



And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.  
- Acts 4:31

# The Absolute Reign

The Sermon

Acts 4:23-31

## 12 | Dilemma of the Case – His Suffering | Acts 4:27-28

*“For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done”* (Acts 4:27-28).

There are so many “Why?” questions asked in the Old Testament that it is impossible to numerate them. The Psalmist questioned God. *“Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide in times of trouble?”* (Psalms 10:1). Jeremiah cried out to God in great distress. *“Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?”* (Jeremiah 12:1). It is an age-old question! Why do the righteous suffer? Why do the godliest people get cancer? Saint Teresa died in her early twenties after spending most of her life in bed with suffering. How can that be? Why do bad things happen to good people?

There are four Old Testament books written by an author who had a brilliant theological mind (1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings). His goal was not to present the history of a chosen people but to present a theological understanding of the relationship between the will of God and the events happening in Israel. He established the premise of “punishment and reward.” When the kings regularly and openly transgressed the Law of God, circumstances did not go well for Israel. Punishment for disobedience was proved repeatedly in these books.

The Book of First Samuel opens with Eli, the old priest. He had two sons who were wicked priests. Because of their wickedness the Philistines attacked Israel, defeated them in battle, and captured the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God’s presence (1 Samuel 4:10-11). So the premise holds true; when a person disobeys God the result is destruction, which also was true for the Philistines. When the Philistines possessed the Ark of the Covenant they had God’s presence dwelling in their land. However, because of their wickedness, God’s presence brought misery, not blessing. They voluntarily returned the Ark of the Covenant to Israel (1 Samuel 5).

We see the premise of “punishment” through the reigns of King Saul and King David. Each time these men disobeyed God major destruction followed. Finally the Kingdom of Israel was split between the northern ten tribes (Israel) and the southern two (Judah). The story goes from bad to worse. The kings of both the north and south disobeyed God. They let the high places of the pagan cults remain, and they did not observe the laws forbidding intermarriage. These kings got progressively more disobedient proving the premise repeatedly as destruction came to their nation.

The premise of “reward” is never proven. Obedience to God should result in blessings and goodness, but we never see a king who obeys to prove the premise of “reward.” However, when we think all is lost a king appears who will prove the complete premise of “punishment and reward.” His name is Josiah! *“Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor after him did any arise like him”* (2 Kings 23:25). This was a high moment; the blessings of God should flow and Judah should prosper. The beginning of the next verse is *“Nevertheless”* (2 Kings 23:26), causing us to “gasp!” This is a “NO” in the eternal moment. The Pharaoh of Egypt killed Josiah in a battle. Josiah’s son became king, reigning in wickedness, and Judah ended in Babylonian captivity. This placed a kink in the theological premise. Disobedience produces chaos; but obedience should produce prosperity. How can we explain this?

Surely the premise of “reward for obedience” will be proven in the New Testament. Has there ever been one like Jesus? His ministry began with the voice of His Father. *“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”* (Matthew 3:17). The Father said this again at the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5). Has ever the power of God been demonstrated in such a Man? His miracles were evidence of this power! Surely Jesus will prove the premise. When a person is obedient prosperity and well-being result.

“Oops!” What is Jesus doing on a cross? Why is He crying out to God, *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* (Matthew 27:46). Does God forsake people who do right? Maybe the premise is wrong! This is the dilemma of our passage. If God is sovereign will He not protect the good people and punish the bad people? Why would a sovereign God allow His people to suffer? The sovereignty of God is the power and might of dominion over His creatures, to determine and dispose of them as He desires. It is based on the fact that there is nothing or no one who is greater in power and existence than God. Therefore, why would a good God allow suffering? I can easily see that He does not cause suffering, but why would He allow it? He could prevent every bad thing from happening to me. Why would He not do this?

The answer is in Jesus! The early church understood their present situation as an extension of Jesus’ crucifixion. In uniting and identifying with Jesus, they embraced His suffering. In the last words of Christ, He uttered the statement, *“It is finished!”* (John 19:30), referring to the establishment of the Kingdom of God’s New Covenant. It was not a reference to evangelizing the world, the final event of His second coming, or wrestling against principalities, powers, and rulers of the darkness of this age (Ephesians 6:12). The early church viewed all suffering in this battle as an extension of the Christ’s sufferings. Paul cried, *“that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death”* (Philippians 3:10). Could this be what Paul described? *“I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church”* (Colossians 1:24). Remember these words, *“For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ”* (2 Corinthians 1:5). Paul instructed Timothy, *“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God”* (2 Timothy 1:8). If the sovereign plan of the Trinity God predetermined that Jesus should suffer, why would you and I be exempt? We will now investigate this concept!

