

Making Sense of the Hard Providences of God

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Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Good morning, Providence Church. It is a blessing to be able to worship the Lord. I'm so grateful for the technology we have that we can gather together around the word of God. I was thinking about, reminded of a verse in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul says to the Corinthians, and I don't want to make more out of this than we should but I think it's definitely something to ponder and I think there is some theological encouragement we can draw from it, he says to the Corinthians, "When you are gathered in the name of the Lord and the Spirit is there and I am with you in spirit, then turn such a one over to Satan for destruction of his flesh." He's talking about a church discipline situation but he tells them that somehow he's with them in spirit. How can that be? Well, I think it's because we're all in Christ and in Christ we are united. We are all seated in the heavenly places in Jesus Christ, Ephesians 2, and if that is the case, the distance is not the barrier that we think it is, and so let us really in our hearts unite under the word of God today and be united by his Spirit in our submission to our King, the Lord Jesus.

So I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles now to Nehemiah 1. Nehemiah 1. We're picking up in our exposition of the books of Ezra/Nehemiah. If you've been with us, you'll recall that we've said that these two books are really one book originally; that the Lord in the Old Testament, it's one book, Ezra/Nehemiah, and I think it's really, we're gonna see this morning I think there's something really gained as you read right out of Ezra into Nehemiah as the Lord intended, that it really confronts us. Thinking about this is our second week on the internet. I mean, we've been on the internet longer but internet only in the sense, the second week, and last week we titled the message "Making Sense of the Coronavirus." That was last Sunday's message. In the providence of God and just the way that the word holds together, Ezra/Nehemiah, today's title is a real encouragement to me working on this, this week, "Making Sense of the Hard Providences of God." That's the title of the message this morning, making sense of the hard providences of God. I think that's exactly the first thing that should come to us as we read these first few verses of Nehemiah. So the title "Making Sense of the Hard Providences of God." The doctrine of providence, our name, the name of our church, Providence Church, is the doctrine that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass; that he governs all of creation in such a way that whatsoever comes to pass, comes to pass in accordance with his will and is for the providential blessing of his people for his glory and our good.

And so the doctrine of providence is the idea that his sovereignty is ordaining everything that happens in your life for his glory and your good.

Now that said, we encounter things that are puzzling. We encounter things that are painful and that we, in our finiteness, cannot see any good in, especially in the moment. Some of you are going through circumstances like that right now. All of us, in a sense, are going through circumstances we never imagined with this coronavirus outbreak, but some in our body are experiencing some really hard circumstances right now, and I think this passage has some great comfort for us. So the title "Making Sense of the Hard Providences of God." The idea is when life doesn't make sense, when events transpire which we cannot see how it fits together, when we're surprised by these difficulties, these trials, we're devastated at times, when you find yourself in places you never imagined being, what do you do? I think this passage in Nehemiah will help us to begin to understand how we can find strength, how we can make sense out of the hard providences of God.

We're going to be reading Nehemiah 1:1-4.

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." 4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we come to You this morning asking that You might add Your blessing by the power of Your Spirit, that You might make Your word alive in our hearts, that You might give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and wills that would be broken before You and submissive to You, and that You might be glorified in the praises of Your people, that You might be glorified in the surrender of Your people before You in Your goodness and Your faithfulness. Help us, O Lord, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Making sense of the surprising or the hard providences of God. Making sense of the hard providences of God. I want you to think about, one of the things that we have to, I often encourage you to do is to try to read a passage as if you don't know what's gonna happen. You already, so often as we walk with the Lord, we've read through the Bible, we've read this passage before, you may have heard messages on it, you may have read books about it, and so it's hard to read the Bible with fresh eyes and it's always a good thing to ask the Lord to give you the ability to see what the original audience would have seen when they first read it; when someone first reads this, what was the impact, because that helps you

understand what God was doing when he inspired these words to be written. What was his purpose? What did he want to accomplish in our lives?

Well, one of the things that happens here is we see this really is a surprising turn of events. It's more surprising than at first glance it looks because of the familiarity of this passage. This is one of those circumstances where the people of God find themselves in places they never imagined being. They find themselves devastated by God's hard providence. And so I want us to look at our message today under two main points. Two main points. The first point is the shocking condition of the people of God. The shocking condition of the people of God.

