

God's Sovereignty And The Church's Condition (Part One)

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Through the years, a number of people scattered among the many churches of God have sent me papers examining whether God or Satan scattered the church. These papers show that a sharp division exists among God's people on this point. From the papers that have crossed my desk, most believe that God permitted it but did not instigate it.

On a related issue, a number of letters ask that, since all the spin-offs of the Worldwide Church of God have the same basic doctrines, why am I not taking steps to merge the Church of the Great God with one or more of the others? In these papers and letters run a common thread—one we all need to explore and about which we perhaps need to adjust our thinking.

The common thread is the role God performs in the world, the church, and our individual lives. If we do not know how God interacts with His creation, we may have the wrong perspective on a great deal of what is happening. We should give it ample attention because, without this consideration, we will lack an absolutely vital understanding of God's overall operations. Without it, we will function in a weakened state of faith. This can devastate us spiritually because it will produce doubt, as well as confusion and lack of perseverance.

This two-part article hopes to add not only understanding, but also appreciation for the magnitude and intimacy of God's dealing with the world, the church, and individuals.

Reactive or Proactive?

Overall, this article is a study of faith. Increasing our knowledge of God is important to faith's growth. However, the subject focuses on a specific aspect of faith that involves God's sovereignty and the present condition of the church.

Insufficient knowledge of God has the ability to produce a fruit that can be stated in a general accusation: Our common perception of God in His role as Sovereign Ruler is that He is essentially *reactive* rather than *pro-active*. Simply put, God waits until we do something before He does something. "We" can include mankind in general, the church as an institution, or individual sons of God.

Another way of explaining this is to compare His function with common occupations. For instance, we tend to perceive Him more as a policeman looking for a crime to happen than as an officer directing the traffic onto a certain avenue. We perceive Him more as a test proctor or hall monitor than as a teacher preparing students to take their places as leaders in society. We see Him more as a functionary in a quality-control department than as the chief operating officer of a huge and successful corporation. We are inclined to understand God as One who in ages past designed and created a marvelous instrument but now more or less passively watches it run. In sum, we picture God more as an observer than as the Creator who causes things to happen.

This kind of thinking arises, in part, because we who grew up in Israelitish nations put so much emphasis on free moral agency. Do we have free moral agency? Absolutely, but if we overemphasize

its importance to the whole of God's plan, we can be subtly influenced to put God in the background of our salvation and destiny and ourselves in the driver's seat. In addition, it can lead us to give far more credit for the outcome of events to humans who seem to be in control—even in national or international affairs. This is wrong.

Genesis is the book of beginnings. It lays foundations for what follows in the rest of the Bible. How does Genesis introduce God to us? The very first chapter of the very first book shows God actively creating a suitable environment in which mankind can live and flourish. This is no accident. It is done by design so that the initial impression we receive when beginning to study the Word of God is not of Him standing around observing but actively working—creating.

This is supremely important. The Bible shows God as the Mover, Shaker, and Shaper of things pertaining to man's purpose. We do not see Him contemplating; He is actively performing His occupation. He creates. Quickly—in a scant 26 verses—the narrative penetrates to the major purpose behind all God's creative activity: "Let Us make man in **Our** image." First, God prepared the physical environment suitable for the next step: His ongoing creation of forming and shaping man in the image of His holy, spiritual character.

Does God Plan Ahead for His Spiritual Creation?

In Acts 15:14-18, the apostle James makes an astounding series of statements following Peter's address to the assembled elders:

Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: "After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name," says the Lord who does all these things." Known to God from eternity are all His works.

Notice how clearly God states that *He* initiates His works through men. Acts 10 relates the story of the conversion of Cornelius and his house. Neither Peter, whom God sent, nor Cornelius, who received him, knew of the other's existence. God, working in both men, opened the door and brought them together.

God Himself pledges to rebuild the tabernacle of David. Certainly, He works through men, who, on the surface, appear to observers to be doing the work. Nevertheless, it is the invisible God who initiates and enables the rebuilding by determining when it will begin, who among men will work on it, and how completely they will finish it. He also gives gifts to those concerned to bring it about. Surely, God activates, sustains, and completes.

