

The Sovereignty Of God In Providence

Introduction

By John Reisinger

"For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."
Romans 11:36

There are six basic principles surrounding the sovereignty of God in providence that run all the way through the Word of God and under gird its message of salvation. It is essential to understand and believe these six principles in order to have a Biblical understanding of either God Himself or the theology of His sovereign grace. Grasping and applying these truths to your everyday life is the foundation of Biblical hope that leads to true joy in the Lord. It is impossible to have a hopeful sense of security and a heartfelt assurance while living in our present-day, crazy world without a knowledge and appreciation of the sovereignty of God in providence embodied in these six Biblical truths.

Do you personally understand the message of hope and grace that is set forth in the Word of God, or do you have trouble "putting it all together" into one coherent system? Can you relate the truths of the Bible to your everyday life, or do the doctrines of the Word of God seem unrelated to the "real life situations" of your personal world today? This article is written for the express purpose of giving clear and specific help in these two areas. It is designed to help you understand what the Bible really says and means, and then help you to apply that message to the real-life situations in your personal world that you must face.

Six Basic Principles

Let me first list the six principles and then cover them one at a time:

1. God has a definite plan and purpose for the world. Job 23:13; Eph. 1:8-12.
2. God is always in control of all things and is constantly at work in accomplishing His plan. Hab. 1:1-11; Isa. 10:5,6.
3. God controls and uses everyone, even the devil, in working out His plan. Isa. 10:7-11; Ps. 76:10.
4. God punishes people He uses to accomplish His purposes when they act out of wrong motives. Isa. 10:12-16; Acts 2:23,24; Mt. 27:15-26.
5. All things are from God, but the devil is the agent of all evil. II Sam. 24:1; I Chron. 21:1.
6. Although all sickness and affliction are part of God's purposes and under His sovereign control, it does not follow that all sickness and affliction are necessarily chastisement for sin. Job 1:1,6-2:10; 13:15.

Before we look closely at these six principles, let me "kick the needle of your mind" so that you are mentally "in gear." This will test both your basic knowledge of Scripture as well as your ability to apply it to real life situations. We are all naturally averse to hard thinking, especially about anything new. Like the needle in the hi-fi, we go round and round in the same groove. I want to be sure your mind is in gear and that you are really thinking.

Just suppose next Lord's Day morning you were shaving and listening to the radio. The newscaster announced that the night before at exactly midnight every house of prostitution, every pornographic shop, every gambling casino, and every house of any kind of sin very mysteriously collapsed and were totally destroyed. Your reaction would probably be, "Praise the Lord." When you went to Sunday School somebody would ask you, "How do you account for that?"

What do you think happened?" I am sure you would reply, "It was the hand of God. God was surely in that." Of course, you'd be right. The unbelievers may not accept your explanation, and the newspapers and TV newscasters may be inventing all kinds of theories, but you would attribute the whole thing to God and rejoice in His sovereign work.

God or the Devil?

Now just suppose the following Sunday morning you were again shaving and the same newscaster said, "Last night at exactly midnight every single Bible-believing church in the country very mysteriously collapsed and was totally destroyed." I wonder what you would say then? Would most Christians say, "Bless the Lord," or would they say, "It was the devil"?

Why would anyone blame - or rather, credit - God for the first situation (the destroying of the bad places), and then credit the devil with the destruction of the churches? If we understood the Scripture clearly, especially texts like Romans 11:36 and Romans 8:28, we would be forced to acknowledge the hand of God both times. The whole burden of this booklet is to teach us that God sovereignly controls every single thing that happens, whether it be "good" or "bad." God is involved, in one way or another, in every event and each minute detail of that event. This is what we mean by "The Sovereign Providence of God." If this is not true, then we really have no sure hope for our lives in this confused generation.

When people blame all the good on God and all the bad on the devil, they are guilty of an ancient heresy called "dualism." Dualism basically sees God and the devil (good and bad) as two independent and sovereign powers struggling for ultimate control of this world. We earnestly hope "our side" wins, but at times it does not look too good. Unfortunately most Christians today are guilty of believing that very heresy. This is especially true of the charismatic movement as well as anyone else that emphasizes health and wealth as the birthright of every Christian, and blames the devil for everything that hinders our "personal happiness". This is the heresy of dualism at its worst.

"Dualism" Is Heresy

Why do sincere Christians do this? Why do they blame the good on God and the bad on the devil, unconsciously denying the sovereignty of God? It is probably because they are trying to "protect" God. They are trying to make it easier to believe and love Him by exempting Him from anything that appears to be bad and crediting Him with everything that appears to be good. A young nurse who worked in the emergency ward of a hospital told me that when anyone from a particular church in that town had an accident, the pastor would rush down to the hospital. His first words to the victim and family were, "Remember, God had nothing to do with this." I suppose the poor man was afraid the people might desert the faith. If you'll just think that preacher's statement through for a moment, you can see it is ridiculous. The man may have been trying to "protect God," but in reality he was laying the groundwork for despair and unbelief. He was leaving the injured person totally in the hands of either Satan or blind cruel fate. He was unconsciously moving God right out of the picture when the person needed most the assurance of God's sovereign control.

A Personal Example

The other evening a man gave his testimony and told of a friend that had died in a tragic Army plane crash. The officer in charge of the situation was seeking to comfort the mother and said the following:

"It is impossible for this to ever be repeated. It was a freak accident that could never occur again. No one could have predicted or controlled the events. There simply is no explanation."

The mother was a Christian that understood the truths we are talking about, and she replied:

"Sir, you may not believe that God was in that plane with my son, but I do. I have no idea why God chose to allow this to happen, but I know that this was part of His sovereign purpose and His hand was in total control of the plane, the weather, and my son's life."

How different is that mother's theology and hope from that of the preacher in the emergency room!

How Powerful Is God?

Suppose you were the victim of an accident and you were laying in the emergency room in pain. Would that preacher's theology and "words of comfort" help you? How would you feel if someone told you that God had nothing to do with what happened? How long would it take you to start thinking some very serious and logical questions like, "Where was God when this happened? Could He have prevented it? Why didn't He prevent it? Was the devil stronger than God in this situation? Did the devil really cause this accident, even though God was desperately trying to keep it from happening to me?" You would soon begin to wonder whether you were on the wrong side. You might think, and correctly so, that if the preacher were right, then maybe God is not nearly as powerful as you thought He was.

I am sure you can see that if God isn't big enough to control the bad things as well as the good things, then we are in deep trouble. When the bad things get more numerous than the good things (in times like today), then it looks as if we are losing the war. It looks like "our side" is the weak side. Whether you realize it or not, that is exactly what has happened in the hearts of many present-day Christians. This generation has forgotten the sovereignty of God and exalted the sovereignty of man's "free will." We have forgotten the holiness of God and exalted man's personal happiness to be the chief goal and obligation of the gospel. We are so occupied with ourselves and our own pleasure that we literally believe that God exists for the sole purpose of making us "happy" by giving us whatever our sinful and selfish hearts desire. He is viewed as a heavenly bellhop that is ready to carry our suitcase of self-ambition anywhere we instruct Him—we call it "praying in faith." When we do not get what we want, then we either condemn ourselves for lack of faith or lose confidence in God's promises (what we falsely believed were His promises).

