

Is God in Control?

1 Timothy 6:15

In 1981 a widely acclaimed best-selling book swept the nation. In literary reviews Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, was described as touching, heart-warming, wise and compassionate, a book all humanity needs. In the book, which is an attempt to make sense out of a tragedy in his own family, Rabbi Kushner concludes that the author of the book of Job "forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good...chooses to believe in God's goodness." In Rabbi Kushner's view of the teaching of Job, "God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can't bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims."

Rabbi Kushner, of course, is not alone in his denial of the sovereign (or providential) control of God over the events of our lives. Christians as well as non-Christians frequently speak of misfortune and accidents, of circumstances beyond our (and presumably God's) control, of things just happening by chance. Down through the centuries, sickness, suffering, and sorrow have always raised questions about God's control and care of His creation.

The implicit assumption in the minds of many is: "If God is both powerful and good, why is there so much suffering, so much pain, so much heartache in the world? God is either good and not all powerful, or He is powerful and not all good. You can't have it both ways."

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

The Bible teaches us we do have it both ways. God is sovereign (all-powerful) and He is good. The Bible's teaching on this subject is categorized under a subject theologians call the Providence of God. God's providence is a term we often use in Christian parlance to acknowledge God's seeming intervention in our affairs. For example, in giving my personal life history, I frequently say something such as, "When I became convinced in my heart that I wanted to pursue full time ministry as my life and vocation, God, in His providence, brought me to the College of Biblical Studies." In making such a statement I intend to say that God so controlled or arranged certain circumstances of my life that a specific result—in this case, finding out about the College of Biblical Studies, was bound to occur.

There are two things wrong, however, with that way in which we refer to the providence of God. For one, we almost always use the expression "the providence of God" in connection with apparently "good" events. Coming to the College of Biblical Studies was a good event for me, so I'm quite happy to attribute it to the providence of God. But you almost never hear anyone say something such as, "In the providence of God I had an accident and was paralyzed from my waist down." Like Rabbi Kushner, we are reluctant to attribute "bad" things to the intervening hand of God.

The second problem with our popular use of the expression “the providence of God” is that we either unconsciously or deliberately imply that God intervenes at specific points in our lives but is largely only an interested spectator most of the time. When we think this way, even unconsciously, we reduce God’s control over our lives to a stop-and-go, in-and-out proposition. Our unconscious attitude is that the rest of the time we are the “master of our fates” or conversely the victims of unhappy circumstances or uncaring people that cross our paths.

Historically, however, the Church has always understood the providence of God to refer to His care of and governance over all of His creation at all times. Well-known theologian J.I. Packer defines providence as,

The unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill, He upholds His creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances, and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory.

Note the absolute terms Packer uses: “unceasing activity,” “all events...all acts,” “directs everything.” Clearly there is no concept of stop-and-go, part-time governance on God’s part in this definition.

Packer’s definition of God’s providence is very complete and, I believe, very accurate according to Scripture. For my own sake, I have developed a slightly shorter definition that I can more easily remember:

God’s providence is His constant care for and His absolute rule over all His creation for His own glory and the good of His people.

Again, note the absolute terms: constant care, absolute rule, all creation. Nothing, not even the smallest virus, not one maverick molecule, escapes His care and control.

But, note also, the two-fold objective of God’s providence: His own glory and the good of His people. These two objectives are never antithetical; they are always in harmony with each other. God never pursues His glory at the expense of the good of His people, nor does He ever seek our good at the expense of His glory. He has designed His eternal purpose so that His glory and our good are inextricably bound together. What comfort and encouragement this should be to us. If we are going to learn to trust God in adversity, we must believe that just as certainly as God will allow nothing to subvert His glory, so He will allow nothing to spoil the good He is working out in us and for us.

In the previous lesson I asked the question, “Can you trust God?” and observed that the first meaning of the question is, “Is God trustworthy?” Can God always care for us (is He sovereign), and does He always care for us (is He good)? The doctrine of God’s providence clearly affirms that we can trust God. God does care for us and He does constantly—not just occasionally—govern all the affairs of our lives.

In order to better understand and benefit from the biblical teaching of God's providence, we need to also consider another aspect of providence: the sustaining action of God in upholding and preserving His creation.

GOD SUSTAINS

The Bible teaches that God not only created the universe, but that He upholds and sustains it day-by-day and hour-by-hour. Scripture says, “[Christ] upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3), and “in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). As theologian A.H. Strong said,

Christ is the originator and upholder of the universe...In him it consists, or holds together, from hour to hour. The steady will of Christ constitutes the law of the universe and makes it a cosmos instead of a chaos, just as his will brought it into being in the beginning.

