebuchadnezzar’s immediate acknowledgement of the sovereign God resulted, not only in the reversal of his previous decree, but a new one was pronounced declaring “that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way” (3:29). More fearful though than this was the retribution visited on those who had conspired against Daniel under the rule of Belshazzar: “At the king’s command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions’ den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones” (6:24).

Divine Sovereignty & Faithfulness

While the response of the suffering saint is to ‘entrust’ their lives to God, it is enabled by the fact that God is above all, faithful. “Though in such extreme moments it is hard to reconcile our sufferings with the goodness of God, it is well to hold firmly to the clue of divine causation. That which has not come causelessly will not causelessly remain. This is the one crevice through which light steals into the dungeon: ‘God is in all I suffer’”.^[2] Every trial and suffering is sent by the hand of God, and is in perfect harmony with his faithfulness. God will not do anything in our lives that is contrary with his own nature, for he cannot deny himself. However, as Clarkson so aptly states,

Whatever our creed may be, and however unexceptional our views as to the attributes and actions of God, we find ourselves strongly tempted to indulge the fretful, distrustful spirit shown by the children of Israel; we are apt to think that God has ‘forgotten to be gracious’ to us, that he has ‘passed us by’, that our wrongs and sufferings are disregarded by him just as if they were actually hidden from his eyes.

He continues explaining that his complaint,

... arises, not from a pardonable ignorance, but from a culpable forgetfulness, an inexcusable disregard of the nature of God whom we serve. ... For anything we know, an earlier interposition even by a single day would be a precipitancy that would do us harm; and for anything we can tell God may have already started means of deliverance whose ultimate outworking will realize out hearts’ desire. Wherefore let us banish dissatisfaction and distrust as ungodly, and cultivate a devout trust in the Lord, who will make good the kindest word ‘on which he has caused us to hope’.^[3]

God’s character is immutable; his faithfulness can neither decrease nor increase in regard to his creatures. It is only our apprehension of this fact that rises and falls, so often, according to the circumstances of life. Let us therefore not forget the integrity with which God has called us, and the care with which he directs our path, whether rough or smooth, whether in fair weather or foul. It was with this unshakeable confidence that these saints of old confronted the fearful might of kings and their empires, innocently suffering the jealousies and conspiracies of ambitious and godless men, ultimately prevailing through lives that were not dear unto themselves, and that were rescued from the very jaws of death both by a divine and dramatic interposition.

Divine Sovereignty & the Spirit of the Age

In conclusion, the book of Daniel illustrates dramatically the interaction between the moral agency of men and the sovereignty of God. It is this chemistry of men walking in the world with the covenant God that produces what is so needful in the Western twenty-first century church—a philosophy of suffering. Just as these men were faced with the spirit of the age, the seduction of status and luxury in Babylon, so too are we confronted with the values and priorities of the twenty-first century politically correct mantra that would seek to lead the Christian into a syncretistic worship of both the living God and the god of this world. As the state progressively encroaches on the rights of the individual, family and church, arrogating to itself the prerogatives of deity, demanding worship of itself as the image of God, men of the calibre of Daniel and his three friends will need to take their stand, seeing, sometimes through tears, the sovereign Lord as the final judge and arbiter of men and their actions. Resistance to the state’s interference in spheres not assigned to it by God will incur the wrath of men and the innocent suffering of the saint. This will require the biblical Christian to understand the total sovereignty of God in the midst of their

adversity without reflection on his goodness and doubting as to the honour of his intentions, for in him there is “no variability, neither shadow of turning” (Jas. 1:17)

Originally written as an essay, July 1990

References

[1] W.A. Grudem, “The First Epistle of Peter – an Introduction and Commentary”, (Leicester, England/Grand Rapids: IVP/Eerdmans, 1988) p. 126 f

[2] E. Johnson, “The Pulpit Commentary – The Book of Job”, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) Vol. VII, p. 111

[3] W. Clarkson, “The Pulpit Commentary – The Book of Isaiah”, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) Vol. X/ii p.87

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