The Cause of Modern Despair

The more self rages, the more sin and man's selfish nature appears to triumph, the more it looks like God is losing the war because He is weak and helpless. The despair, frustration, and depression of this present existential generation is in direct proportion to their misunderstanding of the sovereign control of God over all things, and the worst is yet to come. The "God wants you rich and healthy" gospel will prove to have been the primary cause of the forsaking of the faith in this generation. The "loving God" that is supposed to give you anything your heart desires will be despised and ridiculed when He does not deliver the goodies.

If a Christian living in wicked times like today really understands the Scripture, he is like the little boy who was playing baseball. A man came along and said, "What's the score?" and the boy replied, "Forty to nothing." The man asked, "Who's winning?"; the boy answered, "The other

team." The man wanted to be sympathetic and said, "You must be very discouraged." The little boy's face lit up and he said, "Oh, no, we're not discouraged. We haven't come up to bat yet!"

The Christian doesn't look at the newspaper headlines, he doesn't look at the odds or the experts, he is not impressed with either the "doomsayer" or the "false prophet". The child of God with a clear understanding of the Scripture looks to the sovereign God clearly revealed in that Scripture. A knowledgeable believer knows that he is on the winning team regardless of what the world's scoreboard says. He knows that Jesus Christ is Lord regardless of what is taking place either in the world or in his personal life; he is confident that everything will, in the end, be for his own good as well as for the glory of God.

Calvary Was A Day of Victory

Jesus Christ was never more our Lord, and His Father was never more in total control of all things than the day that sinners "with wicked hands" unknowingly fulfilled the decrees of God and nailed our Saviour to the cross. Our blessed Lord was never more in control, never more sovereign and powerful, than He was the moment men cried out in derision, "Where now is your God?" and challenged Him to prove He was the Son of God by coming down from the cross. If you and I had stood under the cross that day we probably would have wondered whether God was really the Father of our Lord Jesus. If He was, why didn't He come and help? Why did the Father allow all of these things to happen to His dear Son? We would have never understood, apart from revelation, that this hour of this day was the specific point in time toward which God had been moving ever since the day that Adam sinned.

There has never been a day when God was more triumphant in His power, in His love, and in His holiness than He was that day at Cavalry. Jesus Christ was not a martyr; God's Son was not a victim. That day at Golgotha was the day of God's victory, not a day of defeat. God was the Master of Ceremonies and controlled every single detail of that event. The world and the devil may have thought that God's plan and purpose had been thwarted, but they were wrong. Calvary was a day of glorious victory for sovereign grace. Sinners gloated and mocked without being aware that their very thoughts and actions were fulfilling God's ordained purposes.

Let us now examine the six principles of the Word of God upon which these glorious truths are built.

FIRST PRINCIPLE: **God Has A Plan**

The first principle starts with God and His purposes. God has a definite plan and purpose for the world. (Job 23:13; Eph. 1:8-12).

We do not want to spend too much time on this first point since we intend to devote a whole booklet to this subject. Let me just outline this truth with several verses of Scripture.

"He is of one mind, and who can turn Him? And what His soul desireth, even that He doeth." Job 23:13

1. God HAS a plan. "He is of ONE MIND ... What His soul DESIRETH...."
2. God's plan is INCHANGEABLE. "Who can TURN HIM....?"
3. God's plan must and WILL SUCCEED.... "even that (which He desires or plans) He DOETH."
4. God's plan INCLUDES ALL THINGS that come to pass.

". . . being predestinated according to the purpose (or plan) of Him who worketh ALL THINGS after the counsel of His own will." Eph. 1:11

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose(or plan). Rom. 8:28

The Pelagian denies that God has a plan. The Arminian denies that the plan is specific and inclusive of all things. The Confessions of Faith say, "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and Holy counsel of His own free will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass." Here are a few other texts on the same subject:

God does everything DELIBERATELY - Psalm 115:3

God does as HE PLEASES - Psalm 135:6

God does all things according to His own eternal knowledge, power, and desire. Isa. 46:10 and Acts 15:18.

If you feel inclined to reject what is being said, I suggest you look up some "tough" verses (Deut. 2:30; I Sam. 16:14, and Romans 9) and try to fit them into your system of theology. A classic illustration of the sovereignty of God in accomplishing His purposes is found in II Sam. 17:1-14:

- vs. 1-3 Good counsel is given.
- vs. 4 Absalom is ready to act.
- vs. 5-13 Bad counsel is given deliberately.
- vs. 14 God purposed Absalom to believe a lie.

As I mentioned earlier, the above is very sketchy and will be filled out later. The subject of God's decrees is really a subject all by itself and deserves a lot more space than we have at this time. We will move on to the next principle.

SECOND PRINCIPLE: **God Is Always In Control**

The second principle grows out of and naturally follows the first principle. God not only has a plan, but He also carries out that plan. The second principle is that God is always in total control of all things and is constantly at work in accomplishing His plan (Hab. 1:1-11; Isa. 10:5,6).

Sometimes God's plan calls for revival and there will be a day of Pentecost when thousands of souls will be swept into the Kingdom of God. There are other times that His plan calls for judgment. Isaiah calls God's judgment His "strange work," but it is nonetheless God's work. Just as there will be a day of Pentecost when thousands are saved, so there will be a day of judgment when a universal flood sweeps nearly the whole human race into everlasting damnation. We must see that God is just as much the author of one as He is the other. Whether it is Pentecost or whether it is the Flood, whether they are the events of Acts 2 or the events of Genesis 6, God is in total control and is working out His own plan. The rain and full harvest, as well as the drought and empty barns, are from the hand of the same sovereign God. We must learn to praise Him under both circumstances (Hab. 3:17-19).

