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God's Tests

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Part 2

Who's in Control Here?

SEVEN

Two Views on God's Sovereignty

Who *is* ultimately running the world? Is God truly sovereign? What authority does the devil possess? What role do chance and human choice play in the events and outcomes of our lives?

Those are all important questions, and if we are to understand much about God's tests, we'll need the answers. That will require that we do more than simply skim over the surface of the Scriptures. We'll have to plunge into the deep.

So take a deep breath. Let's stay under for a while as we explore some beautiful revelation about God's sovereignty from Scripture.

Diving In

The Bible certainly affirms that God is sovereign: "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and *His sovereignty rules over all*" (Ps. 103:19, emphasis added). Paul refers to God as "the blessed and *only Sovereign*, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15).

Although God is sovereign, possessing all authority, we would be wrong to conclude that He has never given limited authority to other persons in the universe, or that He has not granted His creatures the privilege of making their own decisions. Scripture tells us that He has done both. Some to whom He has granted authority have abused their authority. Many whom He has allowed to make their own choices have made wrong choices. Consequently, not all that happens on earth is God's *perfect* will. Yet everything that happens must be within His *permissive* will, or else He is not supremely sovereign.

If God is sovereign, possessing all ultimate authority, then anyone who possesses authority anywhere in the universe—including human beings or Satan—only has it because it has been granted to him by God. There is no other way for anyone to gain any authority.

If there were, we would be forced to conclude that God is not all-powerful and all-knowing—as the Bible tells us He is.

If authority was taken from God by force by one of His creatures, then that creature was more powerful than God, and God is not all-powerful. Similarly, if authority was swindled from God by one of His creatures, then that creature was smarter than God, and God is not all-knowing because He was fooled.

Thus, anyone who has any authority is under God's authority and is operating with His permission whether he realizes it or not. For example, Pilate said to Jesus, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:10-11). Likewise, Paul wrote that "there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Rom. 13:1).

Hyper-Sovereignists and Non-Sovereignists

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, two extreme views often surface whenever the subject of God's sovereignty is discussed. I refer to the adherents of those two extreme views as the "hyper-sovereignists" and the "non-sovereignists."

The hyper-sovereignist has concluded that God causes everything that happens, completely ignoring Satan and the wills of human beings. The hyper-sovereignist makes statements such as, "You can never be certain of what God will do because He is sovereign, and He can do anything He desires." Although God can certainly do anything He desires, He will not do what would violate His own character or Word. The hyper-sovereignist, however, leaves the impression that God might actually transgress His own Word or fail to keep His promises. That, of course, is entirely incorrect. God will never break His Word. He always keeps His promises. If God tells you what He will do, you can be sure He'll do it.

On the other extreme, the non-sovereignist thinks that God has very little or no control over what is occurring on this earth. Things went so wrong in the Garden of Eden that, ever since, God has been up in heaven watching the world from a distance, waiting patiently for the Millennium when He will finally be able to control the earth again—once Satan is bound. Some non-sovereignists are even convinced that if God does do something on the earth in this age, it is only when He is *given the right* by someone on earth who prays. This view, also, is entirely incorrect according to the Bible.

As we study the Scriptures, we'll see how both hyper-sovereignists and non-sovereignists need to learn something from each other.

Back to the Boat on Galilee

Let's consider again the story of when Jesus and His disciples faced a fierce gale as they were crossing the Sea of Galilee. We'll view the scene from both standpoints—the hyper- and non-sovereignist's.

Had there been a hyper-sovereignist in the boat that day, he would have declared, "We know that God is in control, and so we trust that He has a purpose for sending this terrible storm. Let us not question Him. It seems strange to us that God would want all of us to drown today, but we know that 'God's ways are higher than our ways.' Let us, then, humbly accept His will for us."

The non-sovereignist in the boat would retort, "I'm sorry, but you are quite mistaken. God is good, and He would never send a storm to cause us all to drown in this lake. God

has nothing to do with this situation. This storm must be from Satan; so let us rebuke the devil and overcome this circumstance.”

Whose theology is correct? Actually, both are partially right and partially wrong.

Was it God’s will for Jesus and His twelve disciples to drown that evening on the Sea of Galilee? The hyper-sovereignist thought so. The non-sovereignist, however, disagreed, and he was correct, as all of us know who have read the end of the story. It was not God’s will for Jesus and His disciples to drown that evening on the Sea of Galilee.

Who caused the storm? The hyper-sovereignist thought it was the sovereign God; the non-sovereignist thought it was the devil. One of them must be correct.

Some readers may think that neither is correct, believing that severe weather is—as is often said by preachers and theologians—only “a naturally occurring phenomena in our fallen world full of sin.” That explanation, however, is just a camouflaged admission of ignorance, as it raises more questions than it answers. Does severe weather occur simply because of the *presence* of sin on the earth? Does sin by itself generate hurricanes and tornadoes? If that is the case, then severe weather is man-made. That idea is absurd, of course.

