

IS GOD IN CONTROL?

**GOD ... IS THE BLESSED CONTROLLER OF
ALL THINGS, THE KING OVER ALL KINGS
AND THE MASTER OF ALL MASTERS.**

1 TIMOTHY 6:15, PH

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."¹ 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."²

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1983), pages 42-43.

² Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, page 43.


Rabbi Kushner, of course, is not alone in his denial of the sovereign control of God over the events of our lives. Christians as well as nonChristians 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 testimony, I frequently say something such as, "When I became aware that I could not live the Christian life in the Navy alone, God, in His providence, brought me into contact with The Navigators." 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, coming into contact with The Navigators—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 into contact with The Navigators 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.”³ 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, escapes His care and control.

But, note also, the twofold 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

³ From the article by J.I. Packer on “Providence” appearing in *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962), pages 1050–1051.

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 chapter one 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, hour by hour. ✎

Scripture says, “The Son is ... sustaining all things by his powerful word” ([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.⁴

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 chair I am sitting on while I write these words holds together because the atoms and molecules in the wood are held in place by His active will.

The stars continue in their courses because He keeps them there. Scripture says, “He ... brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” ([Isaiah 40:26](#)).

⁴ Quoted by Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1984), page 91.

God's sustaining action in Christ goes beyond the inanimate creation. The Bible says that He gives life to everything ([Nehemiah 9:6](#)). "He supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call" ([Psalm 147:8-9](#)). 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 all men life and breath and everything else.... '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.

When I was an infant I had a bad case of measles. The virus apparently settled in my eyes and in my right ear leaving me with monocular vision and deafness in that ear. Was God in

control of that virus, or was I simply a victim of a chance childhood disease? God's moment-by-moment sustaining of His universe and everything in it leaves me no choice but to accept that the virus was indeed under His controlling hand. God was not looking the other way when that virus settled in the nerve endings of my ear and the muscles of my eyes. 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 Ruler ([1 Timothy 6:15](#)), the One apart from whose will the sparrow cannot fall to the ground ([Matthew 10:29](#)). Jeremiah asks, “Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?” ([Lamentations 3:37](#)). “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’” ([Daniel 4:35](#)). “[He] is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone 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.”⁵ Philip Hughes says, “Under God, however, all things are without exception fully controlled—despite all appearances to the contrary.”⁶ 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 tracing 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 nonChristian, for the most part, has ruled out both the creating act of God and His providence. For him, all events are

⁵ Quoted by John Blanchard, [Gathered Gold](#) (Welwyn, Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), page 332.

⁶ Philip E. Hughes, [Hope for a Despairing World](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), pages 40–41.

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.”⁷

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?”⁸

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

⁷ Steven Fink, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable* (New York: American Management Association, 1986), pages 1–2.

⁸ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, pages 46–48.

morally blind, without values. It churns along, following its own laws, not caring who or what gets in the way.”⁹

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.

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.”¹⁰ 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.

⁹ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, page 59.

¹⁰ Alvera Mickelson, “[Why Did God Let It Happen?](#)”, *Christianity Today* (March 16, 1984), pages 22–24.

In His well-known statement about sparrows, Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father... So don’t be afraid; you are worth more 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. ✍

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 hold back 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.”¹¹ 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 ter-

¹¹ Margaret Clarkson, [Destined for Glory](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), page 6.

rors 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 super-sensible 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?”¹²

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. 🖋

¹² G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), page 23.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

**THE LORD FOILS THE
PLANS OF THE NATIONS;
HE THWARTS THE PURPOSES
OF THE PEOPLES.
BUT THE PLANS OF THE LORD STAND
FIRM FOREVER, THE PURPOSES OF HIS
HEART THROUGH ALL GENERATIONS.**

PSALM 33:10-11

In the year 1902, a young English boy came down to breakfast to find his father reading the newspaper which carried news of preparations for the first coronation in Britain in sixty-four years. In the middle of breakfast the father turned to his wife and said, “Oh, I am sorry to see this worded like that.” She said, “What is it?” “Why,” he replied, “here is a proclamation that on a certain date Prince Edward will be crowned king at Westminster and there is no *Deo volente*, God willing.” The words stuck in the young boy’s mind for the very reason that on the appointed date the future Edward VII was ill with appendicitis and the coronation had to be postponed.¹

¹ Iain H. Murray, *The Life of Arthur W. Pink* (Edinburgh: The Banner of

At this time, at the end of Queen Victoria's reign, the political, economic, and military power of the British Empire was at its zenith. Yet for all its great might, Great Britain could not carry out its planned coronation on the appointed date.

