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God's Tests

By David Servant

EIGHT

God's Sovereignty and Our Authority

In this chapter, I'd like to begin by further considering an important aspect of God's sovereignty, that is, His restraining power over Satan. If we can grasp that concept, we can better understand the spiritual authority that God has (and has not) given to believers. Keep in mind that we have already established that all authority stems from God. Anyone who possesses any authority has it because God has granted it to him (see John 19:11; Rom. 13:1).

Let's start by going back to the beginning, even before God created Adam and Eve. Obviously, no human beings had any authority then. We do know that, sometime before Adam and Eve were created, Satan attempted to gain some authority. He was, however, quickly dealt with. Jesus said that He saw Satan "fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18). That gives us at least a little glimpse of Satan's power in comparison to God's power. Satan was no match for God, which is what you would expect, since God is the Creator and Satan is merely a creation.

When God created Adam, He did give him certain authority, but Adam's authority was clearly limited, not unlimited. God told him, "Fill the earth, and *subdue it*; and *rule over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28, emphasis added). Obviously, Adam was not given absolute sovereignty over everything on the earth. He couldn't control the weather, for example. Essentially, God gave Adam authority to rule over the fish, birds, and animals, and that was it. Moreover, Adam was very much still under God's authority as an under-ruler, as plainly indicated by the fact that God judged him when he sinned. Adam couldn't rule over God and kick Him out of the garden.

The reason I make that point is because some think (erroneously) that when Adam sinned, somehow Satan was able to usurp the authority with which Adam originally was entrusted. Some have even gone so far to say that God has no authority on the earth, and therefore, He *can't do anything* here unless we "give Him permission" by asking Him. Supposedly, they say, God's hands are completely tied because Adam gave his authority to Satan.

The Bible never states, however, that God gave Adam all authority or sovereignty over the earth. Therefore, *if* Satan did actually gain what Adam had, then Satan has never had all authority or sovereignty either. *If* Satan has Adam's authority (and notice I say *if*), then, just as Adam was under God's authority, so too, Satan is under God's authority.

An Old Question Answered

This might help us to answer an age-old theological question: "If God knows what we need even before we ask Him, why does He require that we ask Him? Why doesn't He just give us what we need?"

Some non-sovereignists offer this answer: "Because when Adam fell, he gave his authority to Satan, and God has no authority to act on this earth unless someone on this earth asks Him to do so." That answer seems to make God dependent upon us.

One who is more biblically balanced, however, has a different answer. He remembers, as we learned in a previous chapter, that the primary lesson God was trying to teach the Israelites during all their trials in the wilderness was this: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3). In other words, God was trying to teach His people to look to Him for everything, that He was their source, that they needed Him desperately. I suspect that God is trying to teach us that same lesson.

Why does God require us to ask for what He already knows we need? Because we need to learn, as did the people of Israel, to look to God as our source for everything. Self-sufficiency is prideful, and God hates pride.

Can you see the danger in a theology that promotes the idea that "God's hands are tied, and unless we ask Him, He can do nothing"? It leaves us with the impression that God is dependent upon us, rather than the understanding of what God is *actually* trying to teach us—that we are dependent upon Him. One view makes us proud, the other makes us humble.

God's Self-Limitation

If God is limited in any way, it can only be because He has limited Himself. For example, can God save a person—even if that person has no faith? No, God *can't*—or else He would violate His own word. God is limited in the salvation of people because He has sovereignly determined that salvation is received only by faith. Because of that, we can prevent God from saving us from our sins. He has, for His good reasons, given us authority to reject or receive Him.

Unfortunately, however, some have taken the concept of God's self-limitation to an extreme, propagating the idea that poor God can no longer do anything unless someone uses his faith. God is allegedly helpless without us. Each time, however, that God does something apart from a response to someone's faith, that theory is debunked.

I can't help but think that God is insulted by the very idea that His hands are supposedly tied because of Adam's fall. It is equivalent to saying that before He created humanity, God was too stupid to see what was going to happen, and so He got Himself into a big mess that rendered Him powerless on earth. The Bible, however, plainly teaches that God knew humanity would fall, and that He, in fact, planned for the redemption of humanity even before He created us (see Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:2-23; 4:27-28; 1 Cor. 2:7-8; Eph. 3:8-11; 2 Tim. 1:8-10; Rev. 13:8).