So those who say that severe weather is “just a naturally occurring phenomena in our fallen world of sin” must mean that severe weather is a result of God’s *judgment* upon this sinful world. If that is what they mean, then they are really saying that God is responsible for severe weather. If it is a manifestation of His judgment, then it occurs because of His decree.

Some would argue that severe storms are “just the forces of nature at work,” but that is a similar explanation that is no explanation at all. Who created the forces of nature? It was God. Even if those forces act randomly, it was God who determined or permitted those forces to act randomly, and so He is responsible.

So, either God, the creator of all nature, still has control over the forces of nature, or Satan somehow gained control to some extent. Therefore, either God or Satan was responsible for the life-threatening storm on the Sea of Galilee that evening. So who was it?

Does Satan Have Control of the Wind?

The fact is, the Bible most often gives *God* credit for control of the wind, not the devil. Only once in Scripture is Satan given credit, and he first had to receive permission from God to cause a “great wind” that took some lives (see Job. 1:12, 19). At all other times when credit is given, it is given to God (see, for example, Gen. 8:1; Ex. 10:13, 19; 14:21; 15:10; Num. 11:31; Ps. 48:7; 78:26; 135:7; 147:18; 148:8; Jer. 4:11-12; 10:13; 51:16; Ez. 13:13; Amos 4:9, 13; Jonah 4:8; Hag. 2:17; Rev. 7:1). Here are a few scriptures not included in that list that you can read for yourself:

Thou dost rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, Thou dost still them (Ps. 89:9, emphasis added).

Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters; they have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. *For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.* They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the depths; their soul melted away in their misery.... Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distresses. *He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed (Ps. 107:23-29, emphasis added).*

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, *who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar*, the Lord of hosts is His name (Jer. 31:35, emphasis added).

And *the Lord hurled a great wind on the sea* and there was a great storm on the sea (Jonah 1:4, emphasis added).

From looking at all of Scripture, we can only conclude that either God caused the storm on the Sea of Galilee or Satan caused it with God's permission. Therefore, the hyper-sovereignist is certainly correct in saying that, ultimately, God was in control of the situation that evening.

On the other hand, the non-sovereignist is correct in asserting that God wants us to use our faith to overcome trying circumstances. That's a lot different than just accepting them as God's final and ordained will—as the hyper-sovereignist thinks.

Yet the non-sovereignist has perhaps missed something that the hyper-sovereignist has at least partially understood: The non-sovereignist doesn't see any divine purpose in His circumstances. In the boat that day with Jesus, the non-sovereignist didn't take into consideration that it was God who was leading them across the Sea of Galilee. He didn't recognize God's foreknowledge of the gale or the fact that God will use adversity to cause our faith to grow.

Arriving at a Balanced Understanding

As a young Christian, I was greatly influenced by the hyper-sovereignist viewpoint. I thought that anything and everything that happened to me was God's ordained will, and my job was to learn and grow through the difficulties that the Lord allegedly sent my way. I read certain books about being "fully surrendered to the Lord." Although the authors didn't realize it, they actually taught me to surrender to Satan's attacks, attacks that God wanted me to resist and overcome.

Some years later, I was influenced by the non-sovereignist view and was swayed to believe that there was absolutely no divine purpose in any negative circumstance. If something was negative, it was from the devil. Period.

Both viewpoints are unbalanced and lead to extremes.

Because the hyper-sovereignist often does not recognize Satan's "fiery darts," he is an easy target. The devil must delight as the hyper-sovereignist humbly accepts a demonic assault as being sent from God. He is "destroyed for his lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6).

On the other hand, the non-sovereignist, who laughs at how deceived the hyper-sovereignist is, is a little deceived himself. He rejects the idea that God might lead someone to a place where he will experience difficulties—as He did the Israelites after their exodus. He laughs at the idea of learning lessons from God when difficulties strike. He ignores scriptures about spiritual growth stemming from hardship.

The Theological Pitfalls of the Non-Sovereignist

The non-sovereignist's theology may lead him to extremes in understanding God's judgment or discipline upon sin. In his mind, if a Christian sins and is, for example, disciplined through sickness as a result (a biblical concept; see 1 Cor. 11:28-32), the non-

sovereignist thinks God played no sovereign role in the suffering. Rather, that person “opened the door to the devil” or “got out on the devil’s territory.”

Most Christians who use such expressions are trying to help others see that God is a God of love, and that we, not God, are responsible for the consequences of our sin. When such expressions are accepted apart from a scriptural balance, however, the result is serious doctrinal error, because God’s discipline upon sin is annulled. Suddenly, we have a God who *doesn’t* punish sin, and we’ve created a devil who *does* punish sin. The non-sovereignist who is trying to defend God’s character has actually defamed it, detracting from His holiness. Additionally, he has made Satan look somewhat holy, as he, acting on his own, apart from God’s authority, is allegedly putting sickness on people when they sin, which might motivate them to repent! Satan suddenly seems more like God than God!

So what is the truth of the matter? The truth is that God may permit Satan to afflict with sickness one of His children who has persisted in disobedience. God’s objective is to bring His disobedient child to a place of repentance. (I am not saying, of course, that all sickness is a manifestation of God’s judgment or discipline. According to Scripture, however, such a possibility certainly exists.)

