

CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM – OUR LUST FOR AUTONOMY

The thesis of Chapter 1 is, God is in control and He has my best interest at heart. If this thesis is true, then it must follow that I am not in control. But the problem is, I want to be in control. I thirst for autonomy, independence, self-rule, self-realization. Why is that? What is the origin of this lust? What are the consequences of it in our lives? Is there a solution to this problem? What part does God play in the solution, and what part do we play?

These are the questions we will seek answers to in this chapter. The answers are more important to the management of your finances than you might imagine.

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF OUR LUST FOR AUTONOMY?

The answer is, in a word, God created us with the desire for autonomy. A teacher I studied under in a businessmen's Bible class had the best way of expressing it I have heard. I begin with a quote from him so that you may hear it in his words.

“When God created Adam and Eve, He placed them in a perfect environment; no sin, pollution, opposition, and no prohibitions—with the exception of eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis records no other command given to our first parents. The issue of the tree was who gets to determine what is good and evil: what is in my best interest and what is not? This issue focused man's struggle with God. Satan said that if they were able to decide what was good and evil for themselves they would be “like God.” You can see why taking of the fruit was such a temptation. Note that Adam and Eve's thirst for autonomy came before the fall: it brought about the fall. God created them with a desire to be autonomous, and then asked that they limit this appetite by allowing God alone to determine what

was and was not in their interest. This same struggle remains with us today”¹

Satan is still suggesting to us that God does not need to be taken seriously. His excuse for such a suggestion among those in our circles today is that grace eliminates accountability in eternity for temporal behavior, a dangerous assumption, which we will deal with in Chapter 3.

We are told that man was created in God’s image. I assume that the desire for self-rule is a part of that image. Another part of that image is volition, the ability to make choices. And when Adam and Eve violated the one command God gave them, they exercised their choice, causing the fall, which created the problem we have lived with ever since.

So the origin of our desire for independence is creation. The problem is our unwillingness to surrender that desire and submit to God to let God decide what is in our best interest and what is not.

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF OUR QUEST FOR AUTONOMY

I will mention just three. The first is anger. One day in Bible class, the teacher used some very strong language to describe the seriousness and danger of our refusal to surrender our autonomy-lust. I think his words are worth considering.

“Know that man’s fundamental problem with God has always been that man is angry with God because God is God, and man is not. Put another way, men rebel against God in anger because God got there first. Man ought to have been God. I should have been God, but God beat me to it, and it ticks me off.”

And on another occasion, this quote.

¹ Walter A. Henrichsen, *Thoughts from the Diary of a Desperate Man* (Ft. Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1977), p. 207.

“I want to be in control. I want to be in charge. It seems to me that God is arbitrary and capricious in the way that He handles Himself. Not only are His standards arbitrary and capricious, the whole doctrine of election is. I want to be able to elect. I want to be able to make those decisions. It makes me angry that God does that. And not only that, but how dare God make me sick, or give my wife cancer, or take my child prematurely, or cause my business to go bankrupt. How dare He do that? And so men say, ‘I will not worship a God who does that. My God could never kill a little baby.’ That’s utter nonsense. Of course God kills babies. That is the arrogance that is hard to suppress. It lies just below the surface in every man’s life.”

These are hard words. Some will not be able to accept all of them. Not many years ago, I would not have accepted all of them. But I believe we need to hear them because of the seriousness and danger of our refusal to surrender our autonomy-lust. The theologians of old called this “pride.” The Scriptures say, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Often I meditate on that statement. I asked myself, what does it really mean for God to resist me? Can you imagine the Creator God of the universe resisting us puny created beings? What does that mean? I think we’ll get some insight on that as we continue to list the consequences, and then consider God’s part in the solution to our problem, which is essentially **pain**, but I’m getting ahead of myself.