Silence of God

The first text of Scripture we want to look at to show this truth is in the book of Habakkuk. The book of Habakkuk was written primarily to give us the Biblical perspective of history. The prophet deals with a problem very much in evidence today. He tackles the question, "How can a holy God allow wicked men to triumph over the righteous?" Wicked men do triumph, and it is usually at the

expense of the righteous. We could put the question another way, "Why does God sometimes appear to be deaf to the prayers of His people when they cry to Him in time of trouble and confusion?" Let us look at the text for our answers:

"The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see. O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are those that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth. Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvelously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you. For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs." Habakkuk 1:1-6

As you read this, notice in verse 2 that Habakkuk is praying to God and accusing Him of either not hearing or not answering his cries. Habakkuk is pleading for God to send revival, but instead of revival it appears that God does nothing and even allows things to get worse. Habakkuk looks around and sees violence, corruption, and injustice on every hand, and God doesn't seem to be doing anything about it. Habakkuk wants revival to come, but all he sees is increasing lawlessness. Verse 3 states that God forces Habakkuk to look at the awful situation. It is as if God insists that he see and acknowledge the violence on every hand. "I see injustice; I see wickedness in all areas of society; I hear men blaspheming God; and worst of all, it appears that God is doing nothing." In verse 4 Habakkuk concludes that "Therefore the law is slack." He describes the society as one controlled by lawlessness, where the wicked man, if he has enough money, can get away with anything. Habakkuk is describing a situation exactly like the lawless society of today. In the first four verses you see his accusation against God, and "accusation" is the correct word to use. Habakkuk is accusing God of either being deaf or else not powerful enough to hear and answer his prayers. God appears to be either unable or unwilling to do anything about the awful situation in society, and Habakkuk seems to be wasting his time praying.

In verse 5 God answers Habakkuk, and His answer is harder to understand than His silence. Now remember, Habakkuk is praying about God's own covenant people. He is talking about the nation of Israel. I want you to particularly notice in verse 5 where God says, "I will work a work in your days." Then in verse 6 God says, "Lo, I raise up the Chaldeans." God responds to Habakkuk and, in effect, says, "I am very much at work, and I am not deaf, blind, or helpless." Verse 5 is very amusing: God says, "When I tell you what the work is which I am doing, you will not believe me," and sure enough, when God tells Habakkuk what He was about to do, poor Habakkuk is more upset than he was before. He was first perplexed by God's apparent inactivity, but now his major problem is with God's announced activity. God's purposes seem worse than His silence. Exactly what was God about to do? At that very moment God was strengthening the Chaldean nation and moving them to invade the nation of Israel. The Chaldeans would be God's instrument of chastisement upon Israel; that is clear from the text. The Chaldeans are coming, and God Himself is responsible for sending them.

"The Devil Did It!"

Most TV preachers would have said, "That is a lie because God is a good God and something good is going to happen to you today!" It was true that the invasion by the Chaldeans was going to be used by God for good purposes; in fact, the terrible times would be the means of bringing repentance, and thus, the answer to Habakkuk's prayers for revival. However, such a God and such methods would never fit into today's concept of God and His sovereignty. We simply must get into our minds that when the Chaldeans come, it is not "the devil sending them" to mess up

our party; it is God, Himself, Who is sending them. It doesn't matter what the thing is that perplexes us today; if it happens, then God's hand is in it and over it, or it would not have happened. God sent it to accomplish something. We must seek His face and ask Him for grace to learn whatever lesson He is seeking to teach us through this particular trial, instead of blaming it on the devil.

Blaming all of our difficulties on the devil is a backhanded way of strengthening our own self-righteous conceit: "We really must be super-spiritual Christians to be attacked so strongly by the devil." Until you see the hand of God in all things, you will fight both God and the very purpose for which He sends the problem. There is nothing so tragic as listening to a sincere, but misguided, believer blame the devil for the fruits of his own stupidity; he then feels the devil did it just because he was so spiritual! It never occurs to him that he was believing and expecting something that God never promised, and at the same time was refusing to accept his circumstances as having been sent by God. His bad theology keeps him from hearing God speak to him in his trials; and worse yet, it hardens him in his false spirituality.

Do you see what the text is saying? "I (not 'the devil') will work a work," and this work is going to be a work of judgment. Notice again the emphasis in verse 6, "I (not 'the devil') raise up the Chaldeans." God is the One sending that awful nation against His chosen people. Later on in the chapter God shows that He is also going to judge the Chaldeans for what they did, but that comes up just a bit later in another principle.

Because this second principle is so important, and since it is the foundation of everything that follows, let me give you another passage that teaches the same truth. In the tenth chapter of Isaiah we have at least three of the principles we want to discuss. The second principle we have been looking at is found in verses 5 and 6:

"O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets." Isaiah 10:5,6

Instead of using the Chaldean, God is now using the Assyrian. In verse 5 God declares that the rod in the hand of the Assyrian is really His rod. The Assyrian may be the one who is doing the clubbing (verse 15), but behind the Assyrian is the hand and purpose of God. In verse 6 God says, "I will send him (that is, the Assyrian) against a hypocritical nation, against the people of my wrath, I give him a charge." God, not the devil, is sending the Assyrian against Israel. God says, "I am giving this charge to the Assyrian." Now I am sure you see how clearly this passage teaches the second principle that I am discussing. No matter what is going on or who is doing the acting, God is always sovereignly at work. He is in total control and He is working out His own ordained purposes. The most dangerous man to listen to in such times is the "sweet, pious soul" that says, "My God is too loving and kind to do anything like that." Unfortunately, some of these dear people are probably right. "Their God" would not act like that simply because "their God" grew out of their own emotional imagination instead of out of the words of Scripture.

THIRD PRINCIPLE: Everybody Works For God

Here is the third principle. In working out His own plans, God uses everybody, even the devil. Now at first that shocks some people: "What! God uses the devil?" That is exactly right. Everybody, even the devil, serves God's purposes. Now a servant may serve through gritted teeth, and he may hate his servitude; but he is, nonetheless, a servant. So it is with the devil. The devil has never done one thing out of love or obedience to God. He has never done one thing in order to knowingly bring glory to God. Everything the devil does, he does because he hates

God and because he is trying to frustrate the purposes of God. However, in the end, everything the devil does will surely further the purposes of God. If ever there was a born loser, it is the devil, himself. In the final day, it will be shown that the devil never won a single time. And that includes the Garden of Eden!

Let us see this truth set forth in Isaiah chapter ten:

"But this is not what he [the Assyrian] intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations. "Are not my commanders all kings?" he says. . . . "As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols, kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria--shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?" Isa. 10:7-11

The text is very clear; the Assyrian does not have the same thing in mind that God has in mind. In fact, it is perfectly obvious that the Assyrian is not thinking at all about God. All that the arrogant Assyrian is thinking about is destroying another nation and robbing it of its riches. However, totally unbeknownst to the Assyrian, God is the One directing the whole situation. God is moving the Assyrian's mind and emotions. The sovereign Lord is directing the Assyrian's every action in order to accomplish His own purposes of judgment upon Israel.

Man's Wrath Glorifies God

Verse 10 of Psalm 76 is a very interesting verse and illustrates what I am saying. The verse says, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee. . ." and then goes on to say, "and thou restraineth the residue thereof." In other words, man is filled with wrath against God and His authority. God did not put the wrath in man, nor is God responsible for either the wrath or the actions of man that express that wrath. Man's "free will" is 100 percent responsible for both every ounce of wrath and sin in man's heart and for every act produced by that wrath and sin. Nevertheless, God totally controls and directs the man's heart. All of man's wrath that will further God's purpose is allowed to surface and is used and controlled by God for His own ends. However, there is a lot of wrath in man that does not fit into God's purposes, so He puts a cork on "the residue thereof" and does not allow that to express itself. God controls man's wrath both ways. God decides when and how much of man's wrath will be expressed, and He also uses each expression of that wrath to accomplish some specific part of His ordained plan.

