

Review of *The Crook in the Lot*

By Thomas Boston

REVIEWED BY ZACH WILLIAMS

The Crook in the Lot: Understanding the Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in the Midst of Trouble and Affliction by Thomas Boston. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2017. 168pp., \$10.00.

During his lifetime, the Scottish pastor-theologian Thomas Boston (1676–1732) was a man deeply acquainted with the reality of pain and suffering.¹ As a child, he witnessed the imprisonment of his father for religious nonconformity. His wife was beset with physical and mental illness for the greater part of their marriage. Additionally, only four of the ten children born to him lived into adulthood. The other six all perished within two years of their birth. Simply put, he knew well the kind of hardships that Christians faced in their sojourning. It is not surprising, then, that Boston reflected deeply on the topic of human suffering in multiple sermons throughout the course of his minis-

¹ Born in the small town of Duns in the Scottish Borders, converted at the age of eleven, and educated at the University of Edinburgh, Boston devoted his life to pastoral ministry in the parishes of Simprin (1699–1707) and Ettrick (1707–1732). Despite ministering in relative obscurity, Boston is considered one of the most prolific theologians in the Scottish tradition. He is chiefly remembered for his work *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, which went through numerous editions and was widely read throughout Scotland, and for his role in the Marrow Controversy (1717–1723), which ultimately led to a major split in the Scottish church in the year after his death. For a full account of Boston's life, see Thomas Boston, *The Memoirs of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988). For a modern edition of Boston's works, see *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013).

try. Three of Boston's sermons on this topic were posthumously published as *The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God Displayed in the Afflictions of Men* (1751), later titled *The Crook in the Lot*.² Of all the profound works that Boston produced, this small, but weighty treatise has arguably had the greatest lasting impact. It was, in fact, the most widely published of Boston's works, and it is still recognized as a classic work of pastoral theology.

The immense value of *The Crook in the Lot* is bound up in its ever-relevant theme: the sovereignty and wisdom of God in the afflictions of men. The title of the work was drawn from the words of Ecclesiastes 7:13: "Consider the work of God: For who can make straight what He hath made crooked" (KJV). Boston's purpose in this work was to assist his readers in understanding the various afflictions that they faced in life, the various crooks in their lot, and God's sovereign purposes behind them. His concern in this work was not so much to answer that age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to (seemingly) good people?" Rather, his concern was to answer the question, "What can my afflictions teach me about God, and about myself?" Those who are involved in pastoral ministry recognize, along with Boston, that affliction and suffering are not abstract ideas. Rather, they are universal realities that are daily experienced by even the godliest of people. It is therefore worth considering the biblical wisdom that Boston brings to bear on this issue.

In highlighting the sovereignty and wisdom of God in man's afflictions, Boston first reflected on the words of Ecclesiastes 7:13 and made three key arguments based on this text: First, he argued that all afflictions of men were subject to the sovereign purposes of God. He thus remarked, "As for the crook in your lot, God has made it; and it must continue while he will have it so" (3). Boston thus contended that all crooks ultimately had their origin in God. This was not to say, however, that there was anything crooking in the character of God. Responding to this claim, Boston noted that even the harshest of crooks were "made in the depth of infinite wisdom," so that even the things that seemed crooked to man's natural inclination were straight in heaven (8). Boston therefore encouraged his readers to quiet themselves under the will

² Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot: Understanding the Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in the Midst of Trouble and Affliction* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2017).

and purposes of God, though they may be tempted to charge him with wrong (9). Even the sinful crooks that entered the lot of men, according to Boston, were permitted by God, though he was by no means the author of them. He thus wrote, "Though he [God] is not the author of those sinful crooks, causing them to be the efficacy of his power: yet if he did not permit them, willing not to hinder them, they could not be at all" (20). In all this, Boston's message was clear: God is sovereign over the afflictions and trials of men.