Was the omission of "God willing" from the proclamation and the subsequent postponement of the coronation merely a coincidence, two events without any relation to one another? Or did God cause Prince Edward to have appendicitis to show that He was "in control"? We don't know why the situation occurred as it did. One thing we do know, however: whether we acknowledge it with *Deo volente* or not, we cannot carry out any plan apart from God's will. ✎ The Bible leaves no doubt about that fact. James says it so clearly in the following passage:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "*If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.*" (James 4:13-15, emphasis added)

GOD'S ABSOLUTE CONTROL

God is in control; He is sovereign. He does whatever pleases

Truth, 1981), page 4.

Him and determines whether we can do what we have planned. This is the essence of God's sovereignty; His absolute independence to do as He pleases and His absolute control over the actions of all His creatures. No creature, person, or empire can either thwart His will or act outside the bounds of His will.

✍ In chapter one I stated that, for us to trust God in times of adversity, we must believe in God's sovereignty, His love, and His wisdom. Of these three truths, the sovereignty of God seems to be questioned the most frequently and most stridently. It seems we will allow God to be anywhere except upon His throne ruling His universe according to His good pleasure and His sovereign will. ✍

Even godly Christian writers whose books are helpful to many can, in their writings, take God off His throne. One of their most common statements is that God has voluntarily limited Himself to the actions of men in order to give man his freedom. For example, Andrew Murray wrote, "In creating man with a free will and making him a partner in the rule of the earth, *God limited himself. He made himself dependent on what man would do.* Man by his prayer would hold the measure of what God could do in blessing" (emphasis added).²

² Andrew Murray, *Every-Day with Andrew Murray*, as quoted by *Christianity Today* (March 6, 1987), page 41.

Other Christian writers fail to acknowledge the controlling hand of God—either directing or permitting—in every event of our lives. One writer, for example, speaks of suffering sometimes coming because of misfortune or accident, things “just happening,” and pain coming our way, “due to circumstances beyond our control.”

Our response to such statements is more than mere theological discussion. Confidence in the sovereignty of God in *all* that affects us is crucial to our trusting Him. *If there is a single event in all of the universe that can occur outside of God’s sovereign control then we cannot trust Him.* His love may be infinite, but if His power is limited and His purpose can be thwarted, we cannot trust Him. You may entrust to me your most valuable possessions. I may love you and my aim to honor your trust may be sincere, but if I do not have the power or ability to guard your valuables, you cannot truly entrust them to me. 🖋️

Paul, however, said we can entrust our most valuable possession to the Lord. In [2 Timothy 1:12](#), he said, “That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and *am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him* for that day” (emphasis added). “But,” someone says, “Paul is speaking there of eternal life. Without question, we can entrust our eternal destiny to God, but what about our problems in this life? They make me wonder about the sovereignty of God.”

It should be evident, however, that God's sovereignty does not begin at death. As we will see in a later chapter, His sovereign direction in our lives even precedes our births. God rules as surely on earth as He does in Heaven. He permits, for reasons known only to Himself, people to act contrary to and in defiance of His revealed will. But He never permits them to act contrary to His sovereign will. ✍

In support of the statement I have just made—God never permits people to act contrary to His sovereign will—consider the following passages of Scripture:

In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps. ([Proverbs 16:9](#))

Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. ([Proverbs 19:21](#))

There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD. ([Proverbs 21:30](#))

Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? ([Ecclesiastes 7:13](#))

Who can speak and have it happen if the LORD has not decreed it? ([Lamentations 3:37](#))

You ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." ([James 4:15](#))

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” ([Revelation 3:7](#))

We make plans, but those plans can succeed only when they are consistent with God’s purpose. ✎ No plan can succeed against Him. No one can straighten what He makes crooked or make crooked what He has made straight. No emperor, king, supervisor, teacher, or coach can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not first decreed to either make it happen or permit it to happen. No one can say, “I will do this or that,” and have it happen if it is not part of God’s sovereign will.