"The devil is the hardest working servant that God has!" I remember how astonished I was when I first heard that statement. However, the moment God showed me the truth of His absolute sovereignty, I immediately saw how true the statement was. Granted, the devil does every single thing that he does out of pure hatred; nonetheless, God controls and uses it all to accomplish His own foreordained plan. Perhaps an illustration will help us to see this point.

An Illustration of Sovereignty

A very wealthy man we will call Mr. Rich had a beautiful estate covered with every kind of tree. Mr. Rich did not like women, so he was a bachelor; he could not stand animals, so he had no pets. He treated his trees the way some people treat their pets. He even gave each tree a name. Mr. Rich had one particular tree that was his favorite. Unfortunately, he also had an enemy (we will call him Mr. Evil) that hated him and desired to hurt him; however, the enemy could not find a way to carry out his evil desires. One night Mr. Evil thought up a way to deeply hurt and wound Mr. Rich. Mr. Evil climbed over the fence into the orchard and proceeded to chop down Mr. Rich's favorite tree. The very thought of how hurt Mr. Rich would be when he saw his favorite tree destroyed made Mr. Evil work all the harder. Finally the tree began to fall. Mr. Evil was so excited that he ran the wrong way. The tree fell on him and pinned him to the ground.

Shortly after daybreak, Mr. Evil saw two men walking toward him and the fallen tree. "I know I am caught, and I know I will be punished, but I do not care. I ruined your favorite tree!" The poor man was so filled with pathological hatred that he kept saying, "I ruined your tree! I ruined your tree!" Mr. Rich looked at him and said, "The man with me is a building contractor. I must cut down one of my trees to build a summer house for my parents, and I had chosen this spot right here. I brought this gentleman out to show him which tree we would have to cut down, but I see that you have saved me that trouble. Thank you!"

I am sure that you see the point. Everything the devil does will always, in some way, further God's purposes. We need to remember that God must accomplish His purposes in a world of sin; because of that fact, there is a lot of awfully dirty work that has to be done. God will never get His hands dirty, because the devil will (unknowingly) take care of all the dirty work. Joseph's brothers may do what they did out of hatred, but "God meant it for good to bring to pass. . ." what He had ordained (Gen. 50:15). The Assyrian and the Chaldean may be motivated entirely by lust for power and booty, but God is in charge of their every expedition.

FOURTH PRINCIPLE:
**God Punishes The Very People He Uses
To Accomplish His Purposes**

This fourth principle is one of the most difficult. God actually punishes the very people that He used to accomplish His plan when those people do what they did with a wrong motive and with no thought of God.

Look again at Isaiah ten:

"When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the King of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eye. For he says, `By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of the nations; I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings.'" Isa. 10: 12,13

You can feel the arrogant unbelief and self-sufficiency of the Assyrian. He really believes that he has accomplished everything by his own wisdom and strength. He has no thought of God nor does he acknowledge God in any way. If we were to tell him the truth of what was happening, he would probably burst out laughing, and then kill us for daring to infer there was a Person stronger than himself. The next verse really shows his conceit:

"As one reaches into a nest, so my hands reached for the wealth of the nations; as men gathered abandoned eggs, so I gathered all the countries; not one flapped a wing or opened its mouth to chirp." Isa. 10: 14

Here the pompous king compares himself to a man robbing the nests of helpless birds. He can laugh at the armies and navies of any and all nations because of his superior strength. Everyone is too afraid to even open his mouth and protest, let alone actually try to stop him. Ah, but wait a moment and listen to Someone else speaking. Listen to God tell why the invasion of Israel took place and what is now going to happen to the Assyrian. In verses 5 and 6 God said He would use the Assyrian to punish Israel. In verse 12 God repeats that He had indeed used the Assyrian, but then God adds, "I will punish the King of Assyria for the wilful pride of his heart..." God will now deal with the Assyrian for what he did! Verse 15 tells us why God is angry with the Assyrian, even though the Assyrian has just (unknowingly) completed a job that has been assigned by God. Let these words sink into your mind and heart regardless of what they do to your sentimental theology:

Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it [Who is the ax, and who is swinging the ax in these verses?], or the saw boast against him that uses it [Who is the saw and who is doing the sawing]? As if a rod [the Assyrian] were to wield him who lifts it up [Can the Assyrian control God or alter His purposes?], or a club brandish him who is not wood! [Does a man use, control, or in any way thwart God's actions or purposes?] Isa. 10:15

Cut that verse any way you want and it always comes out the same way. God moved and used the Assyrian to accomplish His plans of judgment, and then He punished the Assyrian for what he did simply because he did it with the wrong motive and with no thought of God at all. Does it sound unfair for God to use people and then punish them for what they do? The failure to see this truth is one of the primary reasons that untaught Christians have such difficulty in believing the absolute sovereignty of God. They totally confuse the so-called "free will" of man with the Biblical doctrine of the "free agency" of man. In their confused minds they think there are only two choices. (1) Either man is totally free [even God's power is limited by man's sovereign will], or else (2) man is a robot [God's sovereignty somehow (?) eliminates man's need to make right choices] and therefore cannot be held responsible for his actions.

God is Sovereign - Man is Responsible

These passages of Scripture that we are discussing will help you realize that both of the above options are false. The Word of God, from beginning to end, teaches that God is absolutely sovereign and controls everybody and everything as He works out His own foreordained purpose and plan. However, the same Bible also teaches that every human being is 100 percent responsible for every one of his actions. Our little pea-brains may balk at that and say, "This is a contradiction!" but the Scripture declares both of these things to be true. Whether I understand either, both, or neither of these Biblical facts, they are still both true simply because God revealed them both in His Word. God is absolutely sovereign and will accomplish every part of His ordained plan; and man is totally responsible for every thought, word, and deed.

Does Isaiah 10:5,6,12 explicitly say that God controlled and sent the Assyrian to invade and punish Israel? Do verses 7-11,15 declare that the Assyrian did what he did out of his own wicked heart and arrogant pride? Do verses 12 and 15 emphatically teach that God is going to deliberately punish the Assyrian for what he did in spite of the fact that what the Assyrian did was ordained and brought to pass by God's power and control?

Let us look at some other texts that teach this same truth. Acts 2:23 is a classic verse that brings together the decrees of a sovereign God and the free acts of responsible creatures. In verse 22 Peter reminds the Jews that Christ had all of the credentials to prove that He was indeed the promised Messiah. Then we read these words: "Him, being delivered by the determinate council and foreknowledge of God.... Acts 2:23a

The N.I.V. puts it like this:

"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge..."