Here is a good question to ponder: If it is true that God lost His authority over Satan when Adam fell, how is it that He has given all believers authority over Satan in their own lives?

Some claim that Jesus could only give people authority over Satan after His resurrection—when He supposedly “got back what Adam lost.” Jesus, however, gave His disciples authority over Satan and demons *before* His resurrection:

And He called the twelve together, and gave them power and authority over all the demons.... And He said to them... “Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and *over all the power of the enemy*, and nothing shall injure you” (Luke 9:1; 10:18-19, emphasis added).

Quite obviously, Jesus was sovereign over Satan before and after the fall of Adam, as well as before and after His own resurrection. God has shared *some* of His authority with the church, and the church should be exercising its God-given authority over Satan. Even if the church fails to exercise its authority, however, God will continue to exercise the portion of His authority that He has not given to the church. You can count on that!

God’s Sovereignty Over Human Government

Let’s take a look at a few scriptures that will give us insight into God’s sovereignty over the earth. Satan isn’t ruling nearly as much as some folks think. Some have mistakenly thought, for example, that the devil has control over every earthly government, and that God has no influence whatsoever. That, however, is simply not the case.

Let’s consider some scriptures that reveal God’s sovereignty over human government. The first two are from the book of Acts. The setting for the first scripture passage is shortly after Peter and John had been put on trial and threatened by the Sanhedrin. They returned to the other believers, and along with the entire church prayed the following prayer:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do *whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur* (Acts 4:27-28, emphasis added).

Surely the disciples didn’t believe that God inspired Herod, Pilate, and the Jews to play their particular parts in the events that led to Jesus’ crucifixion. They did, however, realize that God *permitted* each one to do what he did in order to fulfill His preordained plan for the sacrifice of Christ. As we saw earlier, Jesus Himself acknowledged this very thing when He was questioned by Pilate. When Pilate asked Him, “Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” Jesus replied, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:10-11). Pilate was governor only because God had sovereignly granted him to be governor.

The apostle Paul, in his sermon on Mars Hill in Athens, endorsed God’s sovereignty over human governments when he said: “And He [God] made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, *having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation*, that they should seek God” (Acts 17:26-27, emphasis added). God predetermined the histories of the nations at least to some degree.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel said of God, “It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings” (Dan 2:21).

Daniel later informed Nebuchadnezzar, proud king of Babylon, that he would lose his mind until he recognized “that the Most High is *ruler over the realm of mankind*, and bestows it on whomever He wishes” (Dan. 4:25, emphasis added).

Clearly, God’s sovereign hand plays a part in the rise and fall of earthly rulers and kings. Notice Daniel said that *God* was “ruler over the realm of mankind,” not Satan.

More Proof

In Acts 12:20-23, we read about King Herod delivering an address to the people of Tyre and Sidon. His enthusiastic audience cried out during his speech: “The voice of a god and not of a man!” What happened next? “And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:23). Thus ended King Herod’s reign, and I don’t think anyone would say that it was the devil who killed him. The Bible plainly stated it was an angel of the Lord.

Without apology, Paul declared in Romans 13:1-2:

Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority *except from God, and those which exist are established by God*. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God (Rom. 13:1-2, emphasis added).

From studying other scriptures we know that there is a valid time for civil disobedience, but my main point here is that no government on the earth exists apart from God’s permission. In fact, Paul goes further than that and says that every government is “*established by God*.” That includes even governments that are less than perfectly righteous (which, I would guess, includes all of them). It is quite clear from numerous scriptures that God sometimes uses corrupt and evil leaders as a means of His discipline or judgment upon deserving people. If you’ve ever read the Old Testament you know that.

I am not saying, of course, that God motivates any evil rulers to be evil. Yet God permits evil people to rule, and He uses them at times to fulfill His divine purposes. For example, God used evil Pharaoh, evil Herod, and evil Pilate to fulfill His divine plans. God is using evil rulers even today.

Some years ago, I ministered at a pastors’ seminar in Nicaragua. At that time, that Central American nation was experiencing civil war as the U.S.-backed contras were trying to overthrow the Marxist Sandinista government. I remember asking a pastor who had lived in Nicaragua all his life if he would rather live under the former government, or under the Sandanista government. He expressed that under the former government, the economy had been doing well and times were much better. When I questioned him about the present situation, I learned that inflation was running at an incredible 22,000 percent, and hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans had fled their homeland to look for a better life elsewhere.