What an encouragement, what a stimulus to trusting God, this aspect of God’s sovereignty should be to us. Is someone “out to get you”? That person absolutely cannot execute his malicious plan unless God has first decreed it. I spoke with a military chaplain who had a confrontation with a more senior chaplain over an illegal act the senior chaplain proposed to do. As a result the senior chaplain wrote a very critical letter to the chief of chaplains that has seriously jeopardized my friend’s career. Is my friend merely a victim of a cruel act of revenge? Not according to Scripture. The ungodly chaplain may write a dozen critical letters, but he absolutely cannot end my friend’s

military career unless God permits it. And if God permits it, it is because the ungodly action is part of God's plan for him. No one can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it ([Lamentations 3:37](#)).

My friend's experience is not unique. Thousands of Christians have experienced similar injustices at the hands of teachers, coaches, fellow workers, and supervisors at work. Perhaps you have, too. When these events occur they always hurt. We cannot dismiss them with the glib expression, "God is in control." God is in control, but in His control He allows us to experience pain. The pain is very real. We hurt, we suffer. But in the midst of our suffering we must believe that God is in control; that He is sovereign.

As author Margaret Clarkson again so beautifully has written, "The sovereignty of God is the one impregnable rock to which the suffering human heart must cling. The circumstances surrounding our lives are no accident: they may be the work of evil, but that evil is held firmly within the mighty hand of our sovereign God.... All evil is subject to Him, and evil cannot touch His children unless He permits it. God is the Lord of human history and of the personal history of every member of His redeemed family."³

³ Margaret Clarkson, *Grace Grows Best in Winter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), pages 40–41.

Not only are the willful malevolent acts of other people under God's sovereign control, so also are the mistakes and failures of other people. Did another driver go through a red light, strike your car, and send you to the hospital with multiple fractures? Did a physician fail to detect your cancer in its early stages, when it would have been treatable? Did you end up with an incompetent instructor in a very important course in college, or an inept supervisor that blocked your career in business? All of these circumstances are under the controlling hand of our sovereign God, who is working them out in our lives for our good.

Neither the willful malicious acts nor the unintended mistakes of people can thwart God's purpose for us. "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD" ([Proverbs 21:30](#)). The Roman governor Felix left Paul in prison for over two years. Felix committed a totally unjust act because he wanted to grant a favor to the Jews ([Acts 24:27](#)). Joseph was left in prison for two years because Pharaoh's cupbearer forgot him ([Genesis 40:14, 23; 41:1](#)). These two godly men were left to languish in prison—one because of deliberate injustice and the other because of inexcusable forgetfulness—but both of their predicaments were under the sovereign control of an infinitely wise and loving God.

Nothing is so small or trivial as to escape the attention of God's sovereign control; nothing is so great as to be beyond His

power to control it. The insignificant sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His will; the mighty Roman empire cannot crucify Jesus Christ unless that power is given to it by God ([Matthew 10:29](#); [John 19:10–11](#)). And what is true for the sparrow and for Jesus is true for you and me. No detail of your life is too insignificant for your heavenly Father's attention; no circumstance is so big that He cannot control it. ✍

Within two days I received word of calamitous events in the lives of two of my friends. The wife of one friend was killed instantly when her car apparently stalled at a railroad crossing in the path of an oncoming train. The other friend is an independent over-the-road truck driver, struggling to get established in that business. On a recent trip, his truck broke down, necessitating expensive repairs on the road. The cost of the repairs completely wiped out the income he would have made from that trip.


The consequences of these two events, of course, cannot be compared. The struggling truck driver would agree that no amount of lost income can be compared with the loss of a precious wife. But what do we say to either of these men, each grappling with his own unique set of circumstances, about the sovereignty of God? Do we just speak to the one of a “tragic accident” and to the other about his “bad luck”?


Are we truly left to the mercy of stalled cars, of trucks that break down, of people who are in a position to do us harm and

are intent on doing it? No, a thousand times no! We are in the hands of a sovereign God who controls every circumstance of our lives and who rejoices in doing us good ([Jeremiah 32:41](#)).