Can you imagine some of the very Jews that several weeks before had cried out, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" hearing Peter attribute the whole event of Calvary to God's absolute sovereign purposes? Those men would have been ready to heave a sigh of relief and say, "We thought that we were guilty and responsible for the death of Jesus, but now we realize that we are not. It was God and not us." They would love to get the monkey of responsibility for that awful event off their backs. Unfortunately, that is exactly what Arminian theology would allow them to do. However, notice the rest of the verse:

". . . ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain [Him]. . ." Acts 2:23b

Peter says, "True, it was God's sovereign purpose to have Christ crucified, but that in no way excuses you! You acted out of the hatred of your hearts and His blood is on your heads!" My dear reader, words cannot be more clear. The verse shows that God used wicked men to accomplish His sovereign decrees, and then held those very men responsible for their wicked deeds. We may not understand how these two things can both be true, but we cannot deny that the Word of God declares them both to be true. Hyper-Calvinism may deny the one and Arminianism may deny the other, but we will believe and preach them both.

God's Decrees and Man's "free-will"

Let me give you this truth in a classic statement from one of the Puritans. "What God sovereignly decrees in eternity, man will always demand in time." Man's "free will" will always freely choose the very thing that God has sovereignly ordained and God's purpose will be fulfilled; just as surely, man will be responsible for his every act of sin. I know of no passage that sets forth this truth as clearly as Matthew 27. The whole chapter is loaded with vain attempts by men to deny personal responsibility. First, Judas tried to deny his responsibility for the death of Christ by pleading Christ's innocence and giving the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders. They, in turn, replied, "What is that to us? That was your responsibility." Was it not their duty to be certain that Christ was, indeed, guilty and worthy of death? Certainly it was!

The story of Jesus before Pilate portrays one of the worst wimps in history. Pilate knew beyond question that Jesus was innocent and yet he deliberately distorted and destroyed law and justice in punishing Him. He then tried to absolve himself from responsibility. However, Matthew makes it clear that this whole event took place because Pilate went along with the "free will" choice of the crowd. Remember, they had the power and authority to choose anybody that they wanted to choose to be released. It was entirely up to them. Notice carefully the words of the text:

"Now at that feast the Governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would." Mt. 27:15 (The N.I.V. says, ". . . a prisoner chosen by the crowd.")

The choice was left entirely up to the "free-will" of the crowd, and the crowd knowingly and deliberately chose a guilty, "notorious" criminal named Barabbas. Over the protests of his wife, his conscience, and both Roman and Hebrew law, Pilate refused to stop the injustice. He caved in to the cry of the mob. When asked what they wanted done with "Jesus who is called Christ," the crowd screamed in unison, "Crucify Him!" Pilate tried every trick in the book to get the crowd to change its mind, but he only managed to make them shout louder, "Crucify him!"

Guilty Because Totally "Free"

Finally Pilate tried to deny his personal responsibility by washing his hands in front of the crowd. He said, "I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility." The people responded without hesitation and gladly took responsibility for the whole thing. They answered in defiance, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" Could anybody be guiltier and more responsible for their acts, than that crowd was? Did anyone ever fulfill in more detail (although totally unknowingly) the secret purposes of God, better than Pilate and that mob did?

Listen very carefully to two simple questions and their clear answers from the verses in Matthew 27. (1) Exactly what did God Almighty eternally decree would happen to His Son? That He would be crucified! Exactly what did that mad crowd vehemently demand to take place? The crucifixion of Christ! What God sovereignly decrees in eternity, man will freely choose in time. (2) What is the only thing that will satisfy the character of a holy God? The shed blood of Jesus Christ! What is the only thing that would satisfy the hate and passion of that crowd? The shed blood of Jesus Christ! What God sovereignly ordains in eternity, man will choose by his own free will in time.

Perhaps an illustration will help us to understand this point. A switchman for the railroad is responsible for throwing a switch that changes the tracks upon which two trains are running. Suppose he got drunk, went to sleep and did not throw the switch when he was supposed to and the two trains collided and over 100 people were killed. Could the man justly be accused of murder? I think we would all agree. However, suppose, totally unbeknown to the drunken man, a flash flood had washed out a bridge. Now, because the man was drunk and did not throw the switch, and also because the bridge was washed out, a terrible train crash was avoided. Would it now be just to reward the man for being drunk and not throwing the switch since his behaviour averted an accident?

Now think clearly. Which time was the switchman the most guilty? When his sinful action caused a wreck or when the same action averted a wreck? The answer is simple. If you judged the man solely on the ground of his duty, or responsibility, then he was just as guilty both times. God may use the worst of sins to accomplish great good, but He still holds the individual responsible for the sin. The Chaldeans, the Assyrians, and the rebels who crucified Christ are proof of this fact. We are not responsible for the results of what God does with our acts; we are totally responsible for the acts themselves. That, and that alone, will be the basis upon which God will deal with us.

Before going on to the next principle, let me emphasize the practical effect that the point under discussion should have in our personal life. We must never feel that we are "pawns" or "victims" of the ungodly. We should always see the hand of our heavenly Father controlling all things. If the wicked prevail, it is only because God has purposed to use it for His own glory and for our good.

In the forty years that I have been in the ministry, I have nearly always been able to get along with the leaders with whom I have worked. Until recently, there was only one exception to that. I worked with one particular deacon that literally hated me; I think he would have killed me if he could have gotten away with it. I used to call him "Shimei" (but only when my wife and I were talking). I am sure you remember Shimei. As David was fleeing for his life after Absalom had taken over the kingdom, Shimei cursed David and said, "You bloody man, you are getting what you deserve." One of David's men wanted to "silence Shimei's tongue forever," but David said, "If God wants me to be cursed, so be it." David recognized the hand of God.

FIFTH PRINCIPLE: **The Devil Is The Agent Of All Evil**

The fifth principle is essential to help us see two things at the same time. There is a real devil, and he is extremely busy. We have seen that God controls all things and uses everybody to work out His ordained purposes. However, even though all sickness and affliction come from the hand of God, it is the devil that is the agent of the evil. In other words, we must see both the hand of the devil and the hand of God at the same time. I have a book entitled 65 Mistakes In The Bible. It was written by a liberal preacher. The only real mistake was that the man ever wrote the book in the first place. Let me give you one of the "mistakes" in the Bible:

"And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah." II Sam. 24:1

"And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel." I Chron. 21:1

It is obvious that both verses are referring to the same event (when Israel and David were punished for numbering the people). It is just as obvious that one passage says God moved David and the other passage says that Satan moved David. Which is correct? If we understand the principle that I am setting forth, then it is clear that both God and Satan were involved. It was God's purpose (unknown to Satan) and Satan's hatred (which God used) that accomplished the

work. God used both David's pride and Satan's hatred to accomplish His own purposes. We must see Satan's hand as the agent who brings the evil, but we must also see God's hand as the sovereign Mover and Controller. Let me illustrate this principle with a story.