The Living Bible renders verse 18 as, "That is what the Lord says, who reveals His plans made from the beginning." How carefully crafted are His plans? How detailed are they? Has anything been left to chance? One thing is clear: He is a Creator who knows where He is going and has known from the outset of the project. He made His plans, and they proceed as and when He planned. When we begin to think of what James says here in terms of all the nations of the earth as well as the church, we are considering events of tremendous magnitude involving billions of people and millennia of time.

But we need to make this more personal.

Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4-5, ". . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. . . ." *Predestined* means "marked out in advance" or "appointed beforehand." Verse 4 indisputably says this occurred "before the foundation of the world." When we combine this with Acts 15:18, this event must have occurred some time before what happens in Genesis 1:2-26.

Is this a generality that predestines only the existence of a church and not the individuals who would comprise it? The overall impression of the context in combination with other passages suggests an answer of "No," but it is not certain. Herbert W. Armstrong took it as a generality, which is indeed a safe conclusion. Regardless, Paul's words describe a Creator who is not only actively working toward an ultimate end, but also toward specific intermediate accomplishments, such as the church. He is the One in control, moving things in whatever direction they need to go. It begins to become clear that events relating directly to God's purpose of reproducing Himself do not happen randomly. One should not have the impression that God sits at the controls in heaven constantly making adjustments to accommodate for what He did not foresee we would do down here.

In I Peter 1:2, Peter comments on God's operations in this sphere of His work: ". . . elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied." *The King James Study Bible* has an interesting note about the intent of this verse: "This is not merely advanced knowledge of, but when connected to 'before the foundation of the world,' it means God determined in *eternity* past to bring certain *ones* of His creation into a special relationship with Him and each other at specific times" (emphasis added).

Before attending Ambassador College and becoming a fulltime minister, I worked for sixteen years in a steel mill. My responsibilities took me to the construction of new buildings and the maintenance of typical large steel mill machinery. As we erected a new building, we followed blueprints made by architects, engineers, designers, and draftsmen. Every detail of what we were building—where it sat on the property, perhaps ten thousand individual dimensions, water pipes, sewer lines, specifications of the foundation, composition of the flooring, steel columns, girders, electrical lines, conduit, brackets to support pipes, roofing materials, the color and composition of paints both inside and out, etc.—was determined, designed, and drafted on the plans before the actual construction began.

In principle, is this not a human form of God knowing the end from the beginning? Does this not compare to God appointing beforehand or predetermining when, where, and who does what? If men can do this on a small scale, why cannot God do this on an immensely more massive and complex scale with His vastly superior mind? Is not God's intellect of such magnitude that He can easily do this (Romans 11:33-36)? Does He not have sufficient time to plan, prepare, and bring these things to pass (Isaiah 57:15)? Dare we even think of Him as getting tired or wandering from the purpose He established for Himself (Psalm 121:3-4)?

Even so, do not get the impression that He does not react to how we use our free moral agency. If He did not react, chapters like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 would not be necessary, for in these chapters He definitely says, "If you do this, I will do that." They obviously depict Him reacting to our choices. He contemplates and judges what we do. However, this in no way negates the fact that the Bible reveals Him as the Prime Mover in His creation, always in control even in what we consider bad circumstances that directly affect us.

How Closely Is God Watching?

In Matthew 10:29-30, Jesus gives us an unquestionable illustration of this: "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered." God deemed this promise important enough to repeat in Luke 21:18, where the only difference is the context in which Jesus uses the illustration. There He promises that God will closely watch over us during periods of persecution. The scope of God's attentive care of His creation is so great that even an insignificant sparrow cannot die without Him being aware and approving that such a thing should happen. How awesome!

Isaiah 49:14-16 provides us with a touching and encouraging insight into God's watchful care of His children:

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me." "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands. Your walls are continually before Me."

The Bible sometimes uses Zion as a type of the church. From that perspective, we can see the church in its present dilemma saying the words of verse 14. God's reply declares the intimacy of His interest and watchful care. He is constantly looking out for our best interests in every situation. His being the Prime Mover in His creation does not eliminate our free moral agency. Nor does it negate God making judgments and reacting to the quality of our choices.