All things are indebted for their existence to the continuous sustaining action of God exercised through His Son. Nothing exists of its own inherent power of being. Nothing in all creation stands or acts independently of the Lord's will. The so-called laws of nature are nothing more than the physical expression of the steady will of Christ. The law of gravity operates with unceasing certainty because Christ continuously wills it to operate. The floor I am standing on while I say these words holds together because the atoms and molecules in it are held in place by His active will.

The stars continue in their courses because He keeps them there. Scripture says,

Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars, the One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing. (Isaiah 40:26)

God's sustaining action in Christ goes beyond the inanimate creation. The Bible says that He gives life to everything (Nehemiah 9:6). Psalm 147:7-9 declares,

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; sing praises to our God on the lyre, Who covers the heavens with clouds, Who provides rain for the earth, Who makes grass to grow on the mountains. He gives to the beast its food, and to the young ravens which cry.

God did not simply create and then walk away. He constantly sustains that which He created.

Further, the Bible teaches that God sustains you and me. “He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things... for in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:25-28). He supplies our daily food (2 Corinthians 9:10). Our times are in His hands (Psalm 31:15). Every breath we breathe is a gift from God, every bite of food we eat is given to us from His hand—every day we live is determined by Him. He has not left us to

our own devices, or the whims of nature, or the malevolent acts of other people. No! He constantly sustains, provides for and cares for us every moment of every day. Did your car break down when you could least afford the repairs? Did you miss an important meeting because the plane you were to fly in developed mechanical problems? The God who controls the stars in their courses also controls nuts and bolts and everything on your car and on that plane you were to fly in. If we are to trust God, we must learn to see that He is continuously at work in every aspect and every moment of our lives.

GOD GOVERNS

The Bible also teaches that God governs the universe, not only inanimate creation, but also the actions of all creatures, both men and animals. He is called the Ruler of all things (1 Chronicles 29:12), the blessed and only Sovereign (1 Timothy 6:15), the One apart from whose will the sparrow cannot fall to the ground (Matthew 10:29). Jeremiah asks, “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?” (Lamentations 3:37). “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Daniel 4:35). “The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes” (Daniel 4:17).

No one can act outside of God’s sovereign will or against it. Centuries ago, Augustine said, “Nothing, therefore, happens unless the Omnipotent wills it to happen: he either permits it to happen, or he brings it about himself.” Philip Hughes says, “Under God, however, all things are without exception fully controlled—despite all appearances to the contrary.” Nothing is too large or small to escape God’s governing hand. The spider building its web in the corner and Napoleon marching his army across Europe are both under God’s control.

As God’s rule is invincible, so it is incomprehensible. His ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9). His judgments are unsearchable, and His paths are beyond finding out (Romans 11:33). The sovereignty of God is often questioned because man does not understand what God is doing. Because He does not act as we think He should, we conclude He cannot act as we think He would.

GOD OR CHANCE?

This, then, is divine providence: God sustaining and governing His universe, bringing all events to their appointed end. This doctrine, however, is scarcely accepted among people today. The non-Christian, for the most part, has ruled out both the creating act of God and His providence. For him, all events are in the hands of fate or chance.

Such a view comes out matter-of-factly, if incidentally, in one book about managing crisis. The author says, “You should view and plan for the inevitability of a crisis...out of the strength that comes from knowing you are prepared to face life and play the hand that fate deals you...Fate dealt me an interesting hand early in 1979.”

In Rabbi Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Kushner asks, "Can you accept the idea that some things happen for no reason, that there is randomness in the universe?" Speaking of the direction a forest fire takes, he asks, "But is there a sensible explanation for why wind and weather combine to direct a forest fire on a given day toward certain homes rather than others, trapping some people inside and sparing others? Or is it just a matter of pure luck?"

Elsewhere Rabbi Kushner reminds us that insurance companies refer to earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and various other natural disasters as "acts of God." Then he says, "I consider that a case of using God's name in vain. I don't believe that an earthquake that kills thousands of innocent victims without reason is an act of God. It is an act of nature. Nature is morally blind, without values. It churns along, following its own laws, not caring who or what gets in the way."

Randomness, luck, chance, fate. This is modern man's answer to the age-old question, "Why?" Of course, if one dismisses the whole idea of God, as many do, then there is no other alternative. Many, while not dismissing the idea of God, have fabricated a God of their own speculation. Seventeenth-century deism constructed a God who created a universe and then walked away to leave it running according to its natural laws and man's devices. Many people today are practical deists, and deism is just a garden-variety form of atheism.