## Superimposed Suffering

The human arena has different types of suffering. The pain or discomfort endured may be the same in all suffering, but the central issue is the source of the suffering. It has to do with the question “Why?” When suffering is sourced by purpose and accomplishes something, we find it easier to endure. A mother endures the suffering of childbirth with a sense of joy; she gladly does it again. Suffering in the life of the believer is different than the suffering in the life of a non-believer. While there is pleasure in sin for a season, suffering will come. Sin is always destructive and produces suffering. However, when the suffering of sin is imposed on one who has not participated in such sin, it is redemptive. In fact, there is never redemption, until one who has not participated in sin bears the suffering of sin. This is the message of our passage. The force of the world gathered together to superimpose the suffering of their sin upon Jesus, the One who had never sinned. The Trinity predetermined this!

Our text begins with *“For truly”* (Acts 4:27). In the Greek text, “synago,” translated *“were gathered together,”* is the first word and the main verb in the verse. The fourth Greek word “aletheia” is translated *“truly.”* It expresses the idea of truth or conformity to reality, actuality. In other words, Luke stated the reality of the case. While it may not appear this way to some, in the essence of truth it is reality!

The Greek word “epi,” translated *“against,”* expresses the basic meaning of “upon,” taking several forms in the New Testament. In our passage, it expresses the idea of “superimposing.” The conflict of the world in which we live is presented to us in these two verses. *“Herod”* represents all the kings of the world. *“Pontius Pilate”* represents the rulers of the world. *“The Gentiles”* represent the world domination of the Roman Empire. *“The people of Israel”* represent the Jewish nation. Together they represent all the evil of all generations. They are the instrument of demonic forces under the direction and domination of Satan. What have they gathered to do? They have come to superimpose their selfish desires and independence on the plan of God. This establishes the platform of suffering. This is suffering in the life of the believer. It is the demonic

realm superimposing the thinking, desires, and plans of a self-centered mind upon the selfless, self-sacrificing, never think about yourself thought pattern of God.

Christianity is merging with Jesus; we think like He thinks. We become an expression of His mind in a world that is determined to live for itself, which results in suffering. Throughout Jesus' instruction to His disciples He established a pattern of consistently drawing them into an awareness of inevitable suffering. He began the Sermon on the Mount with the basic premise of Christianity. We are *"poor in spirit"* (Matthew 5:3). We are to live aware of our helplessness. This allows the merging of God's nature with us, and we become the Kingdom person, receiving benefits from this merger: meekness, fulfillment, mercy, purity, and peace. The last Beatitude is stunning. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake"* (Matthew 5:10). Perhaps Jesus is warning us of what might take place in our lives. But He continues by making it a certainty: *"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake"* (Matthew 5:11).

Jesus wanted to duplicate His ministry through the disciples. He gave them instructions for ministry, which included strong warning about suffering. *"But beware of men, for they will deliver you up"* (Matthew 10:17). *"You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake"* (Matthew 10:18). *"When they deliver you up, do not worry"* (Matthew 10:19). *"When they persecute you in this city, flee to another"* (Matthew 10:17-23). He continued: *"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!"* (Matthew 10:24-25). *"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword,"* (Matthew 10:34). Suffering of believers is without question.

The wonder of it all is the victory contained within the suffering. Jesus acquired our flesh and blood for the purpose of suffering. It was through this death that He destroyed, *"him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"* (Hebrews 2:14-15). The suffering imposed on the believer from the self-centered evil of the world is the weapon that destroys them!

The early church understood that the evil world imposed suffering and death on Jesus, but it was a direct result of the predetermined plan of God. The destruction they imposed became the redemption of the world and destroyed the forces of evil. The early church understood their participation in this pattern, redemption through suffering. Christianity was not a means to escape suffering, but they were to embrace it for a purpose. Christianity is not a way out but a way in. We participate in the predetermined plan of God to redeem a world. Will we join Him in His death?