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IS NOT ALWAYS APPARENT

One of our problems with the sovereignty of God is that it frequently does not appear that God is in control of the circumstances of our lives. We see unjust or uncaring or even clearly wicked people doing things that adversely affect us. We experience the consequences of other people's mistakes and failures. We even do foolish and sinful things ourselves and suffer the often bitter fruit of our actions. It is difficult to see God working through secondary causes and frail, sinful human beings. But it is the ability of God to so arrange diverse human actions to fulfill His purpose that makes His sovereignty marvelous and yet mysterious. No Bible believing Christian has any difficulty believing that God can and has worked miracles—instances of His sovereign but *direct* intervention into the affairs of people. Regardless of our theological position regarding miracles occurring today, we all accept without question the validity of the miracles recorded in Scripture. But to believe in the sovereignty of God when we do not see His direct intervention—when God is, so to speak, working entirely behind the scenes through ordinary circumstances

and ordinary actions of people—is even more important, because that is the way God usually works. 

A  nineteenth-century writer, Alexander Carson, in his book, *Confidence in God in Times of Danger*, says, “For the wisdom of man cannot see how the providence of God can arrange human actions to fulfill his purpose without any miracle.”⁴ For example, one writer, commenting on an accident in which her car was struck by another that went through a red light supposed that for God to have protected her, He would have made the other driver’s car suddenly sprout wings so that it could fly over her car without impacting. What is implied in such a statement is the idea that God is suddenly confronted with a crisis in the life of one of His children and has no recourse but to work a miracle or let the crisis occur.

God did allow the crisis to occur in her situation, but it was not because He could not prevent it. In His sovereignty He could have changed the timing of either driver’s arrival at the intersection, or even diverted one of them along another route had He chosen to do so. None of us knows of such events in our own lives (perhaps hundreds) when we have been unknowingly spared from adversity or tragedy by the unseen sovereign hand of God. As the psalmist said, “He will not let your

⁴ Alexander Carson, *Confidence in God in Times of Danger* (Swengel, Pa.: Reiner Publications, 1975), page 25.

foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:3–4).

Undoubtedly, one of the reasons the book of Esther is included in Scripture is to help us see the sovereign hand of God at work behind the scenes caring for His people. ✎ One of the more arresting things about the book is that the name of God is never once mentioned. Yet the observant reader sees God’s hand in every circumstance, bringing about the deliverance of His people just as surely as He brought about their deliverance from Egypt through mighty miracles centuries before. God was as sovereignly at work through ordinary circumstances in the time of Esther as He was through miracles in the time of Moses.

The pivot point of the book of Esther is chapter 6. Prior to the events of the night recorded in that chapter, the lives of all the Jews in the entire realm of the Persian King Xerxes were in danger due to the diabolical scheme of one wicked man, Haman, who had recently been elevated to a position higher than that of all the other nobles in the kingdom. But in chapter 6, events begin to turn leading ultimately to the downfall and death of wicked Haman, the physical salvation of the Jews, and the elevation of Mordecai (the hero of the story) to the second highest position in the kingdom.

Because the series of events recorded in Esther chapter 6

reveals in a remarkable way how God sovereignly uses the most ordinary circumstances to accomplish His purpose, we will look at those circumstances in some detail.

On the fateful night King Xerxes could not sleep, so he ordered the book of the chronicles of his reign to be brought in and read to him. In the course of the reading, it came to light that Mordecai who was in danger of being hanged the next morning, had on an earlier occasion reported a plot to assassinate the king. The king asked what recognition had been given Mordecai and found that nothing had been done. So the king decided on the spot to honor Mordecai and, as it turned out, the very man who had determined to hang Mordecai ended up carrying out the king's edict to publicly honor him.

Consider what had to happen to save Mordecai from the gallows. Why could the king not sleep that fateful night? Why, then, did he ask for a dry register of facts to be read to him rather than soothing music to lull him to sleep? And when the book of the chronicles of his reign were read, why did the reader happen to read from the particular section of the book where Mordecai's actions were recorded? Were there not a thousand chances that the reader would have selected some other portion of the annals of the Persian empire to read?