Even Christians often think as deists today. Many accept the concept that God is sovereign, but believe that He chooses not to exercise His sovereignty in the daily affairs of our lives. As one writer put it, "We know that God is sovereign, but we also know that, in His sovereignty, God has placed us in a world of sin and suffering from which we have no immunity," and again, "God's love...for us, does not place us in a protected position." While I agree with the author's basic thesis in her article, that we shouldn't be asking, "Why?" I am troubled with what I understand her to be saying about God's exercise of His sovereignty and His care for His people.

In His well-known statement about sparrows, Jesus said,

Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31)

According to Jesus, God does exercise His sovereignty in very minute events—even the life and death of an almost worthless sparrow. And Jesus' whole point is: If God so exercises His sovereignty in regard to sparrows, most certainly He will exercise it in regard to His children. While it is certainly true that God's love for us does not protect us from pain and sorrow, it is also true that all occasions of pain and sorrow are under the absolute control of God. If God controls the circumstances of the sparrow, how much more does He control the circumstances that affect us. God does not walk away and leave us to the mercy of uncontrolled random or chance events. The oft quoted phrase, "The Devil is in the details" is completely wrong—God is in the details.

A Christian husband flew in a private plane to another city to give his testimony at an evangelistic meeting, taking his son with him. On the way home they ran into an electrical storm that caused the plane to crash. Both the father and son were killed. A Christian friend, in an effort to comfort the bereaved wife and mother said, "One thing you can be sure of: God had no part in that accident." According to this friend, God was apparently looking the other way when the pilot got into trouble. A sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our Father's will but apparently a plane with Christians aboard can.

I read a blasphemous statement by someone who said, "Chance is the pseudonym God uses when He'd rather not sign His own name." A lot of Christians are doing that for God today. Often unwilling to accept the fact that God is working, because they don't understand how He is working, they have chosen to substitute the doctrine of chance for the doctrine of divine providence.

GOOD BUT NOT SOVEREIGN

Along with the doctrine of chance, many Christians are also buying into the philosophy expounded by Rabbi Kushner that God is good but not sovereign. One Christian writer, for example, speaks of her pain as being utterly frustrating to God and gives thanks to God for being her devoted, caring, frustrated heavenly Father. Faced with the dilemma of how a loving, sovereign Father could allow her to experience such agonizing pain, she found relief in the belief that God was indeed frustrated about her pain, shedding tears with her, even as a mother may weep at the suffering of her child.

In fairness to this writer, she suffered excruciating pain for months. As one who has suffered less severe pain, and that only for several weeks at any one time, I realize I have not sat where she sat, I have not had to wrestle to the degree she has with the love of God in the midst of unbearable pain. But, as so often has been observed, we are to establish our beliefs by the Bible, not by our experiences. The Bible leaves us no doubt: God is never frustrated. "No one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:35). It is true that God is involved in an invisible war with Satan and that the lives of God's people often are battlegrounds, as seen in the life of Job. But even then Satan must get permission to touch God's people. (See Job 1:12,2:6, and Luke 22:31-32.) Even in this invisible war, God is still sovereign.

Author Margaret Clarkson, herself a lifelong sufferer said, "That God is, indeed, both good and powerful is one of the basic tenets of Christian belief." We admit that we are often unable to reconcile God's sovereignty and goodness in the face of widespread tragedy or personal adversity, but we believe that, although we often do not understand God's ways, He is sovereignly at work in all of our circumstances.

It is not easy to believe in the doctrine of the providence of God, especially in these days when it seems that doctrine has fallen upon hard times. As Professor G.C. Berkouwer said, in his book *The Providence of God*,

Raw reality assaults this comforting and optimistic confession. Could the catastrophic terrors of our century, with the impropportionate sufferings they inflict on individuals, families, and peoples—could these be a reflection of the guidance of God? Does not pure honesty force us to stop seeking escape in a hidden, harmonious supersensible world? Does not honesty tell us to limit ourselves realistically to what lies before our eyes, and, without illusions, face the order of the day?

All people—believers as well as unbelievers—experience anxiety, frustration, heartache and disappointment. Some suffer intense physical pain and catastrophic tragedies. But that which should distinguish the suffering of believers from unbelievers is the confidence that our suffering is under the control of an all-powerful and all-loving God; our suffering has meaning and purpose in God's eternal plan, and He brings or allows to come into our lives only that which is for His glory and our good.