God can *permit* Satan to act or *restrain* him to any degree. Satan can do nothing except what God permits.

A Few Objections Answered

Some readers might object, saying, “But God has given *us* responsibility to resist the devil, and we must not wait for God to do something about the devil—we must resist him ourselves.” I agree. God has indeed given believers responsibility and authority to resist the devil, and we should resist him (see Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8-9).

That fact, however, does not detract from the fact that Satan can do nothing except what God permits him to do. God has not abdicated to believers *all* of His authority over Satan, making Himself helpless or dependent upon us. God has authority over Satan that He has never given to believers. The authority He has given to us is limited.

Again, some readers may object: “God has given us *all* authority over Satan, not just *some* authority!” But think about that for a moment. If you have *all* authority over Satan, why don’t you banish him from the face of the earth? Why don’t you cast him into the abyss for one thousand years, just as we are told God will do during the Millennium? The reason you don’t is simply because you can’t—because your authority over Satan is limited.

God has given us responsibility and authority over Satan as far as *our own lives are concerned*, as is clear from Ephesians 6:10-17, James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:8-9. In all these scriptures we are told that we should resist Satan. That is a part of God’s sovereign plan. It’s our responsibility to use our God-given authority to resist the devil in our personal lives. We are entirely wrong, however, if we conclude that God no longer has any authority over Satan or that He has given all His authority to the church.

An example would be if I had a million dollars and gave one hundred dollars to you. Now that \$100 is your money. I can’t spend it for you because it’s yours, not mine. If you want to waste it, that’s your business. Likewise, God has given us some of His authority, and now it’s *ours* to use—not God’s. That doesn’t mean, however, that God no longer has any authority over Satan. God is exercising His authority over Satan and restraining him every day. He is sovereign just as the Bible says He is.

Scriptural Proof of God's Sovereignty Over Satan

Allow me to prove this from Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we read:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, *who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able*, but with the temptation will provide a way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13, emphasis added).

Paul promises that God will not *allow* us to be tempted beyond what we are able. We know, of course, that Satan is the tempter, not God (see Jas. 1:13). God, however, restrains Satan to the degree that He “will not allow” him to tempt us beyond what we are able. We see that Satan can do nothing more than what God permits.

That one verse in 1 Corinthians helps us to understand where our authority ends and where God's begins. None of us have any authority to control the degree of temptation that Satan sends. In fact, we have no authority to stop *any* degree of temptation from the devil. If we had unlimited authority, we could command him to never tempt us again. But only God has that much authority. We do have authority to resist temptation and not be overcome by the devil.

What the Devil is the Devil Doing Here?

Have you ever wondered why God even permits Satan to be on the earth, or why God permits Satan to tempt anyone? When God cast Satan out of heaven, why didn't He banish him to some other galaxy? Why this planet? Or, if there was some reason that Satan *had* to be banished to the earth, then why did God place humanity on the same planet? Couldn't God have arranged things so we wouldn't have to share space with the devil?

To gain a glimpse of at least part of the answer, consider what the Lord said through Moses in Deuteronomy 13:1-3:

If a prophet or dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, “Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; *for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul* (emphasis added).

I doubt that any of us would claim that God was the one who inspired that false prophet or gave him the ability to work a false sign or wonder. Surely that prophet was empowered by Satan, not God. Yet God permitted that Satan-empowered, false prophet to arise in order to test His people.

So here is at least a partial answer to the question of why Satan is on the same planet and why God permits him to tempt us: It is so God might know what is in our hearts. God is testing all of us. Do we love Him enough to obey Him and resist Satan's temptations?

In earlier chapters, we considered numerous examples of God's tests as recorded in Scripture, so this should come as no surprise to us. God uses Satan's temptations to test people. This agrees perfectly with what we have already studied in Judges 2 and 3, where

God used Satan's temptations as a test. In addition, this harmonizes perfectly with the incident when Jesus was also tested through Satan's temptations.

A true-blue non-sovereignist never sees God's hand in anything other than the blessings he receives. A biblically-balanced sovereignist, however, sees God's sovereignty in all things. Even Satan's temptations are more than just temptations; they serve a higher purpose—as tests from God.

Please don't misquote me. I never said that God and Satan are working together or that they are on the same team. I only stated that God will use Satan's temptations as His own tests, and that is quite plain from the scripture we just read in Deuteronomy 13.

God test us, at least in part, because He wants to bless us and make us a greater blessing to others. He promotes those whom He can trust. If we can't resist the small temptations that come with small blessings and small responsibilities, how can God trust us with bigger blessings and greater responsibilities, blessings and responsibilities that will surely attract greater temptations?

If, for example, God entrusts us with a little money, and we yield to Satan's temptation to share none, how can God trust us with more money? He can't, because we failed to pass His small test, administered via Satan's temptation.

How sobering it is to realize that our reaction to temptation reveals our love, or lack of love, for God.

In the next chapter, I have more to share with you on the subject of God's sovereignty and His restraining power over Satan. Keep reading to learn more, especially if you have objections. I hope to answer them all!