Nehemiah is shocked by what he hears. He wasn't expecting this. When he hears the report from Jerusalem from his brother, this may mean one of, he says one of my brothers, it may mean his actual brother but the same word for "brother," like we use the word "brother," is used in the general sense too of it could be another Israelite. So when he says, "One of my brothers came back, Hanani, and he reports to me and I'm asking him what's going on with the Jews who had escaped and who are in Jerusalem? What's happening with Jerusalem?" And when he hears that the remnant who've survived are in great distress and great reproach, the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, its gates are burned with fire, he is stunned by that. He immediately is heartbroken. This is something that surprises him, that it's gotten this bad this quickly. What has happened?

Well, look at the words that he uses. We're gonna look at three subpoints. The shocking condition of the people of God, three subpoints. We're gonna ask questions on these three subpoints: what, how and why? That's gonna be A, B, C. 1A is what, the shocking condition of the people of God, what is their condition? Subpoint A. Hanani tells him that the people are in great distress. Great distress and reproach and that is great reproach. These two loaded terms. First of all, great distress. What is their condition? They are in great distress. Some of the other translations translate this "great trouble." The King James says, "great affliction." Interestingly, the word literally is the same word for "evil." They are in, in a sense, great evil and the word "evil" in the Old and New Testament can have this connotation, it's not just evil in the moral sense, it's evil in the experiential sense, that is, harm. Good is that which is beneficial and right, evil is that which is harmful to all that God has made and is against us.

So the idea is they're in adversity. They're in great calamity. Their circumstances are malignant. In fact, I think the idea is evil can be something you actively do, or there's a passive component here that's in line here, the passive connotation. They have experienced great evil, great harm, and this great harm that has come upon them has resulted in them being in great reproach. The NIV translates this word "disgrace." The ESV says "shame." The word means "to be dishonored; to have scorn cast upon you; to be an object of ridicule or mockery." So the people have experienced great affliction, great calamity, and now the people around them, the people of God, the unbelievers around them are mocking and scorning them, ridiculing them. The people who are of God who are to be set apart as a light on a lampstand, a city on a hill, the glory of God

manifested in his people are actually now the objects of derision, and when Nehemiah hears that, he's brokenhearted.

Now that's what is their condition, I want to ask the second point, subpoint, first point, second subpoint: how? We're still talking about the shocking condition of the people of God. How did it get this way? This is where I think the benefit of reading Ezra and Nehemiah together really comes to the surface because how quickly things have deteriorated. Reading from Ezra 10 into Nehemiah 11, there's a gap of 11 ½ years. We read in verse 1, "it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol." Chislev is the ninth month of the Jewish year which corresponds to late November or mid-November to mid-December. Their months overlap kind of like usually about the 15th to the 15th roughly and it moves around, their calendar moves around because it's a lunar calendar. But usually Chislev is gonna be about November 15 to December 15 and so in the month of Chislev in the 20th year, the 20th year is the 20th year of Artaxerxes. This becomes clear in chapter 2, verse 1. They referred to time as it's the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes. Well, Ezra left for Judah and Jerusalem in the 7th year. He left 13 years before but Ezra takes about a year transpires and so that actually it's 11 years and 8 months since the end of Ezra 10, 11 years and 8 months is all it is. It's like saying that today, March of 2020, we're talking about something that happened in July of 2008. Things were great in July of 2008 for the people of God and now look at how radically things have changed.

So it's a quick, it's happened quickly but how has it happened? This is what's even more stunning, shocking. If you think about how you read through the book of Ezra, Ezra 7-10, remember what the Scripture is telling us in that passage. The hand of God is at work in the people of God. Remember that Ezra is leading this second return from exile. The first return had rebuilt the temple under Zerubbabel and Joshua. Then Ezra in 458 is raised up by God to bring about the second return and almost 5,000 Jews return with him and their purpose is to beautify the temple. They bring back tremendous wealth and financial support, and then their priests and Levites, and they come back to restore the worship of God to its rightful place, the law of God to the center of the people of God. Remember a key phrase that was used in Ezra, three times in chapter 7, the hand of the Lord was upon him. The hand of his God was upon him. "The hand of my God was upon me." Three times in chapter 7 it speaks of Ezra as someone in whom the hand of God is working, upon whom the hand of God is working. The hand of God is the power of God. The infinite almighty power of God at work in this man's life.