Then that Nicaraguan pastor made an incredible statement. He told me that he would rather live under the Sandinista government because, in his words, “Before the Sandinistas, nobody was coming to the Lord. Since the Sandinistas have come into power, everything has gotten worse, but now many people have opened their hearts to the Lord and the churches are growing!”

Isn’t that interesting? God can use even ungodly leaders to bring people to repentance. Isn’t that essentially the story of the history of the nation of Israel? A cursory reading of the

book of Judges makes that clear. Numerous spiritual revivals have been spawned by unwitting, evil leaders.

But isn't God a God of love? Yes, He certainly is, and He may therefore mercifully allow temporal troubles to motivate people to wake up, repent, and be saved from eternal troubles.

Of course, God is also a God of judgment and wrath, as was demonstrated when Herod was eaten by worms and when Pharaoh's army was drowned in the Red Sea. The Bible says that God is love but it also says He is a consuming fire (see 1 John 4:8; Heb. 12:29). Paul wrote, "Behold then the kindness and *severity* of God" (Rom 11:22, emphasis added). When God's mercy is repeatedly spurned, His judgment ultimately falls. Down through the ages, God has sent judgment upon numerous nations who have spurned His mercy, including Israel, by means of evil kings and leaders.

Let's read what God Himself said through Jeremiah concerning how He personally deals with nations:

At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it. If that nation which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it, if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it (Jer. 18:7-10).

You can see that when someone argues against God's sovereignty over the nations, He is arguing against God Himself, because God speaks as one who is sovereign over the nations.

Because God is sovereign over human governments, does that mean we should just sit back and assume that whatever happens in our government is God's ordained will? No, in both Old and New Testaments, God's people are admonished to pray for their nation's leaders (see Jer. 29:7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4). Once again, this teaches us to look to God for everything—even for good government. God may do things in our government because we ask Him.

In addition, we can ask for God's mercy upon our ungodly nation, asking God to give everyone more time to repent. Our prayers may forestall His judgment.

I must also add that if we live in countries where we can vote and be involved in the political process, that means God has given every one of us, as citizens, a certain amount of political authority. We should exercise our God-given authority as good stewards who will one day give an account. Again, all authority is from God. If you have a right to vote, it is from God.

God's Sovereignty and Natural Disasters

Now let's consider natural disasters. Are they the work of God or the devil?

Many years ago, before the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, I traveled to Romania for a ten-day ministry trip. In studying about that country in preparation for my trip, I came across a statement concerning Romania in the popular prayer guide, *Operation World*, by Patrick Johnstone. He stated: "The rate of conversions has noticeably increased since the severe earthquake in 1977."

So was it God or the devil who caused that earthquake?

If it was the exclusive work of Satan (who must then have authority to cause earthquakes), why then doesn't he cause earthquakes all over the world, in every city? Why doesn't he kill us all by earthquakes? And why doesn't he target cities full of people who are serving the Lord rather than cities full of people who are atheists? (If you answer that last question with, "Because God won't permit Satan to send earthquakes to cities where many people are serving the Lord," then you've just admitted to believing in God's restraining power over Satan.)

What does the Bible say? Scripture records several incidents when God caused earthquakes because He was judging wicked people. Isaiah warned Jerusalem's enemies: "*From the Lord* of hosts you will be punished with thunder and *earthquake* and loud noise" (Isaiah 29:6, emphasis added). During the rebellion of Korah recorded in Numbers 16, the earth opened up and swallowed an entire group of sinful people. In the book of Revelation, at least five different earthquakes are attributed to God's judgment. In fact, the last one will be the greatest earthquake the world has ever experienced (see Rev. 16:18-20).

Again, God is a God of judgment as well as a God of love. In fact, because He is love, He must also be a God of judgment, simply because love is fair and just. God must react when sinful, selfish acts are committed—or else He is not loving at all.

Should we think that the God who casts wicked people into hell would *never* judge evil people on earth by means of an earthquake or some other natural disaster? Obviously we should not think so, especially when the Bible is full of scriptures that plainly state God sometimes sends judgment through war, famine, and pestilence (for example, Jer. 14:1-12; 27:8).

Does Satan cause all earthquakes? The earth quaked when God came down on Mt. Sinai (see Ps. 68:7-8). Surely that wasn't the work of the devil. There was an earthquake when Jesus cried out from the cross, "It is finished!" (Matt. 27:51). Was that the work of Satan? An earthquake also occurred when Jesus was resurrected (see Matt. 28:2). Did Satan cause that one?