The king heard about Mordecai's service and asked how he was rewarded. Why had the king not rewarded Mordecai at the time he had saved the king's life? Why did he suddenly deter-

mine to do something? And why did wicked Haman appear at that moment to ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai? Why did Xerxes ask Haman what should be done to honor the man in such a way as to conceal the object of his favor, causing Haman to think he himself was the one to be honored?⁵

The answer to all of these questions was that God was sovereignly orchestrating the events of that night to save His people. The question naturally arises, however, “Does God always orchestrate the events of *my* life for my good?” If we grant that the unusual outworking of events in Esther was due to the sovereign hand of God, are we justified in concluding that God *always* orchestrates the events of our lives to fulfill His purpose? According to [Romans 8:28](#), the answer is a solid yes. That verse says, “We know that in *all* things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (emphasis added). It is this assurance that God works in *all* events of our lives that gives sense to Paul’s exhortation elsewhere to “give thanks in *all* circumstances” ([1 Thessalonians 5:18](#), emphasis added). How could we possibly give thanks to God for all the circumstances of our lives if He were not at work in them for our good?

⁵ I acknowledge my indebtedness to Alexander Carson for some of the ideas in this analysis of Esther chapter [6](#) from his book *Confidence in God in Times of Danger*.

GOD DOES AS HE PLEASES ✍

So no one can act and no circumstances can occur outside the bounds of God's sovereign will. But this is only one side of His sovereignty. The other side, which is just as important to our trusting Him, is that no plan of God's can be thwarted. God does as He pleases, and only as He pleases, and no one can frustrate His plans or hinder His purposes. ✍

Again, since this is such a difficult concept to accept, and one which is so frequently disputed, it will be helpful to consider a number of Scripture passages on this subject.

“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.” (Job 42:2)

Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.
(Psalm 115:3)

For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?
(Isaiah 14:27)

“Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?” (Isaiah 43:13)

“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 46:10)

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:35)

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. (Ephesians 1:11)

No plan of God’s can be thwarted; when He acts, no one can reverse it; no one can hold back His hand or bring Him to account for His actions. God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, and works out every event to bring about the accomplishment of His will. Such a bare unqualified statement of the sovereignty of God would terrify us if that were all we knew about God. But God is not only sovereign, He is perfect in love and infinite in wisdom. 🖋️

As we saw in chapter two, Rabbi Kushner ascribed a sort of bare sovereignty to nature. He said, “Nature is morally blind, without values. It churns along, following its own laws, not caring who or what gets in its way.” But God does care. God exercises His sovereignty for His glory and the good of His people.

But how does this aspect of God’s sovereignty (i.e., God does

as He pleases) relate to our trusting Him? Why is this any more than merely an abstract statement about God to be debated by the theologians, a statement that has little relevance to our day-to-day lives?

The answer is that God does have a purpose and a plan for you, and *God has the power to carry out that plan*. It is one thing to know that no person or circumstance can touch us outside of God's sovereign control; it is still another to realize that no person or circumstances can frustrate God's purpose for our lives. ✎

God has an over-arching purpose for all believers: to conform us to the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ ([Romans 8:29](#)). He also has a specific purpose for each of us that is His unique, tailor-made plan for our individual life (see [Ephesians 2:10](#)). And God will fulfill that purpose. As [Psalm 138:8](#) says, "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me." Because we know God is directing our lives to an ultimate end and because we know He is sovereignly able to orchestrate the events of our lives toward that end, we can trust Him. We can commit to Him not only the ultimate outcome of our lives, but also all the intermediate events and circumstances that will bring us to that outcome.

Again it is difficult for us to appreciate the reality of God sovereignly doing as He pleases in our lives, because we do not see God doing anything. Instead we see ourselves or other people acting and events occurring, and we evaluate those actions

and events according to our own preferences and plans. We see ourselves influencing or perhaps even controlling or being controlled by the actions of other people, but we do not see God at work. But over all the actions and events of our lives, God is in control doing as He pleases—not apart from those events, or in spite of them, but *through* them. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery—a malicious act in and of itself—but in due time Joseph recognized that through his brothers’ actions God was acting. He could say to them, “So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God” ([Genesis 45:8](#)). Joseph recognized the hand of God in his life sovereignly directing all the events to bring about God’s plan for him.