Why does God ordain trials and afflictions in the life of his people? Boston by no means intended to offer an exhaustive answer to this question. However, he did offer no less than seven reasons why God might place a crook in someone's lot: to try one's state, to excite them to duty, to convict them of sin, to correct or punish them for sin, to prevent sin, to discover hidden sins, or to exercise grace in them (23–30). Ultimately, Boston hoped that a consideration of the divine origin of human affliction might be a source of great comfort for his readers. He thus encouraged his readers to consider their crooks as coming from a kind and loving father, and to surrender them to his hands (35–36). However, he also warned his readers that if they would not submit to God's purposes for their afflictions, then they could be sure that their crooks would be for their harm, and not for their good (40).

This warning offered a helpful segway into Boston's second main point: that no man could, by his own power, mend areas of his lot that God has seen fit to mar. Along these lines, he wrote "Should you apply your utmost force to make it [the crook] straight, your attempt will be in vain: it will not alter for all you canst do: only he who made it can mend it, or make it straight" (3). For Boston, any attempt of man to strive against the will of Almighty God was futility of the first degree: "When God wills one thing, and the creature another, it is easy to see which will must be done" (44). Thus, it was utter foolishness for a man to seek to make straight what God had made crooked. Furthermore, Boston noted that it was ever the purpose of Satan to convince men otherwise; he was always seeking to persuade men to strive with God, so that they might be free from their crook (56). However, Boston offered a stern warning to those who bought into Satan's lie: "Those who are at war with God in their lot here, God will have war with them for ever. If they will not submit to his yoke here, he will wreath his yoke around their neck for ever, with

everlasting bonds that will never be loosed” (57).

Boston then argued that a proper understanding of the hand of God in human affliction was necessary for a godly response to it. He contended that a proper response to the crooks in one’s lot involved at least five things: an enquiry into the spring from which it arose, a perception of the hand of God in it, an affirmation of it as the work of God, a continuing in the thought of it as such, and a consideration of the end for which it was purposed (58–60). The key to this kind of godly response, for Boston, was faith in Christ. Only a consideration of Christ and his redemptive work could make crooks tolerable (60–64). Boston therefore encouraged his readers to consider their crooks as the work of God in Christ, which were ordained for their own benefit.

Ultimately, Boston was convinced that a proper understanding of the sovereignty of wisdom of God in affliction resulted in a posture of humble submission to the will of God. It was this theme of humility that Boston reflected on in his expositions of Proverbs 16:19 and 1 Peter 5:6. Commenting on the former, Boston wrote, “Humility is so far preferable to pride, that in no circumstances whatsoever its perferableness can fail. Let all the afflictions of the world attend the humble spirit, and all the prosperity in the world attend pride, humility will still have the better: as gold in the dunghill is more excellent than so much lead in a cabinet” (80). Likewise, in his commentary on the latter, he contended that the humbling of sinners was “the great end” of God’s word and all his providences (101). Humility was thus, in Boston’s thinking, a most fitting Christian response to human afflictions.

Ian Hamilton has fittingly described *The Crook in the Lot* as a work of “pastoral medicine” (xi). Indeed, it was Boston’s desire to offer those under his care a biblical framework for assessing the universal reality of pain and suffering in view of the sovereignty of God. So, what are some specific ways that pastors can learn from Boston’s insights as they approach the task of ministering to those in affliction? First, pastors should encourage those under their care to see the hand of God in their afflictions. Boston recognized that a biblical understanding of the sovereignty of God was a source of great comfort for those going through trials, and pastors would do well to emphasize the truth of Romans 8:28 in their preaching and counseling. God is Lord of all, and he

has decreed that all things will work together for the good of those who are his. Second, pastors should encourage those under their care to prayerfully reflect on the question, “What is God trying to teach me in the midst of this trial?” Boston identified several reasons why God might ordain afflictions in the life of his people, and although it is impossible for sinful creatures to have an exhaustive understanding of God’s purposes, it is nevertheless fitting for Christians to consider how God might be using trials for their ultimate benefit. For Boston, this kind of consideration was an important part of a godly response to affliction. Finally, pastors should encourage those under their care to adopt a posture of humility when they meet with various trials from the hand of God. As Boston counseled, it is far better to be humble in a state of affliction than proud in a state of comfort, for humility is a virtue most befitting for a Christian. This kind of ministry will ultimately serve to glorify God and comfort his people amidst the painful reality of human suffering.

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