Does it not say in Matthew 6:8 that He knows what we need before we ask? Knowing these things, could such a massive scattering of His church occur without God being aware of it and, at the very least, allowing it to occur? Understanding His power over His creation, can we possibly believe that anybody could force such a thing on Him?

Because God is moving the world's nations and the church toward the end He has in mind, we are forced to react while striving to understand where He is headed. He knows exactly where He is headed. As Paul says, we look through a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13:12, KJV).

The Prime Mover Creates Circumstances

There is more to this than meets the eye because God creates more than planetary bodies, earthly vegetation, and animal life. He also creates events, happenings, circumstances, and occurrences all to achieve His purpose.

Isaiah 45:4-13 provides an example of how God creates events. The context is God raising up Cyrus, king of Persia, to free the Jews from Babylonian exile that God Himself originally imposed on them. We should also understand that God inspired this prophecy to be written over a hundred years before Cyrus' birth.

"I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the Lord, who call you by your name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, that they may

know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things.

"Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together, I, the Lord, have created it.

"Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' Or shall your handiwork say, 'He has no hands?' Woe to him who says to his father, 'What are you begetting?' Or to the woman, 'What have you brought forth?'" Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: "Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons; and concerning the work of My hands, you command Me. I have made the earth, and created man on it. It was I—My hands that stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded. I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward," says the Lord of hosts.

I Kings 12:24 sets the stage for explaining this prophecy in more detail: "Thus says the Lord: 'You shall not go up nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel. Let every man return to his house, for this thing is from Me.' Therefore they obeyed the word of the Lord, and turned back, according to the word of the Lord."

This event took place during the reign of Rehoboam, son of Solomon, approximately two hundred years before Isaiah lived. To finance his massive building projects, Solomon had taxed the people heavily during his reign. Following his death, the ten northern tribes appealed for relief from the heavy tax burden, but Rehoboam refused. The Israelites returned home in rebellious anger. Rehoboam sent the head of that day's Internal Revenue Service to either collect some overdue revenues or negotiate. The Israelites assassinated him. Fearing the northern ten tribes' secession, the Jews raised an army and prepared to go to war against their northern brethren. At that point, God directly intervened by sending a prophet to deliver the message contained in verse 24.

God says He was personally maneuvering events to bring about His will. He wanted to divide Israel and Judah into two separate kingdoms with two separate histories—a situation that exists to this day. Israel was later scattered in captivity by Assyria. Judah followed Israel into captivity over one hundred years later but at the hands of Babylon. If God scattered Israel, why can He not scatter the church if somewhat similar conditions to Israel and Judah's appear in the church (Leviticus 26:33)? Should we presumptuously assume that the church is exempt from God's chastening? Moreover, why could He not scatter it for any number of other purposes He might have in mind?

Large-Scale Calamity

With this background, we must return to Isaiah 45:4-5 to pay closer attention to a number of things God said and did. Notice that He gives examples of things He does from behind the scenes that people are unaware He is doing. By this, He is revealing a principle. He is doing similar things all the time, and people are just as unaware today as the ancients. He is manipulating events to cause people to react. In these verses, God is speaking to Cyrus, who is totally unaware that God has made it possible for him to be in the position to carry out what God wants him to do. He also informs Cyrus that he will do this job for Jacob's benefit, in this case for the Jews living under the Persian Empire.

In addition, we discover in verse 6 that the Jews do not know this either. The time will come, however, when they will know that God worked these things for their benefit and His purpose, and they will give God glory as the One and Only Almighty God. A small-scale fulfillment of this occurred under Ezra and Nehemiah, but the greater fulfillment will not take place until the Great White Throne Judgment. Isaiah 45 gives the impression He is actively working, but that we are aware of only a tiny portion of His activity even in our own lives. Yet, as His children, we should be intently looking for His hand in our affairs.

Until this point, the prophecy foretells a wonderful event; but verse 7 introduces a sobering side of God's work: He creates calamity! He links two contrasting sets of events: light and peace—representing constructive, hopeful, encouraging events—against darkness and calamity—representing destructive, fearful, discouraging circumstances. God creates both "good" and "bad" circumstances for His people and purpose.