## Sourcing or Suffering

Luke said the world was united in the crucifixion of Jesus; they were *"gathered together."* The Greek word for *"gathered together"* is the main verb of the sentence in the passive voice. The sovereign Almighty God acted upon this group to crucify Jesus. Then, Luke states the purpose of their gathering. They *"were gathered together to do"* (Acts 4:27, 28). The Greek word "poieo" is translated *"to do."* We discuss it often in our studies. It is not doing something out of duty or habit; it is a doing that which flows from the nature of the individuals involved. Trees "poieo" fruit! It is an effortless result of their nature. This verb is an infinitive focusing on purpose.

The Trinity God elevated the leaders of the nations to a place of authority and choice. God did not eliminate their freewill; He did not make them robots. God knew these evil, self-centered men would act according to their nature. He allowed them authority and position enabling them to act out the desires of their nature. They would not be able to tolerate Jesus. Their natures would demand they remove Jesus; they accomplished this through the means of their authority and position. God predetermined they should gather together to crucify Jesus. The proposal was, *"whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done"* (Acts 4:28).

Jesus as a helpless man was filled with the nature of God; He is the visible image of the invisible Father. His willingness to embrace redemptive suffering expresses the nature of the Father. He called His disciples to join Him in this

style of the cross, the nature of God. When we merge with Jesus we become an expression of this same nature. Our nature merged with the nature of God, is in direct conflict with the demonic nature of self-centeredness. This will produce conflict, which results in suffering every time the demonic nature is exposed to the divine nature. It is inevitable. We must conclude that the suffering of Christ and the sufferings of all believers is a fulfillment of God's plan and spills forth from the nature of God.

The self-centered, demonic nature is natural, automatic, and predictable. That evil nature possesses our world and will "do" (poieo) whatever it desires. The nature of God is also natural, automatic, and predictable, and it will "do" (poieo) whatever it desires. The "doing" (poieo) of these two natures are in direct contradiction to each other. Each nature is predictable. It was easy for the Pharisees to structure situations to trap Jesus. They knew exactly what He would "do" (poieo). On the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue; a man with a withered hand was present. The Pharisees hovered and ***"watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him"*** (Luke 6:7). Why would the Pharisees suspect Jesus and watch Him closely? They had enough experiences with Jesus to know how He would respond. ***"But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Arise and stand here'"*** (Luke 6:8). Was Jesus a mind reader or did He know the nature of the Pharisees? He knew what their natures would produce (poieo). These two natures naturally produce conflict that results in suffering.

We are Kingdom people. Can we merge with Jesus and not enter into the conflict? Oneness with God's nature produces the pattern of Jesus in, ***"to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done."*** The early church recognized this. They rejoiced in experiencing the suffering of Christ!

## Specification of Suffering

This concept of suffering must be consistently viewed through the sovereignty of God. God is never caught off guard; He is never surprised! He never asks the question, "What will I do now?" In our passage, the powers of the world were elevated to a position of authority by His sovereignty. In His sovereignty, God allowed these powers to assemble together knowing exactly what they would do. They would ***"do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done"*** (Acts 4:28). Therefore, the suffering of Christ was known before His crucifixion.

Understanding God's sovereignty working through His plan produced such statements as: ***"Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"*** (Hebrews 12:2). The joy was not in the suffering event, but in what the suffering would produce. The suffering was within the perimeters of the sovereignty of God!

When we embrace the reality of suffering, we apply God's sovereignty to our lives. Woe to us if we become people who remain self-centered and self-focused. We expect God to eliminate suffering from our lives. We expect Him to give us a parking place close to the front doors of Walmart. We want health without sickness, financial security without sacrifice, and the elimination of our enemies without redemption. God becomes the protector of "our" sovereign plan. Our plan would not include suffering, which automatically eliminates redemption.

When you and I merge with God's nature we will inevitably experience conflict with our self-centered world. This conflict will produce suffering. This suffering is a vital involvement with the nature of God and His plan for the world's redemption through Christ. We are privileged to be an expression of the sovereign Trinity's nature, which without failure fosters conflict, suffering, and redemption. Will you embrace the suffering in your conflict for the joy that is set before you?