God "Sends" All Things!

An elderly lady was praying out loud in front of an open window. She had neither food nor money, and she was pleading with God to supply her with something to eat. Two boys heard her and decided to mock her faith. They went down to the store and bought a loaf of bread and a quart of milk. Then they stealthily put the milk and bread through the window. When the lady opened her eyes and saw the food, she praised God for hearing and answering her prayers. The boys stuck their heads up above the window sill and said, "Woman, you are stupid. God did not send those things. We put them there, and we did it just to prove to you how dumb you are. God did not bring that milk and bread; we brought them."

What would you say in a case like that? The lady smiled, thanked the boys for the food, and then said, "Maybe the devil brought these things, but God sent them." I am sure you see the difference. When the mailman brings an electric bill for two hundred dollars, you do not get upset with him. He did not send it; all he did was deliver it. This is the principle that we must see in all of the difficult things that happen. Thomas Watson was a Puritan with the ability to put great truth into short, concise statements. If you understand the following quote, you have the whole message:

"God always has a hand in the action where the sin is, but He never has a hand in the sin of the action."

It does not matter what happened, where it happened, when it happened, or to whom it happened. If it happened, then God had a hand in it; He controlled it. However, God is not guilty of the sin or hatred in the hearts of men that caused the sin in the situation.

Few people realize how important this particular principle is in our Christian life. We are told in Scripture to "humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God" and to submit to Him. However, we are also told to "resist the devil" and never to yield to his wiles and temptations. The problem lies in knowing and recognizing the difference between these two things. Many Christians, under the guise of "resisting the devil," may well be actually fighting the sovereign providence of God. Other believers, under the guise of piously "turning it all over to God," may be deliberately ignoring their personal responsibility to obey clear principles and fight temptation. Until we learn to see both the hand of Satan and the hand of God, we may be fighting God when we think we're "resisting Satan," and vice versa.

SIXTH PRINCIPLE: All Affliction Is NOT Chastisement

Our last principle strikes at the very heart of the twentieth century misconception of the gospel and its sure promises. Even though all sickness and affliction are under God's control and are part of His purposes, it is NOT true that they are all chastisement for sin. Some affliction is definitely chastisement for sin and is sent to bring us to repentance and effect specific change in us; however, that is not true all of the time. Sometimes God allows His people to suffer just to demonstrate the power of His grace. It is wrong for a Christian to ever feel that God is "getting even" and punishing him when affliction comes. God only punishes sin in one of two places: he either punished it in Christ and the penal debt is totally paid, or else He punishes it in the sinner in hell. Even when affliction comes into our life as chastisement, it is never penal [that is, from God as judge], but the chastisement is always remedial [that is, from a loving heavenly Father]. Our Father teaches us through affliction, but He never punishes (penally) us.

The Case of Job

In the Book of Habakkuk and in Isaiah we saw God using affliction to bring repentance for sin, in order that He might send revival. The book of Job also talks about affliction, but in a totally different sense. Let us look at Job's suffering and learn this sixth principle. First of all, we must be sure we understand how to approach the book of Job. Most people just assume that Job was "self-righteous" and God sent the afflictions to humble him. It never occurs to these people that Job's so-called "friends" kept hammering away at that same thing and both Job and God denied that such was the case. There is no question that Job made some very foolish statements; likewise, we know that in the end he knew God in a greater way than he ever did before. However, these facts do not change the central truth of the book. Notice what God Himself says about Job:

"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil." Job 1:1

I find it hard to believe that anyone can read those words and then proceed to badmouth Job by claiming he was self-righteous. The moment we accept that idea, we make it impossible to understand the meaning of the book and the purpose of Job's afflictions. Lest we think this verse is not actually God's personal evaluation of Job, then read God's very own words in Job 1:8 and the added words in Job 2:3. The first thing we must settle is this: the afflictions sent to Job had nothing at all to do with chastisement for sin. We can go further and say that the biggest single temptation that Job faced, and overcame, was to believe and acknowledge that the afflictions were sent because of sin. That is the heart of the book. The whole point of the contest between Satan and God is over this very question. Will Job continue to admit that everything that happens to him comes from the hand of God, and at the same time still trust and worship God? The answer is clear. Job lost every single thing that he had, but he did not desert his God, even when there were no answers or explanation for what was happening to him.

Challenge and Counter Challenge

The Book of Job opens with a dialogue between Satan and God involving a challenge by God and a counterchallenge by Satan. Notice this in the following verses:

"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them. And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord." Job 1:6-12

In verse 10 it is obvious that Job is securely in God's hands. In fact, Satan's big beef is the hedge that God has put around Job that makes it impossible to get at him. In verse 11, Satan challenges God to ". . . put forth your [God's] hand, and touch all that he has. . ." God responds by saying, ". . . all that he has is in your [Satan's] power; only upon himself put not forth your hand." It now appears that Job is in Satan's hand. Is Job in God's hand or is he in Satan's hand? If you have understood these verses, you see that Job is in both the hand of God and the hand of

Satan. However, you have also seen that the hand of God is over Satan's hand, and Satan's hand can only do what God's hand allows to be done. In reality, Job is just as much in the hand of God when Satan is testing him as he was before. The only difference is the degree to which God has chosen to let down the hedge he had placed around Job.

And It Was All From God!

We all know the next part of the story. A servant informs Job that the Sabeans had stolen all of his oxen and donkeys, and then killed all of the servants. While that servant was speaking, another one arrives and says that fire from heaven had killed all of the sheep and the servants taking care of them. A third servant immediately appears and reports that the Chaldeans had stolen all of the camels and killed those servants. In less than sixty seconds, Job learns that he is bankrupt of everything. Before the third man has finished speaking, a fourth servant runs up with the news that all of Job's children had died when a great wind had destroyed the house in which they were feasting. The next few verses give us Job's response to these awful events:

"Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly." Job 1:20-22

Notice that Job never mentions Satan. Job attributes it all to the hand of God. God had given all of the sheep, oxen, camels, and donkeys to Job, and Job said, "The same God has chosen to take them all away." But what about his children? Job states that both their birth and their death was from the hand of God. Job maintains his confidence in God's sovereign control and His covenant promise, even when his personal world is destroyed.

We must grasp what is going on in Job's life. We must understand that Satan and God are having a duel with each other; that part is clear. However, we must constantly remember that Job, himself, had no way of knowing that fact. The only way we know is because the Bible takes us behind the scenes. We see and hear both the challenge and the counter-challenge. Job neither saw nor heard either. We understand that Job's heart and life was the battleground for the war. Will the grace of God triumph in Job's heart regardless of the tests and trials? We read the story and know what is happening, but Job knew none of this. Job had no way of knowing that his heart was being used in a war between Satan and God. Job did not-and could not-have any logical, rational, or even theological explanation for what was happening to him. All he had was confidence in a sovereign, holy God.