What about the earthquake in the Philippian jail where Paul and Silas were imprisoned? No one was killed, everyone was released, and a few were saved as a result. Was that the devil's doing? (See Acts 16:22-34. Also see 1 Sam. 14:15, Is. 5:25, Jer. 10:10, and Acts 4:31, for a few other examples of earthquakes which God caused.)

What Jesus Had to Say on the Subject

Along these lines, Jesus mentioned two contemporary tragedies in one of His sermons:

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than the other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:1-5).

Notice that Jesus did not, after citing those two tragedies, say, "Now those things were the work of the devil because God is a God of love." Rather, Jesus used those two tragedies to remind those who survived that they were no better than the ones who perished, and

unless they repented, they would suffer a similar fate. At that time, they were being warned of God's judgment. For the time being, they were receiving God's mercy.

About forty years later, however, judgment did fall upon the Jews and Jerusalem in the form of a holocaust by Roman armies in 70 A.D. That event was clearly a result of God's sovereign judgment upon them according to Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24.

Of course I'm not saying that God inspired Pilate to murder those Galileans or that the falling of the tower of Siloam was an act of God. Pilate acted by his own volition, and perhaps human error was to blame for the tower's collapse. But God obviously *permitted* both tragedies. Additionally, no one can argue that those who perished weren't deserving of death, or else he must argue against Jesus.

Furthermore, I'm not saying that every tragedy is permitted by God because He is judging wicked people. I am saying, however, that we are unbalanced when we believe that no tragedy ever occurs because of God's judgment.

How many modern preachers, if they had lived during Jesus' time, would have commented differently than Jesus did concerning those two above-mentioned tragedies? How many would have preached, "That was the work of the devil, because God is love"? Many would have, because I've heard them say similar words as they explain modern tragedies to their followers.

I recently read about a preacher who ministered to some (and I quote) "angry and confused" hurricane victims who "blamed God for the devastation." This particular preacher told his confused and angry audience that it was Satan, not God, who caused the hurricane. As a result, some "expressed a desire to learn more about the 'true nature' of God."

It's too bad Jesus didn't know about "God's true nature" when He warned His confused audience of their need to repent or perish! Had that modern-day preacher studied his Bible, he would have told his "confused and angry" audience something more like, "You self-righteous people think you deserve better treatment, but God declares that you are sinners. You actually deserve much worse. That same God, whom Jesus said is 'Lord of heaven and earth,' is warning you that He is a holy and wrathful God. Yet, in His great mercy, He sent Jesus to die for you so you could escape His eternal wrath. He is now calling you to repent and receive forgiveness of your sins through the sacrificial death of the Son of God. If you don't, you will one day experience not just a sampling, but a full dose of God's eternal wrath in hell. So repent of your wickedness, believe in Him, and He will forgive you of all your sins and receive you as His very own children."

If we are honest with what the Scriptures say, any person who is not obeying God is worthy of God's instant judgment. In the two tragic examples that Jesus mentioned, it is clear that those who died got what they deserved, and those who survived *didn't* get what they deserved—they were mercifully being given more time to repent. No unsaved person has any promise of being shown any more mercy than he has already been granted, and the fact that he has lived as long as he has is a testimony to God's incredible mercy.

Man-made Suffering

Quite obviously, much of the suffering in the world today is man-made. For example, much of India's poverty can be blamed on Hinduism. Because Hindus believe in reincarnation, it is considered immoral to kill animals, and consequently, rats eat tons of grain annually that could feed multitudes of hungry people. If India would embrace the

truth, fewer of their people would be malnourished because they could eat the cows, chickens, and goats that God intended for them to eat. In addition, the rodents could be exterminated, making more grain available to the population.

Many famines in the world today are a result of government policies, civil unrest, inequitable trade policies, lack of knowledge and greed. Disobedience to God's laws always brings suffering. Perhaps these situations could sometimes be better referred to as God's passive judgment rather than His active judgment.

When Tragedy Happens to Christians

What about Christians who experience tragedies? The answer to that question is not quite as simple. We must first determine what kinds of tragedies we are talking about and what kind of Christian is experiencing a tragedy. If we are talking about a Christian who is in disobedience, then we are talking about a Christian who, unless he repents during the time he is being shown mercy, is in danger of experiencing God's discipline. Paul referred to those Christians in his first letter to the Corinthians, stating that some of them were sick—and some had even died—because of God's discipline or judgment. If you are a disobedient believer, I encourage you to repent.