A second consequence of our failure to surrender our lust for autonomy is discontentment. The lure which Satan used to entice Adam and Eve was the prospect of becoming like God. They may even have thought it possible to become God Himself. We would never admit to anything like that today, and yet the craving for autonomy that is in us, as depraved human beings, unless dealt with in God’s way will approach wanting to be God, whether we’re conscious of it or not. Let me ask you as you hear this to examine your own heart. Perhaps you’ve never thought of it in this way. Can you think of yourself, in some sense at least, as wanting to be God? I can.

A third consequence of our failure to surrender our lust for self-rule is pessimism and despair.

It seems to me that Christianity today cannot accept these statements. Without the answers and truth we are attempting to present in these first two chapters, our thinking is likely to run something like this: The circumstances in my life indicate that God is not acting in my best interest. If I were in control, I would do things differently. I am not in control, therefore life is a cruel joke, and it's God's fault for letting it happen. This is the conclusion Job reached before God explained what we are referring to as Square One. In the end Job repented and admitted that God knew what He was doing and had Job's best interest at heart, even though he never understood the reason for all his suffering and tribulation. In eternity, we will all admit the same thing.

STOP! TIME OUT. THINK

Go back to Square One. Do you really believe that God is in control and has your best interest at heart? Can you accept that you are locked into a system over which you have no control? Did you have any control over where you were born, or the family you were born into? The color of your hair or eyes? Your IQ?

Do you believe that God has you exactly where He wants you right now?.....

Perhaps you're thinking, I've made some really bad mistakes, that's why things are in such a mess? Or more likely, you have shifted the blame to the actions of one or more other people who have sinned against you. Do you understand that God knew every decision you would make in your life, and every person who would touch your life, before you were ever born? And that He ordered all the circumstances which would arise in your life on the basis of that foreknowledge? "All the days of my life were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16) and that He has brought you to where you are today?

Go back and re-read and meditate on the Scriptures given in Chapter 1: Psalm 139:16, Romans 8:28, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Hebrews 13:6, Jeremiah 10:23, Proverbs 16:9, Proverbs 20:24, Ecclesiastes 7:13-14, Isaiah 46:9-10.

You can take your first step toward the surrender of your autonomy-lust by understanding and believing Square One God is in control and He has my best interest at heart. Until you can take that step, you will have to endure the consequences of your quest for autonomy.

THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM – GOD’S PART

Now let’s talk about the solution to the problem. Obviously, the solution is for us to surrender our lust for autonomy and submit to the absolute authority of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, without intervention from God, our sin nature predisposes us toward refusal to surrender. So what is the nature of God’s part of the solution to the problem? In short, it is the administration of pain and opposition. God engineers circumstances in our lives which motivate us to surrender our autonomy-lust. Let’s begin with Adam and Eve.

To the woman he said, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth. In pain you shall bring forth children. Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” [Genesis 3:16-17 (NASB)].

Though it did not appear to our first parents to be the case, these new conditions God instituted following the fall were in their best interest. No discipline for the moment will appear to be in our best interest, declares Hebrews 12:11. Will you trust God that He is acting **always** in your best interest? Remember the many times the word “all” appeared in the Scriptures we studied in Chapter 1?

God cooperates in this lifelong process of bringing us to surrender and to submit to His commandments. I personally believe this is the best description of the sanctification process. And as I read through Scripture, it seems to me that His primary role is the administration of pain - pain of all kinds, physical, emotional, financial, war, natural disasters, chaos and many others. Quite simply, we learn obedience by suffering pain. Although Jesus never committed a sin, even He learned

obedience by suffering pain. “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from what He suffered” [Hebrews 5:8].

Israel suffered immeasurably as they repeatedly went through the following cycle: (1) disobedience, (2) pain, (3) repentance, (4) obedience, (5) repeated disobedience, etc. Stop and think about this for a moment. A key to understanding Jewish behavior, as well as our own behavior today, is what happens following step 4 (obedience) that causes step 5 (repeated disobedience)? This is something for every believer to ponder for himself.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF GOD’S PART?

More than any other author whom I have studied, Paul E. Billheimer has articulated the great value and benefit of suffering and sorrow in the life of the Christian in his book, *Don’t Waste Your Sorrows*.