"Round One" [Chapter One] in the struggle went to the power of the grace of God. Job maintained his faith and his integrity. "Round Two" begins with the same dialogue between Satan and God. However, when God challenges Satan the second time, He "rubs Satan's nose" in the fact that Job remained true and faithful despite the awful afflictions. The third verse of Chapter Two furnishes us with the key to the whole book of Job:

"And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause."

Notice carefully what the verse says. First of all, it is God, Himself, Who is "against Job" in sending these afflictions. It is true that Satan has brought the afflictions, but God is the One that sent them. It is vital that we see the second thing in the text. God moved against Job, without any reason in Job. The afflictions were in no way connected with any sin in Job. Job was being

used as a "test model" without him having any knowledge of what was happening. He was demonstrating and proving the sufficiency of God's grace under unexplained afflictions.

One of Job's greatest losses was his theology. Job's friends reminded him that he had believed and taught that God blesses the "good" and judges the "bad"; since that was true, how could Job explain his present situation? Of course, Job could not explain what was happening or reconcile it with his own theology. Someone has said, "The book of Job records the first time that orthodox theology was confronted with a situation that was too big for it to handle." The hymn writer clearly understood that fact when he wrote:

*When all around, my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay,
His oath, His covenant, His blood,
Support me in the whelming flood.*

There are times when everything collapses and we have nothing left to hang on to but God Himself. We hang on to the knowledge of His character and His covenant. All of our theology and all of our experience are not sufficient to understand and explain the ways of God. However, even when we cannot understand, we can trust that God will be holy, righteous, and faithful in all of His dealings with us; that is the place that Job came to. The awful events proved that Job's faith was genuine, and that God was more than worthy of his faith and hope.

Satan now responds to God's "rubbing his nose" in his failure to get Job to renounce his confidence in God's grace. Let us look at the verses which give this second dialogue:

"And Satan answered the Lord, and said, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life. So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes." Job 2:4-8

Satan is still convinced that Job is a hypocrite. He blames God for being unfair in the contest and protecting Job from personal pain. It is one thing to lose "things" and see other people suffer, but it is quite another to experience unrelenting pain day and night. Again, we must note in verse five that Satan, speaking to God, says, ". . . stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones," and in verse six God responds and says to Satan, "Very well, then, he [Job] is in your hands, but you must spare his life." God lowers the hedge a little more but clearly sets the limits. It is still God's hand that is in control, despite the fact that the hand of Satan is the agent of the affliction. Job never doubts that everything has come from the hand of God.

Verse seven shows Job taking a piece of broken pottery and scraping off the secretion from the boils that covered him from head to foot. Boils are extremely painful things. Job could not sit, stand, or lay without pain since his whole body was covered with boils. He sat "among the ashes" because it was the softest thing he could find.

"Curse God and Die!"

Verse nine and ten are very instructive. They give us a picture of the horrible weakness of a faith that goes by sight and the amazing strength of a faith that sees the sovereign hand of God in all things. How would you feel and respond if this had been said to you?

"Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips." vss. 9,10

The remarks of Job's wife are typical of both the unbeliever and the "dear, sweet, sentimental Christian" that thinks entirely in terms of "ooey gooey" love, and rejects reality. The moment we echo Job's words and declare the principles that we have been explaining, and in which Job hoped, we hear an angry response that sounds something like this in today's language: "Are you telling me that you honestly believe that God is in any way connected with these afflictions? I would not love and serve a God like that!" Few people would have the courage to verbalize what they felt, the way Job's wife did, but they are in basic agreement. "I will trust and love God as long as He gives me the goodies [that I need to be happy], but if He throws in that kind of suffering, then I am not about to trust Him!" How often the devil has whispered into the ear of a tried and tested saint this same blasphemy (to curse God and end it all)! What makes this even more painful for Job is the fact that it comes from his own wife.

Now before you judge the lady too harshly, remember that she had to take care of Job and listen to his complaining. That would be quite a chore! All of those children that died were also her flesh and blood, and all that lost wealth was equally hers.

The Essence of Faith

Job's response is classic. "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" Job has no use for the heresy of dualism. God is the author of all things whether they are good or bad. Job would have made a very poor charismatic with his view of sickness and trouble. I doubt that he would have supported any of the "health and wealth" preachers that dominate the TV screen on Sundays.

Now remember, Job still does not understand or have any explanation for the things that are happening to him. All he knows is that (1) God has sent every one of the afflictions, and (2) God must have had a good reason for doing so even if Job could not fathom that reason. That, my friend, is the essence of Biblical faith in a sovereign and gracious God. The highest point of Job's faith is found in that great declaration in Job 13:15. Notice the whole context:

"Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may. Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life into my own hands? Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his faceI know I will be vindicated." Job 13:13-17

Job is absolutely certain that he will be vindicated, and it will be shown that God was not judging him for sin. In the meantime, Job is prepared to trust God regardless of what may come. When he said, "Though He slay me, still will I trust Him," Job is saying, "Though He Who took the sheep, donkeys, camels, all my children, and my health should take the last step and kill me (which He has a right to do whenever He chooses), still I trust Him and believe He has a just reason. I will not believe He is cursing me in these afflictions nor will I give up believing that I shall someday be totally satisfied and vindicated."

Let me digress for a moment and look at the worst part of Job's temptation. The whole purpose of Satan's attack is to prove one single point. Satan is claiming that there is no such thing as a "genuine believer" that truly loves God for His own sake. Men only worship God because it is to their own benefit. Without the "look what I get out of it" motive, men will renounce God and curse Him to His face. That part is easy to see; however, there is an even greater temptation for Job. He believes that God is the sovereign ruler of the world. Job believes that he has faithfully served

God and that he is basically an "upright man". In no sense is Job claiming to be without sin or guilt, but he is claiming that he has loved and followed God with an upright heart. If this is true, then how can Job explain all of these afflictions? Obviously, he cannot even begin to explain why the things are happening.

Trying to Protect God

Job's biggest temptation is to admit to sin of which he is not guilty as a means of getting God off the hook for sending these troubles. God's character as a "fair and honest God" who rewards good people and curses bad people would then be protected. Job would also have a theological explanation for why God had sent these troubles (they would now be judgments or chastisements), and his friends could then sincerely encourage him to expect forgiveness and restoration since he had "come clean" and confessed his secret sin. Of course, Job would be lying through his teeth; worse yet, the devil would win by proving that Job was a liar and a hypocrite interested in getting the "goodie basket" to start replacing the "affliction barrel." It would have been a thousand times easier to yield to the appearance instead of hanging on to reality. It would have been much easier for Job to "protect" God with a few pious platitudes than it was to honestly face the unexplained facts with an undaunted faith in God Himself, and His sovereign, holy character.

