

Malvern Mashal 143



Trusting in the Sovereignty of God

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Let's ask ourselves this question: is the sovereignty of God just a head doctrine for us, or is it the sure foundation for our times? The unexpected challenges of Patmos experiences test whether we trust him with both the big things of life and the little ones.

Neither John on Patmos nor Paul during his times of imprisonment described themselves as being prisoners of the Roman Empire. They saw themselves first and last as being in the Lord's hands. And God found ways to make the rocky island of Patmos come alive when He appeared in glory to His beloved disciple John.

At the same time we must not be naïve and draw wrong assumptions about the sovereignty of God. He wills many things for our lives, not least that we experience abundant life in Jesus, but our own responses to a large extent determine the extent to which we are able to live in the good of this. There is nothing passive about the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. If there were then people would (and unfortunately do) end up believing and accepting things that actually need to be resisted and overcome in faith, because they come from the one who came to kill and destroy, the one who is a thief and a robber.

John was on Patmos because in a very real sense God limits His power over His children and He gives us freedom to choose. God allowed many of His children to go into exile or

worse, and John like many others chose NOT to say 'Caesar is Lord' but to remain faithful to Jesus and to accept the consequences. May we likewise make good choices.

God knows how to find us when we are going through Patmos experiences. When Jesus saw the disciples on the Lake of Galilee straining at the oars in the moonlight, the word in Greek literally means 'to be tortured in body or mind.' It is a very strong word; but Jesus makes as if to pass them by. Surely He must have been moved by their plight? Was He testing their faith as He did when He asked Philip how he was going to provide for the five thousand? Or was He simply wanting to spend more time alone with His Father? Either way, He answers their cry and comes alongside them and says 'Take courage, I am here.' And the disciples pricked up their ears, and in one person's case had the courage to step out of the boat – and in doing so came to a greater realisation of who Jesus really was.

You see, Jesus was echoing the words of Exodus 3:14 where Yahweh reveals Himself by using the words 'I am who I am.' The significance of Jesus using these most holy of all words 'I AM' did not escape Peter's attention when he had had time to process its implications. In fact it was just after this episode that he first recognized Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. So perhaps the real miracle of this episode was not that Peter managed to take a few steps on

the water, nor even that the winds died down the moment Jesus got into the boat with them, but rather that the eyes of the disciples were opened to see who He really was. And that is also what Patmos times are all about – turning head-knowledge into heart understanding and the vigorous deployment of our faith.

Yes there are floods and fires we may have to pass through, and even much loss and desolation in the Valley of Baca which we drench with our tears, but this is not our final destination – we are passing through these Vales of Tears. Feelings and circumstances go up and down, but the Word of the Lord stands firm for ever. “God is not unjust; He will not forget your work, and the love you show Him as you help His people and continue to help them. May we show this same diligence to the very end, so that what we hope for may be fully realized, as we imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. (Heb. 6:10-12)

This will keep us from exuding an odour of staleness as we pass through these Patmos times, and even of grudgingness as the result of the hurts and disappointments we have sustained. May we remember to look up to Jesus when strong temptations come so that we do not lash out or to give up, and say ‘Your perseverance, Lord;’ or ‘Your love and forgiveness’, or whatever it is we are most in need of at that particular moment. In the midst of our challenges and troubles He is still a very present help. And that will keep us from that overbearing sense of striving and indispensability that characterises certain types of rather self righteous believers.

Anything is better than spoiling or even driving away the sweetness of His presence. May we continue to exude the fragrance of Mary of Bethany that revitalises others rather than indulging the veiled resentment of Martha as we go about our daily business. The people around us may be carrying far more sorrow than they show on their face, and be far more in need of His love than we realise.

I love it when the Lord tells me in so many words on a given day who to visit and what to pray. This is not servile childish dependency –

it is the fruit of union with Him. But the Lord is equally sovereign in Patmos times when we are unable to hear Him speak and simply need to commit our way to Him and step out and make things happen, trusting Him to sustain us, and to intervene as we go along.

Some years ago when we lived near Church Stretton, I set off early one morning for a ministry trip to Holland. That particular station has no railway ticket office; you simply get on the train and buy your ticket there. On the first leg of my journey to the airport the conductor never showed up, so I went to the office at Crewe to buy a ticket from Church Stretton to Liverpool, put my hand in my pocket to pull out my wallet – and discovered with a sinking feeling that it wasn’t there. I was wearing the wrong pair of trousers!

My pockets were ten pound note free zones, and the plane was due to fly in little more than two hours. I muttered an explanation to the ticket officer, and a man in the queue next to mine overheard me, “Here’s my credit card,” they offered, “Use it to go anywhere you want!”

Thank You Lord. It wasn’t an angel – or if it was he had an address I was able to send the money to later – but it definitely felt like a divine appointment.

Something rather similar happened when I was on my way to Finland. My train had been delayed, and Heathrow itself had been struck by such intensely strong storms that there was a huge backlog of passengers. I could see that the queue ahead was going to take hours to get through, and I had only forty minutes to get through to catch my flight. There was absolutely no chance of doing so, but the Lord suddenly said to me quite clearly, ‘I want you to go to Finland.’ Moments later a woman in British Airways uniform headed towards the huge throng of people, singled me out and led me to a separate ticket post which she opened for me. She checked my documents and then closed it again the moment I was through. I must admit I wondered if that one really was an angel in disguise!

From simple episodes like these we can derive great encouragement. When God has a pur-

pose in mind, He is prepared to go to enormous lengths to bring it about. Even though John's stay on the bleak and bare island of Patmos initially appeared completely lacking in either purpose or fruit, in God's sight it was golden: and as the Lord instructed the Laodicean church, 'Buy gold from Me refined in the fire.' Peter reminds us that these trials have come so that your faith, which is of greater worth than gold, may be proved genuine, and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Patmos times are not so far removed from what is often known as the dark night of the soul, when the ability to sense the Lord's presence sharply decreases, and when the opportunities for service may appear to diminish too. If the Lord doesn't immediately open up some new sphere, it may be He because He is changing the season we are in, or wanting to draw our attention to something else.

Sooner or later the Lord will find ways to bring these matters to our attention -- faster than we can get our warp-shields up to dodge them. The discipline we read of in Hebrews 12 is a crucial part of our relationship with Him -- and it is a hand crafted affair.

When the Lord highlights a matter we have a choice -- and the quicker we face it, the easier it is for the Lord to lead us on. But if we insist on covering it up and pretending that it isn't there, we are more or less sentencing ourselves to living with more of the same. If we have got something wrong, we can't afford to let pride or stubbornness cause us to hold back from backtracking to the point where we went wrong.

Anything is better than straying further down the long road to nowhere!

There is a fine line between adopting a profoundly unbiblical *che sera sera* almost Buddhist like attitude, and a deeper acceptance of the way the Lord is leading us -- but this is the fruit of relationship and union, not a cop out or an opt out.

The Sovereignty of God is a profoundly reassuring theme, but it's about more than God delivering us from our problems, though that

most certainly comes into it, it's about going deeper with Him.

Let the Lord bring to mind now at least five episodes in your life.

Let Him interpret to you where He was in them.

How did you respond?

Did they work out well because you picked up on signs of His leading?

Or less well because you missed them?

What can you learn from what happened when what you had most hoped for did not come to pass?

Spend time in the Lord's presence talking with Him now. He will meet with you!

