

“Turning the Devil’s Schemes Against Him”

Ephesians 6:10–13

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Ephesians 6:10–13 (PowerPoint)

Preface

Today makes the seventh time, but from this biblical passage in Ephesians we have been searching into and learning about the schemes of the devil.

The devil, by giving us things we do not desire, or by driving us into situations we do not desire, leads us to think that there is no God and steers us toward resenting God. What people do not desire may differ little by little depending on the individual, but when we dig down deeply, I think they are almost the same kinds of things.

They include physical illness and pain, losing possessions or property, things not going as we hoped, meeting people we cannot really like, and being forced, whether we want to or not, to spend the same time and be in the same space with such people.

Part One

When we look at the Bible, there is a person who was made to experience all of these at once, in a sudden flood, by the schemes of the devil.

It is Job, who appears in the Book of Job.

This man Job, in an instant, within a very short period of time, lost all the property he possessed.

In a single night, he lost his beloved sons and daughters.

And as if to deal a further blow, he was afflicted with a painful, agonizing, incomprehensible disease of unknown cause, so severe that dying would have felt far easier. From the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, malignant sores covered him, and unable to do anything about the itching and pain, he scraped his whole body with a shard of pottery, falling into a state as if his entire body were covered in blood.

Even so, as Job fell down before God and worshiped Him, even his wife—who should have been his greatest understanding companion and spouse—pierced Job with words that were not merely rubbing salt into his wounds, but like delivering a finishing blow to a man on the brink of death, saying, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die.”

Of course, Job’s wife too had lost all their property in a single night, and all the beloved children she had borne in pain were struck down and killed by people like bandits. So in her heart-rending grief and helplessness, I think that her husband’s continuing effort

to be faithful before God looked like hypocrisy to her, like forced endurance, and it angered her.

We can fully understand her feelings, and I do not think anyone can blame her for feeling to the point of uttering the words, “Curse God and die.”

Then, on top of that, Job was continuously bombarded with words from his three friends—words that seemed like comfort but in no way brought comfort at all—and he had to spend time together with them continuously, even though he did not want to be with them.

And all of this was the devil’s scheme, aiming to crush Job, to break the faith of a man who was upright and honest in heart, who feared God and turned away from evil, whose faith was said to be unmatched on the earth, to make him curse God, to curse people, to curse his own existence, and in the end to throw him, as nothing more than a sinner, into the burning Gehenna.

And moreover—moreover indeed—

the Lord God Himself permitted all of these schemes of the devil.

This is what causes us to be perplexed.

Not only Job in the Book of Job, but throughout the Psalms, David sings, “How long, O LORD? Will You hide Your face forever? Why do You stand far away? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?”—to such an extent that believers who trust in God have long been troubled and perplexed.

Then is God doing this with the purpose of confusing us, troubling us, afflicting us, hurting us, and crushing us like the devil does?

Or is there, even there, a holy purpose of the Lord God?

There is.

There is a sure and holy purpose of the Triune God.

Those witnesses of faith in God and in Christ, who were made to live and persevere within that holy purpose, surround us like clouds.

In Hebrews chapters 11 and 12, while naming those witnesses one by one, it teaches the fact that God trained them so that they might share in His holiness, eventually caused them to bear the peaceful fruit of righteousness, transformed them into those worthy to inherit the city God had prepared for them—the heavenly homeland—and actually made them inherit the kingdom of God.

(It is a long passage, so we will not look at all of it now. When you return home, please take time to read Hebrews chapters 11 and 12 slowly and carefully. For now, I would like to look at just a portion.)

Hebrews 12:1–12:12 (PowerPoint)

Part Two

The One called God is a Person who delights in giving us what we desire.

I think that the joy of parents also lies in giving their children what they are wishing for as a present; and for that reason, because they want to know what the child wants and desires, they sometimes ask the child what he or she wants.

In the same way, God also sometimes asks us what we desire.

For example, when Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings, God asked Solomon, "What shall I give you?" (1 Kings 3:5).