Isn't this the great stumbling block of the cross? How can God's dearly beloved Son suffer such agony without His Father so much as lifting a hand to help? No, we did not state the case correctly! How could a holy, righteous, and loving heavenly Father actually inflict the wounds with His Own hands? The inability of the Jews to understand this fact is what made Christ's claims appear to be monstrous blasphemies.

Suppose you had been there the day those wicked and ruthless men stoned Stephen to death. What would you have said if someone whispered in your ear, "God Almighty is in charge of this charade and is using these despicable men to accomplish his secret purposes"? Stephen believed that, and expressed hope and assurance even while he was being unjustly stoned to death.

God's Providence A Mystery

I have no explanation as to why God allows some of His most choice saints to endure persecution and affliction. However, it is both a Biblical and historical fact that such is the case. Job, David, Joseph, and Stephen are clear examples from God's Word; Fanny Crosby, Joni Erickson, and many brothers and sisters in our circle of acquaintances testify to the same truth. It is not ours to question God and ask "Why?", nor is it ours to deny the texts of Scripture that teach a truth we do not like. It is ours to prove God's grace and power by trusting Him even when we cannot understand.

There used to be a rather silly TV commercial about a guy named Mr. Whipple scolding ladies for squeezing toilet paper to prove how soft it was. I never once saw ladies do that in a grocery store, but I did see them squeezing lemons and oranges to see if they were soft and rotten. I believe that is what happens to God's people. He allows the world to squeeze us to see what we are made of. When God opens your heart to His amazing grace, you will open your mouth and begin to testify. You will brag about having found bread that really satisfies your hungry soul and brings real joy into your life. However, sometimes people are skeptical, and they deliberately test you to see how "satisfied" you really are!

When God is doubly gracious and teaches us the truth about His sovereignty, we often open our mouths to brag about a God that controls everybody and every event. We may even ridicule the weak God of the poor Arminian. "Our God is not dependent on man or man's will. Our sovereign God controls every event that comes into our life!" Now the world really becomes skeptical, and

they say, "I wonder if they really believe and trust God's sovereignty. Let's cross their wills and not give them their own way; we'll see how they respond." How do you react when something that you want, and may deserve, is deliberately kept from you by some mean, obnoxious nerd?

If I were a good enough artist I could paint the outside of a glass to look like it was filled with lemonade. However, if I "upset" the glass, then whatever was in the glass would come pouring out. I could have milk in the glass, even though the outside looked like it was filled with lemonade. The process of "upsetting" would bring out the milk.

You and I may paint ourselves with all kinds of Calvinistic labels and ridicule Arminians, but the real test of our faith in a sovereign God is how we act when we are "upset" and do not get our own way. When that happens to you, does sovereign grace or sovereign flesh come pouring out of you? A correct theology is not enough. Job actually lost his theology. In fact, his friends beat him over the head with his theology. "Job, you have taught us that God hears and answers the prayer of a righteous man but refuses to hear the prayer of a sinner, and now when God is silent toward you and all these afflictions have come, you want to maintain that you are righteous! You are a sinful hypocrite that will not own up to his sin, and you blaspheme God with your protesting. How do you reconcile what is happening to you according to your own theology?" How could Job answer such taunts? He could not deny that he had believed and taught exactly what they said, nor could he confess sin of which he did not believe he was guilty. Job could only reply, "I cannot." The only thing left for him to do was shut up and wait on God.

"It Isn't Fair!"

I am often called to counsel with people that have been badly misused. In tears, they say, "But pastor, it was so unfair." I can feel for them. I just recently went through a situation where professing Christians that I loved and trusted deliberately deceived and lied in order to maintain positions of authority. Their behavior was worse than a secular political campaign. It was one of the most difficult experiences of my Christian life. My own heart wanted to cry out, "But Lord, they know that they are lying. It is so cruel and unfair."

What is the only comfort we can take when "it isn't fair"? First of all, we can remind ourselves that God has never indicated that it would be fair! In fact, if we have even the least insight into the Word of God and take its message seriously, we realize that we should not expect the ungodly to be fair.

It was not fair that they put Jeremiah in a pit. It was not fair that Joseph's brethren sold him into slavery. It was not fair that Stephen was stoned, nor that Nero fed thousands of Christians to the lions. Many of the things that have happened to the most godly Christians have been horribly cruel and unfair (see Hebrews 11). However, where did we even get the idea that we should expect the ungodly to be fair? This world is no friend to the grace of God in any sense. Read Matthew 10:16-42, and then dare to ask why it is not fair.

Yes, we will be squeezed, but we will never be "tested above that we are able." If God chooses to allow us to be put into the furnaces, let us endure as good soldiers and exhibit the power of His grace. Let us pray for that grace to believe and say, "Shall we receive good at the hands of God and not bad?" Understanding and applying these six principles of the Word of God will greatly help us to do that very thing.

One of my favorite hymns has caught the truth of what I am trying to say. It is entitled "What-e'er My God Ordains Is Right," and it is found in the Trinity Hymn Book.

*What-e'er My God ordains is right:
Holy His will abideth;*

*I will be still what-e'er He doeth,
And follow where He guideth:
He is my God; though dark my road,
He holds me that I shall not fall;
Wherefore to Him I leave it all.*

*What-e'er My God ordains is right:
He never will deceive me;
He leads me be the proper path;
I know He will not leave me:
I take, content, What He hath sent;
His hand can turn my griefs away,
And patiently I wait His day.*

*What-e'er My God ordains is right:
Though now this cup in drinking,
May bitter seem to my faint heart,
I take it all unshrinking:
My God is true; Each morn anew
Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart,
And pain and sorrow shall depart.*

*What-e'er My God ordains is right:
Here shall my stand be taken;
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine,
Yet am I not forsaken;
My Father's care is round me there;
He holds me that I shall not fall:
And so to Him I leave it all.*

If we could get this truth written on our hearts in such a way that we would always be able to feel its power, we would be "more than conquerors in Christ" in every situation. We would see God's hand in all things and know that sovereign grace and love is controlling all things. The Six Basic Principles we have covered would be like a Rock of Gibraltar underneath our feet. We would sing with great joy, "What ever my lot, Thou hast taught me say, 'It is well my soul.'"

Christian, that is your God. Take courage and have hope. You are absolutely secure in the shadow of His wings. Your Lord has already gained the full victory - and so shall you!

One Last Solemn Word!

If you are not a Christian, then remember, this is the God against whom you rebel. You have consciously chosen to hate His authority and despise His grace. If you have never bowed your heart and will in true repentance and faith to this great God, then of all people, you are both the most miserable and the most foolish. How can you even think you can fight against such a God and ever prevail? Turn to Him in faith and discover that He is just as merciful as He is sovereign.