You and I may never have the privilege in this life of seeing an obvious outcome of God’s plan for us, as Joseph did. But God’s plan for us is no less firm and its outcome is no less certain than was God’s plan for Joseph. God did not give us the story of Joseph’s life just to inform us but to encourage us. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the *encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope” ([Romans 15:4](#), emphasis added). What God did for Joseph, He will do for us. But to derive the comfort and encouragement from this truth that God has provided, we must learn to trust God. We must learn to live, as Paul said, “by faith, not by sight” ([2 Corinthians 5:7](#)).

One of the passages of Scripture that has been very mean-

ingful to me for several years is [Jeremiah 29:11](#), “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ ” Although those words were directed to the nation of Judah in its captivity, they express a principle about God, a principle affirmed elsewhere throughout the Bible: God has a plan for you. Because He has a plan for you, and because no one can thwart that plan, you too can have hope and courage. You, too, can trust God. 📌

From our limited vantage point, our lives are marked by an endless series of contingencies. We frequently find ourselves, instead of acting as we planned, reacting to an unexpected turn of events. We make plans but are often forced to change those plans. But there are no contingencies with God. Our unexpected, forced change of plans is a part of His plan. God is never surprised; never caught off guard; never frustrated by unexpected developments. God does as He pleases and that which pleases Him is always for His glory and our good.

Our lives are also cluttered with a lot of “if onlys.” “If only I had done this,” or “if only that had not happened.” But again, God has no “if onlys.” God never makes a mistake; God has no regrets. “As for God, his way is perfect” ([Psalm 18:30](#)). We can trust God. He is trustworthy. 📌

Just as the book of Esther showed us God’s sovereign care for His people, so the short book of Ruth shows us God at work to

fulfill His plan for one of His people. In one sense, Ruth is more instructive than Esther because it gives us an insight into the sovereign working of God in more ordinary circumstances than those depicted in the book of Esther.

Ruth, you will recall, was the widowed daughter-in-law of Naomi, who uttered those familiar words, “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” ([Ruth 1:16](#)). To help us see God at work in Ruth’s life, we need to read [Ruth 2:1–10](#):

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband’s side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz.

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.”

Naomi said to her, “Go ahead, my daughter.” So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!” ...

Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, “Whose young woman is that?”

The foreman replied, “She is the Moabite woman who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.”

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?”

To quickly conclude the story, Ruth marries Boaz, becomes the great-grandmother of King David and one of the four women listed in Matthew’s record of the genealogy of our Lord ([Matthew 1:1-16](#)).

Notice in the passage quoted, four key events that all had to come together to begin the process of Ruth’s becoming Boaz’s wife. As Ruth went out to glean in the fields, she could have ended up in anyone’s field. Verse [3](#) says, “As it turned out, she

found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz.” God guided her to the right field. But she still must meet Boaz, so verse 4 says, “Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem.” God, who controlled Ruth’s direction so that she happened to go to Boaz’s field, controlled Boaz’s timing so that he happened to go to check on his harvest at just the time Ruth was there.

But still Ruth must gain Boaz’s attention and favor. Undoubtedly many of the poor gathered from Boaz’s field since leaving the leftover grain was part of the Mosaic law ([Leviticus 19:9-10](#)), and hence a common event in the life of Israel. We would suppose that a landowner such as Boaz would not normally notice one poor woman gathering up leftover grain. But Boaz notices Ruth, verse 5: “Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, ‘Whose young woman is that?’” Finally we see Boaz responding favorably to Ruth, verses [8-10](#).

The right location, the right timing, being noticed, and gaining Boaz’s favor were all key links in the chain of events that eventually resulted in Ruth’s marriage to Boaz. None of the events were extraordinary and all give the appearance of “just happening,” nothing more than a coincidence in a romantic story. But the reverent reader of Scripture cannot fail to see the sovereign hand of God arranging those ordinary circumstances to accomplish His purpose. Naomi herself, though not at the time aware of God’s future plan for Ruth and Boaz, ascribes the events to the hand of God ([Ruth 2:20](#)).

The stories of Esther and Mordecai and of Ruth and Boaz both had happy endings. We can see God's hand at work in those events. But what about when the story does not have a happy ending? Is God sovereign then also? This is the crucial question. It's easy to trust God when a process of events turns out as we would desire, though even here our faith often falters during the process until we know the outcome.