Then in chapter 8, we saw that then he speaks of the hand of God upon the people. Now that God is ministering through Ezra to the people, now the hand of God is upon the people. Three times it says the hand of God was upon them in chapter 8.

Then in chapters 9 and 10, what we saw was the powerful impact of the preaching of God's word. We saw on the pages of Ezra 9 and 10 what spiritual awakening and revival really looks like. The word of God is preached and the people of God are cut to the heart and they repent. They're awakened spiritually out of their slumber, out of their spiritual deadness to be alive to God and they repent, and we saw the beauty of repentance. They

mourn over their sins. They confess their sins. They turn from their sins and the turning from their sins was at great cost. Leaving ungodly wives who would turn them away from the Lord, turning away from them to follow Yahweh. And the last verse of chapter 10 of Ezra, all these had married foreign wives and some of them had wives by whom they had children. That's telling us they had to even separate from children. It's the pain that Abraham felt when he sent Ishmael away and Hagar. This is the hand of God.

Now saying that, again imagine you're reading from that into chapter 1 of Nehemiah. The hand of God is upon the people of God. The hand of God is at work among the people of God. The word of God is powerfully at work among the people of God. Repentance is happening. Spiritual awakening is happening. What's gonna happen next? And you see the most unexpected reality, a bitter providence. God allows the people of God to experience inexplicable adversity and calamity. Why? So counterintuitive. You know, we're not a health and wealth church at all. I mean, the health and wealth gospel is something that is one of those as James read earlier, false teachers, wolves in sheep's clothing preach the health and wealth gospel that God wants you to be healthy and wealthy in this world in natural ways, and that you can claim that and name it, claim it, all of that. We don't teach that. We don't believe that and all of you who have been here for any length of time would amen that, but in reality there's something to the sin nature that we have that we still kind of expect that.

I mean, think about it. You go through a time where God calls you back to himself, he brings his word with powerful conviction upon you. You turn back to him with all of your heart as these people do, what do you expect the Lord to do? Don't you expect to be kind of moving forward into sunlit uplands? You're on the way up in who God is and, yeah, you're not expecting just wealth, you don't want that but you're expecting some sense of blessing but it's amazing how we expect that blessing to be outward and temporal and what we see in the book of Ezra is that God's program is not that way. God's program is much better than that. God's program is to bless you inwardly and spiritually far more than outwardly and physically, and that if you have a heart for God, though this is hard at times to deal with, you would want that.

This is what he's doing, but they were left shocked and we're supposed to be thinking about that. Think about that, the hand of God, think about one of the things that we saw about the hand of God was the amazing letter that Ezra came back with from King Artaxerxes, the one he's talking about here in Nehemiah 1, the same man sent Ezra with a letter in chapter 7. This is why Ezra after reading or sharing the letter, the text of the letter, chapter 7, verses 11 to 26, Ezra then comments in the first person for the first time in the letter, this is verse 27, this is right after he shared the letter from Artaxerxes that he was given to take with him everywhere he went. He says, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me." That's after he's just read this letter in chapter 7, 11-26. This letter, chapter 7, verse 11, "Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes

gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel." And here's the text, "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace." This is the Persian king of all the known world saying this is a letter to Ezra, the priest of the law of God, perfect peace, and he basically, he's gonna say in the next 15 verses, "Everything that you need, you can have to restore the house of God, your God Yahweh, and the worship of Yahweh."

He tells him over and over again, it's all about the house of your God, the house of your God, the house of the God of heaven, and he gives this letter to him and it tells him, "You can go," I mean, look at verse 21 here, "I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently." He's saying, "You can go up to any of these people that are gonna later oppose you and you can give them this letter and they're gonna have to do whatever you need up to 100 talents of silver," verse 22, "100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed. Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons. We also inform you that it is not," this is verse 24, "it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim or servants of this house of God." He goes on to give Ezra the authority to punish those who do not follow the decrees of the law of God and he says, "Teach this."

