

Jesus and the Sovereignty of God

Matthew 11:25-26 | Dec. 29, 2019 | Bryce Beale

What are you going to do with your worries?

You will have worries, if you do not have them already—their presence is not in question. But what will you do with them?—that is.

You will face circumstances that put you at great risk. Your dreams and aspirations will face fatal threats, some of them may die in the coming year.

And so you will feel some anxiety, and maybe much more than some.

What are you going to do about it? Where are you going to take your worries, and what are you planning to do to them in order to quiet them down?

You may seek solace in diversions. If you watch enough movies, your mind will be diverted from your fears for a time. That is one approach to worries. But, as you already know, movies only last about two hours. And as the credits roll, you will find your worries rushing back into your mind, even stronger than before.

There are substances you can take which will ease your anxieties. Alcohol can slow your mind so that you no longer recognize what consequences lay ahead; drugs can overwhelm your brain or cloud it to the same end.

But you will sober up eventually, and when you do all your fears will still be standing there, looking at you. If you try to drown them out indefinitely you'll become addicted to the substance, and your last state will be worse than the first.

Relationships often help with worries—but then they often add new worries too.

What will you do?

Since our world has yet to concoct a lasting antidote to anxiety, God by his word quite kindly redirects our attention to the only true cure, the one which he intended all along for our good.

We were not made to live in fear and worry. From the beginning it was not this way. But now that sin has entered the frame, our tendency is, when we encounter a discomfort, to go fleeing to the fig leaves. We have a natural leaning toward human remedies—we, like our forefathers, are prone to trust the arm of flesh when the arm of God is offered us.

Since then we are about to embark upon a new year, and since there are so many trials and tribulations before us through which we must enter God's kingdom, I thought it right to turn all our eyes toward a passage that is designed to give us rest.

I will be focused mainly upon the first two verses, but let's read all six from Matthew 11:25 to 30.

MATTHEW 11:25-30

In that first verse, the 25th, there are three separate parts. There is first *what* Jesus affirms, namely, that God has hidden certain things from the wise while revealing them to infants. Then secondly there is *how* Jesus affirms it, by means of praise or thanksgiving—it is in other words a very positive affirmation. And finally, there is *why* Jesus affirms what he affirms at this point in his ministry, which is suggested by the beginning of the verse: "At that time Jesus declared..." Something was happening at that time which resulted in the affirmation.

Now I think it no accident that at the end of this passage Jesus offers rest to all who come to him. We will not set our focus on Jesus' offer in verses 28-30; our goal this morning instead is to see how verses 25 and 26 lead to the rest that Jesus promises at the passage's end. What is it about what Jesus affirms, and how he affirms it, and why he affirms it in verses 25 and 26 that leads to the calming of our anxieties, to the rest that our weary hearts need?

Let's see, beginning first with what is affirmed.

What is affirmed

Look again at *what* Jesus affirms in verse 25: “you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.”

Jesus is praying to his Father—he makes that clear in his address: “Father,” he prays.

And he affirms that God his Father has done two things: he has hidden, and he has revealed. Both actions are set upon the same object: “these things.” From all that has come before in Matthew, I think we can safely assume that “these things” refers, at the very least, to things that have to do with salvation. John the Baptist has come preaching the kingdom of heaven, urging people to repent and to embrace Jesus, the Christ, the king of the kingdom, so that their sins might be forgiven and they might enter into this kingdom, into life everlasting.

So we will summarize “these things” as “things about salvation.”

“You, Father,” affirms Jesus, “have hidden these things about salvation from the wise and understanding, and you have revealed these things about salvation to little children.”

But just what can this mean, that God has hidden matters of salvation from some, while revealing them to others? If we had only this one passage, it would be hard to know. But we have more—we have all of Matthew before us, and all of Scripture too contained in convenient and portable form.

Someone might argue, if we had only this text, that Jesus affirms no more than this: that God looks down from heaven, sees some who are wise and understanding in their own sight, who are proud of their own so-called knowledge and greatness, and God decides to hide his salvation from them. And on the other hand, when God looks across his earth he finds certain persons who are child-like in their humility, their willingness to be taught of God, and so these he teaches the truth, to these he reveals salvation.

If we had only this passage, then God’s revealing of salvation, and thus salvation itself, would be determined finally not by God, but by us. If we are proud, God hides salvation from us; if we are humble, he reveals it. You see that this puts God’s action—whether revealing or concealing—at our disposal. We ultimately

decide if God will reveal or conceal salvation from us. Our salvation is in our hands.

But once we raise ourselves up from this one text, to a higher altitude, we realize this cannot be.

Look first just at Matthew's gospel. More than any of the other gospels, Matthew emphasizes that God must reveal salvation to us. The initiative must come from him.