Then Solomon asked God for wisdom and a discerning heart, in order to faithfully fulfill his mission as king.

To such a Solomon God responded, saying, "Because you have not asked for long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for discernment to hear what is right, I am pleased, and I will give it to you," and while answering him so, He even gave him riches and honor that he had not even asked for.

Also, when a person whose body was in pain came before Jesus, He would ask, "What do you desire?"

On one occasion, when a blind beggar learned that Jesus was passing nearby, he began to cry out loudly, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Then Jesus approached him and asked, "What do you want Me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51).

Then the blind man answered, "Teacher, let me recover my sight," and He responded to that which he desired.

The Triune God is the One who fulfills our desires.

Earlier, I introduced how David cried out, "O LORD, where are You in my time of trouble?" But the same David also confesses as follows:

Psalm 103:2–5 (PowerPoint)

God is the One who fills us human beings with good things, and He desires to fill us and to satisfy us with good things.

However, as in David's earlier confession, and as in Job's case, the Lord God causes us to experience and pass through things we do not desire, places we do not desire. For God is, as Hebrews says, our Father, our Helper, and the One who created us; therefore, He does not leave us like illegitimate children.

He causes us to meet people we do not wish to meet, to encounter things we do not wish to encounter, and by methods we did not wish for, He greatly perplexes us.

Yet strangely, after time has passed and we look back, we come to realize that within those very things we neither asked for nor desired, He had hidden a rich grace that at that time was difficult to know and impossible to measure.

Part Three

It was the same for the Apostle Paul himself, who wrote Ephesians.

Through a “thorn in the flesh,” which Paul neither desired nor asked for, God granted abundant grace.

What that thorn in the flesh was—whether a serious illness, pain, some physical trait from birth, or something else—is not specifically written. But when we look at Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, it says that he earnestly prayed and pleaded that the painful and unbearable thorn in the flesh be removed.

Yet God deliberately did not remove that thorn in the flesh, but commanded him to live with the pain.

Moreover, that thorn in the flesh which produced pain and suffering was also “a messenger of Satan” to strike Paul.

2 Corinthians 12:7–10 (PowerPoint)

What Paul desired was health and strength.

But God weakened the Apostle Paul by giving him a thorn.

Paul prayed three times that it might depart from him.

Yet God answered by refusing that request.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.”

God’s refusal is also one form of answering prayer.

Yet through what Paul most wanted to reject, God gave him the greatest present.

Humility.

He gave him the gift of humility—of being made low.

The reason God gave the Apostle Paul a thorn in the flesh, even using Satan, was so that he would not boast about himself.

We, however, are prone to boast about ourselves.

Even though what we have was given in answer to prayer, we boast as if it had been ours from the beginning; or we boast that it was given because we prayed; and though it is nothing but grace that God has given, we use that grace for self-display.

Because of the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, Paul was able to humble himself.

He was able to consider others superior to himself.

He was able to see himself as the worst of sinners.

Perhaps even through pouring out complaints toward God who did not remove the thorn, he came to know that he was the worst of sinners.

God deliberately used what seemed to him nothing but a minus, in order to help others, comfort others, understand others' pain, answer others' needs, sympathize with others, and stand at others' level—and thus caused him to give thanks and to be humbled.

Not through success, nor through things going well, nor through being envied by others, nor through a sense of superiority that he was different from others, did he experience “I have died, and Christ lives in me”; but through pain, through the evil dwelling within himself, through what was negative, he came to know that the power of Christ was covering him.

Forgive me for speaking about myself, but when I read Paul's confession, there are parts that feel like my own story.

Just recently, I confessed something like this to my wife:

“The God I believe in is an incompetent God who does not even remove my pain. Omnipotent? That's almost laughable—He will not remove my shoulder pain, will not heal my shoulder; He's a stingy God. If I could be healed just by touching the hem of Jesus' garment, I would want to touch it—but He does not even show me the fringe of the fringe of His garment, nor does He listen; He's a God without ears. He has no interest in someone like me who is completely beaten by a messenger of Satan.” While feeling indescribable pain and numbness in my shoulder, I poured this out to my wife.