Now think about that. If that happened in 2008, I mean, think about if the President of the United States came out and said, "Christianity, this is the one true God. I want to do everything I can to bless the preaching of the word." Even though the person's not a Christian, I mean, Artaxerxes clearly is not a believer, not a follower of Yahweh, but out of his respect for the fact that Yahweh might be the one true God, he says, "Don't hinder anything that's happening. I want the worship of the Lord to be protected." And then 11 years later, suddenly things have changed so badly that now every church is closed down, the people of God are in a shambles, the word of God is nowhere to be found. This is the kind of sudden change that has happened.

How could it have happened? This is the second point. I don't know if I said second, yeah, I said 1B, didn't I? How? We were on what, now we're on how where still this shocking condition of the people of God, point 1. What is their condition? How did they get this way? I want to add one more thing to how. It's interesting, I think that we come out of chapter 10 of Ezra into chapter 1 of Nehemiah and there's an amazing event that happens, this extraordinary turn of events that happens that's not recorded in place. It was recorded earlier. Back when we were in Ezra 4 and we were talking about – hang with me for a minute, you need to focus here on what we're talking about – in Ezra 4 way back when we were talking about the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel and Joshua, they encountered opposition. You remember they encountered opposition from the people and the work stopped and one of the things that the author of the book tells us is he's talking about the opposition that Zerubbabel and Joshua and the first returnees

experienced as they were rebuilding the temple. He then recounts two other times that opposition happened and the people that would have been reading it, recognized it. For us, it's kind of confusing. You're reading and suddenly he's talking about Ahaseurus and then he's talking about Artaxerxes. In verses 7-23 of chapter 4, he tells you what happened after Ezra and the people got back, that happened between the revival that happened and Nehemiah 1, and what happened was a guy named Rehum and Shimshai who were Samaritans who opposed the things of God, wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. Ezra comes there with this letter and he shows it to them and they began, you know, restoring worship, preaching the word, actually rebuilding the city, and these guys get upset and they send a letter to Artaxerxes and that's when they exhort him, "Make a careful search through all the records and you will find that Jerusalem is a rebellious city and that if you let this work continue to go on, you're not gonna have any holdings left on this side of the river because Jerusalem will rebel against you and they're going to lead a revolt against you." And Artaxerxes, the same guy that sent this letter by Ezra, sends word and says to Shimshai and Rehum, and he says, "Go to Jerusalem and stop the work immediately by force of arms."

Wow. What is up with that? Why would God allow Artaxerxes to send a letter like this with this much encouragement, chapter 7 I'm talking about, that whatever Ezra needs, Ezra gets, why would God do that and then come back around and allow the same Persian king to flip on a dime and do a 180 and send a letter that says, "Stop the work by force of arms." And so they come with their military, their soldiers and they stop the work and apparently in the vanity and pride of the ungodly, they're now stoked in their hatred of God and his people. It gets worse and worse until Nehemiah gets this word of how badly things have deteriorated.

So what's their condition? How it got that way? Third subpoint, 1C, why? The obvious question is why? Why has God done this? We have a high view of God. Nehemiah has a high view of God. Ezra has a high view of God. They know that God is sovereign and he rules over everything. Why has this happened? Why did we go from seeing the hand of God in chapter 7 of Ezra, upon Ezra and them getting back to the land; chapter 8, upon the people; chapter 9 and 10 of Ezra, the spiritual awakening and revival and repentance. Why was that followed with the Lord sort of pulling out the rug, in a sense?

It's interesting. I mentioned the hand of God, the hand of God is in chapter 7 of Ezra, the hand of God is in chapter 8, three times in each chapter. Chapters 9 and 10, I think we see the effect of the hand of God in this amazing revival and spiritual awakening. In chapter 1, where is the hand of God? It's interesting I bring that up because in chapter 2 of Nehemiah, verse 8 and verse 18, Nehemiah is gonna say after he finds all this out and he goes to the king, "The hand of God is upon me." That's something we don't, we're gonna look at that more carefully as we go forward but I just want you to see it now. The hand of God was at work. The hand of God will be at work. But for some reason, the hand of God is not at work. What's happened is the Lord has pulled back his hand and he's allowed the enemies of God to rush in, he's allowed calamity to come upon his people, adversity, reproach and contempt to come upon his treasured people.