“Because tribulation is necessary for the decentralization of self and the development of deep dimensions of agape love, this love can be developed only in the school of suffering. It grows only by exercise and testing. This may explain the relationship between sainthood and suffering by showing WHY there is no sainthood without suffering. It may also show why the greatest saints are often the greatest sufferers. It is an attempt to answer the age-old question, ‘Why do the righteous suffer?’”²

“Thus, the supreme purpose of life on earth is not pleasure, fame, wealth, or any other form of worldly success, but learning agape love. In the ultimate social order of the universe (the kingdom of God) rank will be determined, not by talent, magnetic personality, intellectual acumen, earthly success and affluence, but by one thing and one alone – agape love.”³

Here, in my opinion, Billheimer has beautifully stated the process by which God does His part in bringing us to the point of surrendering our lust for autonomy. We must be brought to a state of total brokenness

² Paul E. Billheimer, *Don’t Waste Your Sorrows*, (Ft. Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1977), p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

before we will finally turn loose of our craving for self-determination. This is a life-long process for most of us. It is different for each of us. For some of us, this lust is so entrenched, so embedded in our souls that it has to be blasted or bulldozed out of us before we will finally surrender. What is meant by “brokenness?” Here is Billheimer’s definition.

“One is not broken until all resentment and rebellion against God and man is removed. One who resents, takes offense, or retaliates against criticism and opposition or lack of appreciation, is unbroken. All self-justification and self-defense betrays an unbroken spirit. All discontent and irritation with providential circumstances reveals unbrokenness. Genuine brokenness usually requires years of crushing, heartache, and sorrow. Thus self-will is surrendered, and deep degrees of yieldedness and submission developed, without which there is little agape love.”⁴

It seems I have read that paragraph at least a hundred times. I return to it often and meditate on each sentence. What a great tool for self-examination. I commend it to you.

All of my Christian life I have struggled to understand and resolve what seems to me to be a paradox the sovereignty of God and the responsible choice of man. As I get older I am becoming more resigned to the fact that I will never understand it. Certainly there are people with far greater intellect and theological knowledge than I who may understand it better than I, but I detect in their writings their own struggle. I suspect God does not intend for any human being to understand it, and several Scriptures hint in that direction. In those times when I am most confused and unsure of my own understanding, I find peace and rest in reading and meditating on some of the Scriptures that I have cited in this book.

I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps [Jeremiah 10:23 (NASB)].

The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps [Proverbs 16:9 (NASB)].

⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

..... I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please [Isaiah 46:9-10].

How can God know the future unless He causes it? We must believe in the sovereign control of God, but also in the responsible choice of man, though we may never be able to resolve the coexistence of both.

Some will question whether certain forms of pain and suffering are caused by God, or come as a result of other causes that God has nothing to do with. This seems especially so for things like natural disasters and wars. Some would even include diseases, accidents, financial reversals, and other things, as events God is not responsible for. The church has long debated these questions. I do not have the wisdom or knowledge to make any meaningful contribution to the debate. I can only search and meditate in the Scriptures, hoping for better understanding.

WAR AND CHAOS

Could war and chaos be a form of pain and opposition God would initiate? Consider the following quotes:

“Genesis 11:6, And the Lord said, ‘Behold they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing they propose to do will be impossible for them.’

“The whole earth spoke one language, and united the people built the Tower of Babel. I have never been sure what this tower looked like, or how the people thought it would accomplish their objective, but God responded to them with this startling comment, ‘If We don’t stop them, there is nothing that they won’t be able to do.’ So God scattered the people by confounding them with a multiplicity of languages.

“This scattering produced at least the following: a diversity of cultures and religions – the inability to understand one another,

not only because of language, but also culture-war. Diversity breeds divisiveness. There is no indication of war prior to the Tower of Babel. You find instances of violence, such as Cain killing his brother, but no organized group warfare. God instigated much of the chaos you find in the world.