In Matthew 13, the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the crowds in parables. Why doesn't he speak to everyone as clearly as he speaks to his own followers? And Jesus answers, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."¹ God revealed the secrets of the kingdom to the disciples, and did not reveal them to the rest. Therefore you can say he concealed them from the rest, since they could never see them without his help.

Again, in Matthew 16, at that pivotal moment when Peter realizes who Jesus is and confesses him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus declares, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."² Peter did not realize who Jesus was by his own wisdom and understanding—he, like a child, received that knowledge from the Father.

Move a little higher and scan now the scope of the whole New Testament, and you will find the same sort of statements, that knowledge of salvation comes ultimately from God and not from ourselves. There is Lydia in Acts, that seller of purple, who sits by the riverside and hears Paul preach about salvation. "The Lord," we read, "opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."³ Paul knew that his success as a preacher was determined not by his own eloquence or skill, but by God opening the heart. So he prays in Ephesians chapter 1 that God would enlighten the eyes of the Ephesians' hearts.⁴

For, as he openly declares in the next chapter, "by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the

¹ V. 11 (ESV).

² V. 17.

³ Acts 16:14.

⁴ V. 18.

gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”⁵ If God revealing the things of salvation to us depended ultimately upon ourselves, whether we were proud or humble, we would have ground for boasting. I could say, “I am humbler than you, therefore I am saved.” But the Scriptures cannot be broken, which state with no equivocation that God is the ultimate determiner of salvation so *that* no one can boast.

And lest we find a way out of this, we come to Romans 9 and find the matter set plainly before us.

For[, writes Paul again, God] says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.⁶

What Jesus affirms in our text is not something new or unexpected—he affirms what all of Scripture, Old and New Testament, affirms: salvation is of the Lord. He is the ultimate determiner of salvation, not us.

The verse right after the ones we are considering says something similar, verse 27: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” The Father must give knowledge of the Son, and the Son must give knowledge of the Father—the point is that this knowledge, this saving knowledge of God, is according to God’s choice. “Anyone to whom the Son *chooses* to reveal [the Father].”⁷

What Jesus affirms we call the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation.

How it is affirmed

Now almost immediately there springs into our minds a thousand questions and perhaps objections to this doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation.

⁵ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁶ Vv. 15-16.

⁷ Emphasis mine.

“Are we then robots, mechanically performing what God has predetermined we would do?”

“How can God be just to condemn those from whom he conceals the things about salvation?”

“Why does God choose some for salvation, and not others?”

“What if I’m not chosen? What if my children or my friends or loved ones are not elect?”

We are able to answer some of these questions from the word of God—but this morning I am not interested in answering them, since Jesus does not pause to answer them. I want instead to draw our attention away from the many questions we create, toward the attitude of Jesus. He has affirmed God’s sovereignty in salvation—that is *what* he has affirmed—but just as important is *how* he affirms it. This strong statement of God’s choice comes to us not in a proposition, not in a textbook, and not in any apologetic sort of way.

It comes to us in a prayer of praise.

At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”⁸

There is certainly a place for the honest Christian to wrestle with the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, but at the end of our wrestling—even in the midst of it!—our goal must be to become like Jesus, to share his attitude toward this mystery of the Almighty. We are not called upon to understand how God’s sovereignty works in every detail, for the secret things belong to the Lord; but we are called upon to feel what Jesus felt when he considered God’s sovereignty.

This same event recorded in Luke’s gospel tells us more of how Jesus felt: “In that same hour,” writes Luke, “he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, etc.’”

Someone might object that this is Jesus—he knows the secrets of God’s counsel, he has the answers to our many questions. So he

⁸ Matthew 11:25-26.

can rejoice in God's purposes, while we are left outside to puzzle about them.

But the apostle Paul, a mere mortal like ourselves, reacts to God's sovereignty in just exactly the same way. His strongest statement of the doctrine is in Romans chapters 9, 10, and 11. And how does he conclude that section, at the end of chapter 11? With a doxology of praise. He has just been considering the depths of God's sovereign plan, and he himself cannot pierce the cloud to understand it all, yet he boldly praises the Lord for it:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

"Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

It is not enough for us to learn the theological language about God's sovereignty—words like election, predestination, Calvinism, the eternal decree, and so forth. We ought to learn these, for they help us to serve others better. But we must go beyond the knowledge and come to the place that Jesus is: he rejoices in the Holy Spirit, and then confesses the grandeur of God in the matter of revealing and concealing. We should labor to approach the magnificence of God through Scripture as near as we can, and when we reach that impassable boundary that divides the mortal mind from the mysteries of the divine, there we should fall upon our faces in awe and reverence. We should be filled with a profound joy before the unbridled power and prerogative of the world's Maker.