Why? In the passage we don't have a clear answer. In fact, this is one of the best illustrations of Proverbs 21:1 that I think there is in the Scriptures. Proverbs 21:1, "The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. Like a watercourse He channels it wherever he wishes." You know, when you look at a river from the sky or if you're really paying attention, even if you're realizing how if you're crossing a river, a lot of times you'll cross a river and have to cross it again, cross it again, because the river does like this as it flows, it meanders, and so you think it's going one direction and then it turns. That's how the Lord's control over the heart of the king is. The king can be going in one direction and the Lord speaks and decrees and suddenly he's going in a different direction. The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. Like a watercourse he channels it wherever he wishes. Artaxerxes' first decree in Ezra 7, he's going one direction, and then on a dime the other direction, and in a sense what we see is the freedom of God, the sovereign freedom of God. God is free to do as he chooses. And listen, he's just because if you and I get what we deserve, we go to hell. You should always put whatever your circumstances are in context of what you deserve and what I deserve. What we're getting is mercy. What we're getting is kindness. What we're getting is lovingkindness. But God is sovereign and he's free, and there are times where the Scripture really hammers that home. The image of the potter and the clay in Isaiah and also in Romans 9.

So the shocking condition of the people of God. We've looked at what their condition is, how they got there, why, we don't know, although the rest of the Scriptures gives us some real encouragement. The second point, the second main point today, the first point was the shocking condition of the people of God, the second point today is the stabilizing power of the character of God. The stabilizing power of the character of God. We don't have a lot in the passage that tells us but as we read the rest of the book, we'll see this but there's something extraordinary I think in the very first sentence, "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah." Nehemiah, the name.

We don't know much about this man, we just know his dad's name but his name itself, remember names in Hebrew have meaning and Nehemiah is like a sentence and it basically says this, "Yahweh comforts or Yahweh is comfort, Yahweh will comfort." And so Nehemiah in a sense, remember we know that Ezra, his name meant "help, help from God has come." Nehemiah is the comfort of God, the compassion of God, the consolation of God. It's interesting, the word comes nechem and yah basically. It's yah is Yahweh and nechem, which Nehemiah is a form of that means comfort, but it also can mean even repent. Not the word that's used of our repentance which is "shub" which means "to turn," this is a different word that's used of God repenting or relenting of what he was going to do, but the word itself comes from the idea, scholars believe it was originally an onomatopoeic word. Remember onomatopoeia? Like the word "buzz," what sound does a bee make? It buzzes. The word sounds like what it describes. And so this word, "nechem," was that kind of onomatopoeic word. Nechem, in the sense of the root idea was to breathe out like a sigh, an outward expression of emotion in the breathing with a little sound to it. And so the idea is you're going to do something and you out of compassion, and this is I think the picture, you change your mind and out of compassion as you look at the neediness of someone. You look at your child and you're gonna let

them, you know, maybe go through what they're gonna go through and then out of compassion you just say, "No, that's too much. I'm gonna help you out here."

Nehem. So it's the compassion of God, the comfort of God, and so Nehemiah is the comfort that God is sending and it's interesting when you look at this book, he's an extraordinary person. I mean, Nehemiah is a man of prayer, we're going to see. He's continually praying and leaning on the Lord. He is a man of action. I mean, he gets things done. He's a man of extraordinary leadership ability. He is the right man for the job and I think in one sense what we see is the Lord, this is some of the comfort we have here is that the character of God is seen in that he is a God who does send comfort. He's a God who delights to comfort us in our affliction, and he even allows us to experience affliction so that we will look to him for comfort and we will find in him that he is the Father of mercies and 2 Corinthians 1 says, he's the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our tribulations so that we may be able to comfort others with the comfort which we have received from God. God in his hard providences, he sometimes afflicts so that he might comfort and his afflicting is righteous and holy and good, and his purpose in doing it is to give us spiritual prosperity. He afflicts outwardly and physically so that he can bless inwardly and spiritually and that is wonderful. That is so good and when you experience that, when you go through sudden affliction, sudden suffering that causes you to wonder why is this happening, what good could come of this, and sometimes you feel alone and abandoned, that your prayers are hitting the ceiling, not reaching God like the Psalmist says so many times, "Lord, where are You? How long, O Lord?" But when you then see the Lord's hand and when you sense his presence, when he sends forth his word and heals you, he restores you, he sends his comfort to you, there is nothing more wonderful, there is nothing more delightful, there is nothing that satisfies the soul like being comforted by the Lord.