The division of Israel and Judah was a calamity to them, and it remains unresolved almost 3,000 years later. It began with the fear of invasion, continued through the devastation and death of the ensuing warfare, followed by deportation into foreign lands as slaves, a centuries-long migration into northwest Europe with their captors, and loss of their true national identity. This massive calamity was instigated and carried out by Almighty God completely from behind the scenes. The "Unseen Hand" was working toward the end He has in mind.

The church's present calamity is nowhere near that scale in terms of size and length of time to develop, but it is no less important to those of us caught in it. It has involved its own forms of invasion, warfare, fear, discouragement, confusion, scattering—and many, it seems, have emigrated into "foreign lands" with their captors.

Isaiah 45:8 leaps ahead in time to show through symbolism that the result of God's using the means disclosed in verse 7 will be to produce an abundance of righteousness and salvation for those who receive His benefits. The most immediate beneficiaries were the Jews released about a hundred years later by Cyrus, but the longer range fulfillment includes the return of the Messiah and the blessings resulting from it.

Verses 9-11 anticipates that there will always be those who murmur throughout the often calamitous ways God chooses to work out His salvation. Perhaps here God is specifically targeting the anticipated displeasure of some Jews disturbed that He would use a Gentile king, Cyrus, to free them. People who would not dare to grumble against God were they face to face with Him will do this, not realizing that God actually caused some of their discomfort in the calamities they experience. Israel did this in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 8:1-3 plainly says God caused them to hunger. The Israelites grumbled repeatedly, not realizing God was making them go hungry for their good (verses 3, 16). People ask, "Where is God? If He really cared, He wouldn't allow this to occur."

In reality, God cared about far more important things than the hunger pangs the Israelites endured. People frequently blame God with little understanding and in the wrong attitude. He indeed may be "guilty" of causing the calamity. Sometimes He may be blamed for doing nothing, when in reality He may be "guilty" of doing everything because He has a much greater end in mind! The problem with those who dare to accuse God is that they have a vague and weak understanding of how much He is involved.

Verses 11-13 are simultaneously a rebuke and a challenge to those who take this confused and whining approach. What God does is done in righteousness, and He will follow through with His will regardless of their opinions. He challenges them to ask Him about this prophecy and, if they think He cannot bring it to pass, to notice the power He displayed in His creation. The unstated question is, "Who is going to stop Me?" Further, Cyrus will not have to be bribed to perform what God has decreed—he will rebuild Jerusalem, just as God wills.

Passages like these clearly establish that God initiates calamitous events that on the surface appear to be disasters. But such passages also inspired Paul to formulate the well-known and oft-quoted Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." We most need to understand that God creates these events to produce a result in harmony with His purpose. Thus, they are always good whether or not they appear as such on the surface. This in no way means they are fun to go through. By definition, a calamity is not fun, invariably producing the destruction of things we may hold dear. It may be quite painful and frightening! But, if we believe God, and if we are coming to know Him, then we will strive to work through it in patient hope, trusting His wisdom, love, and power.

Small-Scale Calamity

Job 1:6-12 sets the stage for a calamitous event arranged for a single individual:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. And the Lord said to Satan, "From where do you come?" So Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it." Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?" So Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face." So the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

This is a calamity of the first magnitude for just one person! Notice that God Himself takes the initiative in setting this up, choosing the antagonist (Satan) and defining the parameters of what could be done. Can we say in the face of accounts like this that God only permits difficult trials to occur? Can we say He is not actively testing His children to see what is in them? Can we say He is not actively directing Satan to carry out the calamities He designs?

A series of four verses will give us a brief overview of Job's reaction and performance:

Job 1:22: "In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong."

Job 2:10: "But [Job] said to [his wife], 'You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips."

Job 42:7, 9: "And so it was, after the Lord had spoken these words to Job, that the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has' . . . So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did as the Lord commanded them; for the Lord had accepted Job."

The narrative shows that Job had his difficulties as this grueling trial took its course, yet overall, he held his faith, and God was pleased. For the purposes of this article, however, his story clearly establishes that God's creative activity includes taking the initiative to burden individuals as well as nations with sometimes difficult trials that He arranges and oversees. It also establishes that trials are always for the same purpose: to produce righteousness and to glorify God. Of course, the one burdened with them always has the ability to overcome them, as Paul conveys in I Corinthians 10:13. These facts contain a great deal of hope and encouragement for us.