My wife, who quietly listened without saying anything, said just one thing:

“You poor thing, it really hurts, doesn't it. I wish I could do something about that pain, but I'm sorry I can't. But you know, God has continued to give us tremendous grace until now. So it's okay. There must be a reason for that pain too.”

I was able to think, “There certainly must be a reason.”

When I wondered why God would not heal this shoulder He Himself created—this shoulder that no hospital can fix, that did not heal even after surgery, that doctors called authorities on shoulders have said, ‘You will just have to live with it’—various reasons began to come to mind.

I looked back at myself who had looked down on others' physical pain; I thought that if I had a perfectly healthy body and exceptional athletic ability, I would be living entirely selfishly. If I had no shoulder pain, I would not exercise daily to maintain health; I would overeat and overdrink; I would think I understood my body best; I would not kneel and pray, “Please heal me.” And yet, through that pain, as I asked God its meaning, believed in His healing, and thought that following Jesus is the greatest happiness, and as I reflected on the grace given until now, my heart became peaceful.

I felt I must humble myself before God. I felt as though I was seeing myself—so full of the desire to manage my own life by myself, and not humble at all.

Truly, Satan tries to continue giving a thorn in the flesh to pull my heart away from God; but God rather turns that around, using even my complaints, even my sarcasm, even prayers cried out in pain and sorrow, to keep me connected to Himself—and moreover, to lead me to the reversed grace of gladly boasting in weakness so that the power of Christ may cover me.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In order to bring us to the blessing of acknowledging that we are poor before God, He turns around even the schemes that seek to torment, wound, and crush us like messengers of the devil, and leads us through them. He is able to transform them into good. And I felt as though I came to know this in my own body—that the only God proclaimed by the Bible is such a God.

The reason God permitted the messenger of Satan—the thorn in the flesh—to work in the Apostle Paul was to prevent him from becoming proud.

Through that pain he had no choice but to be humbled, to think of God, to sympathize with others’ pain, and, for Christ’s sake, to rejoice even in weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties.

There is no gift better than humility, no character more blessed than humility.

God has promised to oppose the proud but to give great grace to the humble who acknowledge their poverty before people and before God.

And in order to make believers—whom He has made His own children—humble at any cost, He even uses the schemes of Satan to transform them into humble people.

The Lord God gave the Apostle Paul the power of Christ through the weakness he never desired.

Conclusion

God gives astonishing presents through what we truly want to reject.

Through people we reject from the heart, He refines our character.

Through places we deeply wish to avoid, He matures us.

Joseph was also like that.

Through unreasonable hatred, being thrown into a pit, being sold as a slave, being imprisoned for years though he had done good—situations anyone would reject, that seem like Satan’s schemes—God used them to raise him up as one who would save many lives.

And moreover, God Himself refined in him the supreme character of humility.

Jesus likewise.

What Jesus most wanted to refuse was the cross.

For the way of the cross was a way of suffering and pain.

Yet God the Father led Him, through the suffering of the cross, to the glory of resurrection.

Satan bit at Jesus' heel, but through the resurrection Jesus crushed Satan's head.

Among those here today, are there situations, relationships, or pains in daily life that you simply cannot accept and do not want to accept?

Within them, there may be a present that God has hidden.

To our eyes it may be nothing but lament and wound; but in God's hand, it becomes a seed of grace.

God sometimes gives what we desire, but in deeper love He gives what we truly need. And at times, through precisely that which we want to reject, He completes what is most precious.

Therefore, our battle is, of course, also a battle with those situations; but more than that, it is a battle over how much we discover God the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit within them.

Satan tries to prevent us from finding God in what we are placed in.

Therefore, we must not yet draw conclusions.

For God is writing the conclusion.

And God's conclusion always ends in grace.

Let us pray.

Benediction: Psalm 103:2b, 4b, 5a