This is what Job experienced. We talked about the sovereignty of God last week and how Job went through so much. When Job got to the end of his life, I mean the end of his trial and the Lord restored him and he gave him double everything he had before, and remember what Job said? Job was a godly man. Remember at the beginning of the book we noted how Job did not do anything to bring this upon himself which I want to suggest the people of Israel had not done anything to bring this upon themselves, at least the text doesn't tell us that. Now I say that, put that in context, all of us deserve hell, all of us are sinners who need discipline, all of us and this is how God disciplines, through affliction. So we deserve it, more than that, we need it. So he's good in giving it but what I want to say is sometimes the Lord disciplines, you clearly violate his commands, you walk in obedience and he will bring the rod in such a way that you know you're being disciplined for that particular act. This is like 1 Corinthians 11. If you divide the body, the Lord will discipline you as he says in 1 Corinthians 11, if you, you know, harboring grudges, looking down on other believers, coming and taking the Lord's Supper in that kind of a mindset of division, God even killed some of those believers out of disciplining them. He took them home because of what they'd done to the body. He says some are sick and some even sleep because of what God is doing. That's discipline directly related to sin and that is often what we experience. Now we experience discipline because we need it.

We sin, we need to be disciplined, but there are sometimes where God does things that aren't directly related to sin that you've done. Now it's going to deal with sin that's in your heart, though. That's the good news, but it's not because of sin you've done and there's nothing in the passage that would tell us that the people of Ezra and Nehemiah's day have done anything to need to deserve this. I mean, they just have chapter 10, verse 44 is talking about the incredible sacrifice they made in turning from sin but the next thing they get is adversity and sometimes it's like that. That's what happened to Job. Job didn't do anything to deserve it. That's what his friends kept thinking, "You had to do something to deserve this." That's what chapter 3 to chapter 36 or so are about, 35. Job, it's like they keep basically saying, there's a dialogue between his three friends and him and every time each one of them talks, they're basically saying, "Job, it's time to come clean. What have you done to bring this horrible stuff upon you?" And Job keeps saying, "I'm innocent. I haven't done anything. I haven't. There's no secret sin. There's no terrible thing that I've done that God's disciplining me for." And they're like, "Okay, Job, we hear you. Now Job, really, tell us what is it that you've done?" In the end the Lord basically says, "Job was right. You guys were wrong. He didn't have to do anything for Me to bring this upon him. I can do it freely because I am God." That's exactly what he told Job too. That was the correction Job got. "Job, if you want to tell Me how to run your life, can you tell Me how I hung the stars in their places? Can you command the morning? Can you make the mountain goats give birth? If you can, I will listen to you. If you can't, put your hand over your mouth and I will teach you."

That's the sovereignty of God but the wonder of it is the goodness of God comes through there. The character of God. We talked about that last week. He's sovereign. He's good. He's wise. The goodness of God comes through in that Job at the end has double the blessing materially, but more than that, he has more than double the blessing spiritually. He says, "Before I had heard about You with my ears, now I have seen You with my eyes and I repent." He's saying, "I didn't know You like I know You now." In heaven if we talk to Job, I guarantee you he's going to say how grateful he is to God for the wonderful work that he did through that awful affliction he went through, even though the affliction is ugly, it's evil as it says here, that the distress they're in, evil's involved in that, yes, but God's reigning over it; that even what Satan meant for evil, God meant for good.

So knowing the character of God, that he's doing that, is amazingly powerful. Not only that he, his goodness means he wants your best. He wants to truly bless you. He wants to give you every good thing. He will withhold no good thing from those who love him. He's not withholding. He's not holding back. He's actually giving and loving and this is what's, the amazing thing is he's giving in loving his people even as he brings affliction. He's putting them in a place where they need comfort so that he can then fill them up with comfort. He's putting them in the place where they don't know what to do so that he can provide the man to lead them to show them what to do and they are left praising him and worshipping him and thanking him.