If we are talking about tragedy striking an obedient believer, then we need to classify certain kinds of tragedies. Many obedient believers have suffered persecution for their faith to the point of torture and martyrdom. That is certainly a tragedy from a human standpoint, but it is not one from which we are promised deliverance. The Bible, in fact, promises us that we will be persecuted (see 2 Tim. 3:12). Church tradition states that every one of the apostles died for his faith. Although the apostle John may be an exception, he was still exiled and severely persecuted.

Millions of Christians have been martyred, and many more have suffered harsh persecution. There are times when God has miraculously delivered His people, but other times He has not. That is determined by the sovereign will of God. (We will further examine the subject of the persecutions of Christians in a later chapter.)

Another kind of tragedy that obedient believers have suffered is chronic sickness and disease. Unlike with persecution, however, we do have many biblical promises that we can trust for deliverance from illness. It seems clear from Scripture that sickness is in a special class all by itself when it comes to suffering. For example, James wrote:

Is anyone among you *suffering*? Let him pray.... Is anyone among you *sick*? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick (James 5:13-14, emphasis added).

It is unfortunate that some teachers have taken scriptures that apply only to Christians suffering persecution and have erroneously tried to apply them to Christians suffering sickness. Jesus didn't always deliver the persecuted. He never, however, turned away anyone who came to Him for healing. It may surprise you to learn that one tenth of all that was written about Jesus in the four Gospels concerns His healing ministry. If you are chronically ill, there is hope for your healing. I encourage you to immerse yourself in Scripture, and in particular, in those passages that build your faith for healing. (And even if you are not healed in this life, praise God that you will receive a new body one day!)

What about calamities, wars, and natural disasters as far as the obedient believer is concerned? Certain scriptures encourage us to believe that no calamity, war, or natural disaster that is permitted because of God's judgment will fall upon an obedient believer. For example, when Jerusalem was destroyed and hundreds of thousands perished during the Roman holocaust of 70 A.D., there was not one obedient believer in the city because Jesus had warned them so they could escape (see Luke 21:20-24). Also, Noah and his family were saved during the great flood, and all the children of Israel were protected in the land of Goshen when God sent the plagues upon Egypt.

The Bible provides other encouraging examples of God's pre-warning believers of coming calamities in order that they might avoid them. For example, in Acts chapter 11, we have record of a prophecy given by Agabus warning of a soon-coming famine, which took place during the reign of Claudius. Consequently, believers in Antioch (where Agabus delivered his prophecy) sent a contribution "for the relief of the brethren living in Judea" (Acts 11:29).

When Paul was on a ship transporting him to Rome, God tried to warn the ships' captain through Paul that they would lose their ship and lives in a great storm, but the sailors didn't listen. As a result, they suffered the consequences—although God did mercifully protect the lives of everyone on board (see Acts 27:9-26).

Let me give you an example of God's protection in my own life. When I was a young Christian many years ago, I had a habit of picking up almost every hitchhiker along the road so I could practice sharing the gospel with a captive audience. One day, however, when I was driving on an interstate highway through a certain city, I heard what seemed to be an audible voice say to me: "Man with a beard—don't pick him up." Within a half a minute, I drove around a bend, and there underneath an underpass was a man with his thumb out, and he had a beard. I've always wondered what would have happened if I had picked him up. Jesus did promise that the Holy Spirit would "show us things to come" (John 16:13).

The late Demos Shakarian, founder of the Full Gospel Businessmen International, tells in his biography of how God warned his Armenian grandfather and fellow Christians of a coming holocaust in Armenia by means of an illiterate "boy-prophet." Many of the believing Christians fled the country and, in 1914, one and a half million Armenians died at the hand of the Turks.¹ No Christian who obeyed God's warning suffered in that tragedy.

I'm so glad that God cares for His children. Still, I know that I don't have all the answers. I can only offer as many as I've found in Scripture. So we'll have to trust God regardless of what comes our way. I've learned that when we face what we don't understand, we should fall back on what we do understand. Nothing that can happen to you can change the fact that Jesus died for you. Nothing can separate you from His love (Rom. 8:38-39).

¹ See *The Happiest People on Earth*, pp. 20-22.