“People have always worked toward solving the problems of the world through unity and union. We formed the League of Nations, the United Nations, and some look to the union of European nations as another step towards one world government. We sign nuclear proliferation treaties, seek to eliminate poverty and injustice, etc. If God were to allow success, it would seal the eternal damnation of the world, for the path from God is independence; the path to God is dependence. God uses chaos to teach people their need of Him. Never cease thanking God for chaos.”⁵

You may sense that I believe God is the cause of war. Even if I do, I also believe that man has choice, which, within the boundaries God has established, are free. It may be accurate to say that men choose to fight each other. What more natural expression of their refusal to surrender their autonomy could there be? Nevertheless, according to the Genesis passage, God clearly created the circumstances under which men would want to fight each other.

Again, the Genesis passage clearly implies that God’s confusion of the languages was a good thing, not a bad thing. It led to a restraint on evil. It put men in a position of being dependent on God, making it more likely they would turn toward God rather than away from Him. Pain has a tendency to turn us toward God. When the pain lets up, or we go through times when things are going well, usually we drift right back toward our lust for independence and self-rule. As my mentor once said, “You are never in greater danger than when all is well in your life. The satisfied life has no need for Jesus.”

⁵ Walter A. Henrichsen, *Thoughts from the Diary of a Desperate Man* (Ft. Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1977), p. 350.

When I read the quotes on the Tower of Babel, it reminded me of some of the statements Paul made to the Colossians.

For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together [Colossians 1:16-17].

This passage clearly teaches that Jesus Christ has authority over everything, and that one of the results of that fact is that “in Him all things hold together.” And that is a very good thing. Were it not for the fact that Jesus “holds things together,” they would fly apart, or blow up, so to speak. Were it not for Jesus’ restraint of evil, likely mankind would long ago have completely self-destructed. To me, the amazing thing about this fallen world is not how bad it is, but how much better it is than it would be without Jesus and His authority over all things.

NATURAL DISASTERS

I also see natural disasters in much the same way as war and chaos. Since He created the heavens and the earth, God has the same absolute control over nature and the physical universe that He has over nations and individuals.

It was you who opened up springs and streams; you dried up the ever flowing rivers. The day is yours, and yours also the night; you established the sun and moon. It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both summer and winter [Psalm 74:15-17].

Notice that first phrase, “It was you who opened up springs and streams.” As this is being written, the giant tsunami wave disaster in Asia, which killed more than 200,000 people, is still fresh in our memories. Many people, even Christians, will find it impossible to believe that God deliberately caused that disaster, intending for each one of those victims to die. Of course, no one can answer the question, “Why?” But we can believe, based on what Scripture asserts, that God had complete control of it and that it worked in the best interest of every life affected by it. Already there are reports of many turning to

Jesus as a result of the disaster. Perhaps many Christians who survived the tragedy have been motivated to surrender their lust for autonomy and submit to Jesus' authority over their lives. What I do believe is that when we enter eternity and look back on our earthly lives, we will not regret any circumstance that God ordained in our lives. Our only regret will be our disobedience and lack of faith.

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father [Philippians 2:10-11 (NASB)].

THE SOLUTION – OUR PART

What is our part in the solution to all the misery, heartache, dissatisfaction and sinful behavior that flows from our lust for autonomy?

Then He said to them all: "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will save it" [Luke 9:23-24].

How could Jesus have possibly made it any clearer? He is asking me to deny myself to surrender my lust for self-rule. When I do this, I "lose" my life (my right to myself) for His sake. When I refuse to surrender my autonomy-lust, I am attempting to save my life (retain my right to myself), and I lose my life instead.

What does He mean by taking up our cross and following Him? First and foremost it must mean unconditional obedience to all the commandments of Jesus and the apostles. This is so important, we will explore it further in Chapter 3. But I must share my favorite passage indicating our part in the solution to the problem.

Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and My load is light [Matthew 11:28-30 (NASB)].

There is certainly nothing wrong with quoting these verses to an unbeliever who is seeking to enter a relationship with God, but I'm going to suggest an interpretation that you may not have heard. I believe the primary application is for believers who, having been born again, have been made aware of the lifelong process of warfare with their lust for independence. It is this warfare that makes us weary and heavy-laden. It is surrender of this lust that will give us rest.