A passage in the New Testament that I think speaks to this same reality is Romans 8. Turn with me to Romans 8. The stabilizing power of the character of God, to know that God is sovereign, that he's good, that he's wise. Remember his wisdom means, the

definition I shared with you last week from A. W. Tozer, that God always wants the perfect end. He always has the perfect goal in mind and he always uses the perfect means to get to that goal. There's not a better way to do what he does. He always does it the very best way so we can trust that in his sovereignty he's reigning and ruling over whatever adversity comes into our lives even though evil may be at work, and we can hate the evil, we can hate the pain because it's not good, it's bad, but we can trust in the moment that God is doing something good in this and we can cast ourselves upon the Lord. We can rest, as we were talking about, Ted was talking about earlier, in who Jesus is. We can draw near to him and we can find the greatness of his loving heart as we draw near to him.

Romans 8:31-37, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" Now you need to know that that is true. If God is for us, who's against us? Paul says if God is for us, who is against us? What does it matter who's against us? If God is for you, well, you say, "I don't think God is for me looking at my circumstances." Well, you're not thinking about it correctly. God is for if you have placed your faith in Jesus. If you are resting in Christ, God is for you. If you have united yourself to his Son, he is for you. He cannot be against you because he cannot be against his Son. And if he's for you, who is against us?

Then he says in verse 32, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" So he's gonna give you every good thing if he gave you Jesus. He's for you and he's giving you good things every moment of every day. He continues to pile on to the wonder of how sure we can be of God's heart toward us, his character toward us.

Verse 33, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" Who can condemn you, he's saying. "God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us." God is for you. God is giving good things to you. Jesus is interceding for you in the presence of God. You are not condemned. No matter what's happening in your life, you cannot conclude you are being condemned or judged in any way, judgment in the sense of wrath and punishment. No, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," Romans 8:1. That doesn't mean your circumstances are going to be easy.

Verse 35, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Now I love this, and he ends verse 39, he ends with that. Nothing is able to separate us from the love of Christ, the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. So verse 35, he says, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" You are in the love of Christ. You are loved by Jesus and you are loved by the Father as if you were his own Son because you are in his Son. What can separate you from that? The answer is nothing. God is for you. He's giving you good things. He loves you. He treasures you.

Now look at the next verse or the rest of this verse, verse 35, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness,

or peril, or sword?" He's talking to Christians who are suffering and he's saying, "Listen, if you experience tribulation, can that separate you? If you experience distress, if you experience persecution, if you experience famine, if you have your goods taken away and even your clothing taken away and you experience nakedness, if you experience peril, if you experience sword, can that separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus?"

And then just to show us, he quotes from Psalm 44 and he says, "Just as it is written, 'For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'" He says this is actually, this is par for the course in the Christian life, to experience these things, to be led as sheep to be slaughtered, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and to share in his sufferings.

It's counterintuitive but then he gives us this wonderful verse, verse 37 in talking about tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. There are health and wealth teachers that will say those things don't belong to the Christian life and they are lying to you. They are lying or they're fools. The Bible does not say that these things do not belong to the Christian life. It says, in fact, in this world, Jesus said, you will have tribulation. So these things are going to be a part of our lives and so when we encounter them, we should not be surprised as 1 Peter 4:12, which we looked at last week, said. Don't be surprised at the fiery trial that has come to you as though some strange thing were happening to you. That's normal.

"For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." We go through all these things. Why? "But in all these things," not from all these things, "in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." Overwhelming conquer, that's a good translation of that verb. It means literally it's hyper or huponikao. Nikao, nike, means victory. To overcome. To be victorious. Hyper or huper in Greek but hyper as we transliterate it to English means "over, above and beyond." So nike or nichao means "to conquer." That to be victorious. Isn't that enough? No, we aren't just victorious, we are hyper-victorious, over, above and beyond we conquer in these afflictions.

What the people of Nehemiah's day, Ezra's day, their contemporaries, we're gonna see in the book of Nehemiah they worked together. What they were seeing, they were beginning to experience that this is the way that God works as he's unfolding his kingdom which is a kingdom not of this world as Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." The kingdom of God is in the hearts of men and he's transforming people into the likeness of Christ in their character, and to be made like Jesus is to be made prosperous spiritually. This is the will of God, that we would be made like Christ and prosper spiritually; that we would understand the riches of Christ, our spiritual riches. And there's something about experiencing the shocking conditions that sometimes come in our lives that helps wake us up to our great need of God and our great need of Christ.