Notice, Jesus does not think of his Father as the mere mover of chess pieces. God is not a cold abstraction, or an engine, or a force, which some come to imagine when they learn of his predetermined plan. You can see a healthier view of God in the two titles that Jesus sets side by side in his address: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth."

Yes, he is Lord of heaven and earth—not only does he preside authoritatively over the salvation of men and women, but he guides all things in heaven and earth to accomplish his perfect and holy will. When he stretches out his hand, no one can turn it back. He is in the heavens, he does all that he pleases.

Yet he is also “Father.” He is Father to Jesus in a special way, since Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father. But we who have believed in Jesus are now his brothers. We are adopted into the family and we regard God as our Father too. And so, no matter how we come to conceive of God’s sovereignty, we must never conclude that God is only a Potentate of the skies, a manipulator of the pieces, a mechanism that governs all events. No—God is our Father, though he is Lord of heaven and earth. If our view of God’s sovereignty kills this way of perceiving God, then we have not yet known sovereignty as we ought to know it, as it really is.

Jesus regarded the Father with warm affection, and therefore rejoiced in what his Father had decided to do. “Yes, Father,” he reaffirms in verse 26, “for such was your gracious will.”

That is *how* Jesus affirms his Father’s sovereignty, with remarkable joy and exuberance and delight. And we must do the same.

Why he affirms it

But we have left one part of our text for last, and we must turn to it now before we draw from the passage a comfort for the new year. We see what Jesus affirms, and even how he affirms it.

But we must also notice why, at this point in time, he affirms it.

“At that time,” verse 25 begins, “Jesus declared...” The Greek actually reads, “At that time Jesus answering said...” There is nothing told to Jesus beforehand that he is answering—this is instead a Hebrew way of speaking that points, not to a statement made before, but, I think, to the events of Jesus’ life at that very time.

At that time, Jesus witnessed two very different responses to his message of the kingdom. On the one hand, when some heard his message they received it like little children—they did not fully understand it, nor would they immediately have comprehended the mysteries of God’s sovereignty in salvation stated here, but

like children they wanted to believe. They were not too proud to learn from Jesus. And they did learn.

But there were others, no less intelligent, who were too proud to believe. The Pharisees were the leaders of this group, who thought themselves too educated, too knowledgeable to learn anything from this hillbilly Galilean rabbi. When they heard the message of the kingdom, it seemed like foolishness to them. They rejected it.

You and I might be tempted to lose heart in Jesus' circumstance. In the end, most everyone whom Jesus ever preached to would reject him. A large number would cry out for his crucifixion. We prefer broad success; Jesus was dealing with broad failure, interspersed with partial successes.

But "at that very time" he answers the events he is beholding by praising the Father for his sovereign control over it all. This is *why* Jesus affirms God's sovereignty at this point, because he recognizes that sovereignty in his own life and his own ministry.

And I think it is exactly here that Jesus provides for us the antidote to our worries. Remember his promise starting in verse 27:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

When Jesus promises us rest, he says that this rest can only come to us by learning from his example: "learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart." He is not proud. He cannot be numbered among the self-sufficient Pharisees, who must understand everything, must have every answer, must not be led or corrected or instructed.

Jesus is a Son who trusts in his Father. His Father's power extends over every event of his own life, over his own successes and failures. And he trusts his Father. Therefore, he does not need to control the events—his Father controls them. That burden of controlling the events that affect our lives, of predicting calamity and avoiding it all, of perfectly deciding what to do and when so as to escape all dangers—that burden is not on Jesus' shoulders. He casts his cares upon the Father.

And he turns now to you and says, "Go and do likewise." Learn from him, and you will find rest.

You see now why his affirmation of God's sovereignty is and can be the only basis of this sort of rest. How can you rest if you think that all depends on you? How will you deal with your own failures if you think that they are the final determiners of how the story ends? How will you survive your own inadequacies if you think that they are the final word on the progress of God's kingdom, or even on your own usefulness in that kingdom?

At the start of this new year, Jesus offers you the cure for your anxieties, and it is in no substance, no behavioral modification, no gimmick or quick method. He offers for you to be a child of God in name and also in fact.

He calls you to come and no more doubt or kick against the complete sovereignty of God over all that has happened or will; he calls you to come and find your rest in that very doctrine that perhaps at one time you despised. "Come," he says, "and rejoice with me."

Wisdom is not demanded of you, nor understanding—only childlikeness. Come, be a child, and like a child rest in your Father's arms. Nothing you are now experiencing is outside of his power, not one pain that has touched you did so contrary to his compassion or his wisdom. Like a child, you need not always understand; you can just trust him and obey. If you are reconciled to God through Christ, then you must grow up from being an adult into being a child again.

For to such belong, not only the antidote to worries, but also the kingdom of heaven.