Jesus' use of the word "rest" reminds me of what the writer to the Hebrews said, "And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?" [Hebrews 3:18 (NASB)]. I believe the rest Jesus is referring to in Matthew 11:28-30 is the rest of obedience, and His yoke to which He refers are His commandments. We take this yoke by surrendering our autonomy-lust and submitting to His commandments.

Notice what He wants us to learn about Him, that He is "gentle and humble in heart." That is the path to surrender and submission. Finally, notice in verse 30 that He says, "My yoke is easy." On the surface it may seem to us that obeying all the commandments is anything but easy. But when you compare it to the weary and heavy-laden life of self-rule, truly His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

HOW GOD'S PART AND OUR PART WORK TOGETHER

The surrender and submission that comprises our part in the solution will be taken as we respond to God's part, the administration of pain and opposition. We aren't likely to initiate our part until He initiates His part. When things are going well, our tendency is to drift right back into our thirst for control. If things are going well for you, my advice is, thank God for the good times, but realize they won't last. Best that we anticipate the coming pain and sorrow, and prepare for it by understanding it will be lovingly administered upon us by God. It will be discipline and testing, not punishment. It will be remedial, not punitive.

Another of my heroes of faith is the South African theologian, Andrew Murray, pastor, missionary, writer and educator, who ministered in the 19th century. I have read several of his books. I think that he had a wonderful understanding of what we are referring to as "God's part in

the solution to our problem,” and it permeated his writing and preaching. I don’t remember where I read it, but somewhere in his writings I ran upon his counsel to us on how to respond to God’s administration of pain and sorrow. I share it with you here.

“In time of trouble say:

First, He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this straight place. In that fact I will rest.

Next, He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace to behave as His child.

Then, He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He intends to bestow.

Last, In His good time He can bring me out again how and when He knows.

Let me say I am here,

- (1) By God’s appointment.
- (2) In His keeping
- (3) Under His training
- (4) For His time.”

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

I trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior when I was nine years old. I was taught in Sunday School about the sin of pride and selfishness, that serving others rather than self was the essence of the Christian life, that it was more blessed to give than to receive. And I understood these truths, in some sense, at least. But it is with regret and shame that I confess that I was approaching my 70th birthday before the truth we are discussing in this chapter penetrated my soul in a way that transformed my life.

One day in Bible class, my mentor said, “Your problem is that you want to be God, and you’re mad that God beat you to it. You want to decide what is in your best interest rather than submit to what God says

is in your best interest.” When I heard those words, the truth finally registered in my soul, and I’ve not been the same since. That day I took my first meaningful step toward surrender of my quest for independence, and submission to the absolute authority of Jesus over my life. I confess that I am among the slowest learners on this earth. My only consolation is God’s grace in allowing me to live long enough to say, better late than never.

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS AND SQUARE ONE

We will be unable to prevent others from competing with us regardless of how we live our lives. What is our responsibility toward those who will compete with us, and what should be our response to them? Our autonomy-lust will predispose us to take our focus off of excellence (self-competition), and instead focus on those with whom we compete. What does Square One teach us? One who competes with me with all the world’s fury is acting as God’s agent in my life by God’s permission and under His control. Though he may sin against me or cause pain in my life, he will not alter my destiny. God is still in control, superintending all the circumstances in my best interest. God will not delegate my destiny to another human being.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we understand from your Word that You have created us with the desire for independence and self-rule. But it is also clear to us that you have asked us to surrender that desire, and submit to your authority over us to let you decide what is in our best interest and what is not. When Your Son instructed us to obey “all that He commanded,” He removed any doubt about what would be in our best interest. We’ve also learned from this study that You will administer pain and opposition and sorrow in our lives, not as punishment, but as a motivation to surrender. We understand Your goal for us is a state of perpetual brokenness, in which state we will finally find true rest and joy and peace, and as a by-product usefulness in the ministry of Your kingdom. Please use this study to lead those who read it a step closer to that surrender. In Jesus Name, amen.