Consider, for example, the stories of two apostles, James and Peter, as recorded in [Acts 12](#). The close relationship of these two men predated their apostleship because they were partners in the fishing business ([Luke 5:10](#)). They were called by Jesus to leave their business and to follow Him at the same time ([Matthew 4:18–22](#)). Both were part of Jesus' inner circle—Peter, James, and John. But in [Acts 12](#), radically different events happen to them. James is put to death and Peter is miraculously spared the same fate.

Put yourself in the shoes of James's wife and then Peter's. One is grieving over the murder of her husband; the other rejoices over the miraculous deliverance of hers. Peter's wife rejoices in the sovereignty of God, but what does James's wife do? Was God any less sovereign in the death of James than He was in the deliverance of Peter? Is God sovereign only in the "good" circumstances of our lives? Is He not also sovereign in the difficult times, the times when our hearts ache with pain?

The Bible teaches us that God is sovereign over both the

“good” and the “bad.” Consider the following:

When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future. ([Ecclesiastes 7:14](#))

“I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” ([Isaiah 45:7](#))

Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? ([Lamentations 3:38](#))

These three passages clearly state what is taught in principle throughout the rest of the Bible. God controls both the good and the bad. God has not looked the other way or been caught by surprise when adversity strikes us. He is in control of that adversity, directing it to His glory and our good.

So let's go back to James's wife. She, too, must trust in God and in His sovereign control over her life and the death of her husband. Trusting in God does not mean she does not suffer grief, that her heart does not ache. It means that in the midst of her heartache and grief she can say something to the effect of, “Lord, I know You were in control of this dreadful event. I do not understand why You allowed it to happen but I trust You.”

I readily admit it is difficult to believe God is in control when we are in the midst of anxiety, heartache, or grief. I have struggled with this many times myself. Because of my schedule most of my writing is done on an intermittent basis, a “few hours here and a few hours there.” Because of that, this particular chapter was written and rewritten over a period of six weeks or more. During that time I had to work through God’s sovereignty on two occasions myself. In each instance I realized I knew the truth regarding God’s sovereignty. What I had to do was to decide if I would trust Him, even when my heart ached.

I realized anew that, just as we must learn to obey God one choice at a time, we must also learn to trust God one circumstance at a time. Trusting God is not a matter of my feelings but of my will. I never feel like trusting God when adversity strikes, but I can choose to do so even when I don’t feel like it. That act of the will, though, must be based on belief, and belief must be based on truth. 🖋️

The truth we must believe is that God is sovereign. He carries out His own good purposes without ever being thwarted, and He so directs and controls all events and all actions of His creatures that they never act outside of His sovereign will. We must believe this and cling to this in the face of adversity and tragedy, if we are to glorify God by trusting Him.

I will say this next statement as gently and compassionately

as I know how. Our first priority in times of adversity is to honor and glorify God by trusting Him. ✍ We tend to make our first priority the gaining of relief from our feelings of heartache or disappointment or frustration. This is a natural desire, and God has promised to give us grace sufficient for our trials and peace for our anxieties ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#); [Philippians 4:6-7](#)). But just as God's will is to take precedence over our will (Jesus Himself said, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" [Matthew 26:39](#)), so God's honor is to take precedence over our feelings. We honor God by choosing to trust Him when we don't understand what He is doing or why He has allowed some adverse circumstance to occur. As we seek God's glory, we may be sure that He has purposed our good and that He will not be frustrated in fulfilling that purpose.

A WORD OF CAUTION ✍

The material in this chapter is "tough stuff." It should be read, studied, and prayed about when life is more or less routine. It should be stored up or hidden in our hearts ([Psalm 119:11](#)) for the time of adversity when we must draw upon its truth.

Above all, we need to be very sensitive about instructing someone else in the sovereignty of God and encouraging that person to trust God when he or she is in the midst of adversity or pain. It is much easier to trust in the sovereignty of God when it is the other person who is hurting. We need to be like

Jesus of whom it was said, “A bruised reed he will not break” ([Matthew 12:20](#)). Let us not be guilty of breaking a bruised reed (a heavy heart) by insensitive treatment of the heavy doctrine of the sovereignty of God.