So we go through tribulation, we go through distress so that we can cling to Jesus. This means that whatever's gonna happen in the weeks and months to come, some of us may get sick, we may lose some of us. I mean, it can be any of us, it's becoming clear it's not

just older people. Certainly they're at the highest risk but we know that God is sovereign and if he brings that, if he has me walk that path of suffering through the illness, being isolated. I was thinking about how hard it is right now for people that are going through illness are being kept away from their families. I mean, sometimes for the protection of their loved ones, think about how hard that's gotta be. There are so many things about, that can come into our lives that we would find to be a calamity and adversity leading to misery, but how do you bear up under that? The thing that will give you strength and stabilize you is the character of God. If you know the character of God, you know that his promises are true. "I will never leave you nor forsake you and if I call you to walk down a path of loneliness and pain, I will be with you every step of the way, walking with you, leading you, in fact, I have walked the path before you already and I will comfort you," the Lord Jesus says, "with the comfort that I have experienced in My own soul, I will give to you. And I put My Spirit in your heart to give you power. I've given you My word which will sustain you."

He's never, there's never, he does everything perfectly so he's given us all the resources we need in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. We must know this, that the Lord not only has the perfect end, he has the perfect means to the perfect end, so that means we have what we need around us. The Lord, sometimes we have to ask for help. We need to reach out. We need to hit that tab on the website that says "I need help. I need counsel. I need some practical help." Humble ourselves and we do that but the Lord will be with us and ultimately he is the one and he loves to put his people in situations where they are absolutely and utterly perplexed, and they see that their resources are inadequate. This is the way he has always done it. I mean, look, just read the way he dealt with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Exactly the same way. It's the way he dealt with David. It's the way he has dealt with his people that he loves throughout history. This is the way of God and it is the best way. There is no better way. When we understand that, then we have no fear. If we are living in the light of that, we will be able to be more than conquerors through him who loved us. If he did not spare his own Son, if he gave Jesus for you, if he put his Son on the cross, bearing the wrath that you and I deserve, how can you doubt he loves you? How can I ever doubt that? He has proven his love.

We'll find ourselves in difficult circumstances, maybe this is gonna be shorter than we expect, maybe it's going to be less burdensome financially or health wise. We should pray that it will be, that's appropriate because it is a bad thing that's happening. We pray for God to bless and bring goodness but ultimately we should always say, "Nevertheless, Father, not my will but Thy will be done." There's a song years ago, one song I really like about 15-20 years ago had these lyrics talking about the hard providences of God. It says, "When you don't understand, when you're looking at your life and this is when you don't understand, when you can't see his plan, when you can't trace his hand, trust his heart." You look at your life, it doesn't make sense. You look at your circumstances, you can't see how this could possibly be orchestrated by God. You can't trace his hand, you cannot see his fingerprints, in situations like that, what do you do? You trust his heart. He is sovereign, completely in control. He is good, completely good. He wants what's best for his people, always the very best and he is wise. If we know that, we can rest.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we praise and honor You for who You are. Lord, we say with the author of Scripture, Lord, these things are too wonderful for us, they're too great for us, we cannot fathom how all these things hold together. And we pray that You would help us to be like David in Psalm 131, that knowing Your character, knowing Your sovereignty, Your goodness, Your wisdom, knowing who You are, that we could in any circumstance, we could be like David says in Psalm 131, that he was like a weaned child against his mother, like a small child that's no longer nursing, now eating from the table, sitting against his mother not asking to be fed as he was when he was earlier nursing and moving around, but just content sitting on his mother's lap knowing that all is right with the world; that whatever circumstances, whatever things are going on around, a small child on his mother's lap, there are no burdens, there are no concerns, there are no worries about the next meal or what's going to happen tomorrow or what's going to happen next month, just being with mom all is right with the world. Thank You for giving us that glorious picture that that's how You intend us to live, sitting on the lap of our heavenly Father, resting in the arms of our loving elder brother, knowing that everything is right, that we can rest and we don't concern ourselves, as David said, with matters too great for me, things too high for me. We just look and trust in our Lord and His word. Father, make Your people shine brightly with the glory of Your Son. Make us shine so brightly that people are asking us the reason for the hope within us and let us be ready to point them to Jesus. We pray this in His name. Amen.