

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

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Last time, we concluded with a quick survey of the story of Job. The man certainly had troubles as his grueling trial progressed, yet, for the most part, he held his faith, pleasing God, as can be seen in His blessing of Job with new children, wealth, and prestige (Job 42:12-17).

The book of Job establishes that God's creative activity includes taking the initiative to burden individuals, as well as nations, with oftentimes hard trials that He arranges and oversees. Because God is who He is, these trials are always for the same purpose: to produce righteousness and to glorify Himself. The apostle Paul assures us that it is always within the abilities of the one burdened to overcome these trials (I Corinthians 10:13).

Was There a "Plan B"?

Let us take this theme of God planning things in advance and carrying it out another step further. The apostle Peter writes:

. . . knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you. . . . (I Peter 1:18-20)

Our Savior Jesus Christ was also appointed in advance, predestined before the foundation of the world to die for the sins of men. This strongly indicates that God had no doubt that men would sin, so He was prepared. After He created Adam and Eve, He put them in the Garden of Eden and instructed them. Shortly thereafter, Satan came along to make his pitch for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Persuaded, Adam and Eve snapped at the bait of immediate gratification, broke four commandments, and brought the death penalty on themselves. Thus, God set the stage that would create a monumental calamity that reverberates through the millennia, claiming even the life of God in the flesh.

Why did God not step in and stop the sins from occurring? Why did He not restrain Satan or speak out saying, "This is the way. Walk in it"? He could have at any time. He was not distracted elsewhere, and no one could restrain His hand. Further, we must understand that God did not make them sin or force them into it. He did allow them to do it if they so chose. He did nothing to stop them from being seduced by the temptation.

God's awareness of what is happening in His creation and His power over every aspect of it are so complete that, if something happens to us, He has willed it. This does not necessarily mean He plans every occurrence, but He does will it to happen simply by doing nothing to stop it. The actions of Satan, Adam, and Eve in no way caught God by surprise; He knew they were going to sin. There was no "Plan B." Because God is never surprised, He does not get frustrated. He always has things under control, so He does not get fearful and nervous as we do.

Notice Paul's exclamation of wonder as he describes how profound God's power, intelligence, and foresight are:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

How God accomplishes His will is incomprehensible to us. Truly, we "look through a glass darkly" in this regard. All we see are the bare outlines of many things pertaining to God and His plan. A man once said to me, "In my perfect world, nobody would ever get sick, no one would ever be poor, and nobody would ever die." He said this to illustrate to me how different his thinking is from God's. Obviously, God does not think like that.

God Does Extraordinary Things

God makes some people very difficult to deal with. "And the Lord said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go'" (Exodus 4:21). It was not mere happenstance that this Pharaoh was particularly hardheaded, nor was he merely reacting to circumstance. God caused him to be intractable. God did a similar thing to Ezekiel before Israel:

Behold, I have made your face strong against their faces, and your forehead strong against their foreheads. Like adamant stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not be afraid of them, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they are a rebellious house. (Ezekiel 3:8-9)

If God will do this for one of His servants, a prophet, why can He not do it to Pharaoh, who, though an enemy of His people, is also serving God's purpose?

Exodus says Pharaoh hardened his heart nineteen times, and of that total, ten say God hardened Pharaoh's heart and nine that Pharaoh hardened it. This shows a balance. Undoubtedly, Pharaoh had a proclivity toward stubbornness, but God helped him along whenever necessary.

This suggests that on occasion God will disregard free moral agency to suit the purpose He is working out. If life and our destiny to be in the Kingdom of God is all a matter of free moral agency, then free moral agency is supreme God, not the Creator God. But it is true, the Potter has power over the clay to do with it as He pleases (Romans 9:21). Ultimately, God's power of choice trumps man's.

This is further underscored on other occasions revealed in the Exodus events. The sovereign God's power, when combined with Pharaoh's God-aided stubbornness, produced a calamity of monumental proportions for Egypt and glory for the eternal God. God says in Exodus 7:3-5:

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay My hand on Egypt and bring My armies and My people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the children of Israel from among them.

He was producing yet more because He makes a similar statement in Exodus 14:4, as Israel was about to be confronted with crossing the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army not far behind: "'Then I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord.' And they did so."

Where was the Egyptians' free moral agency throughout this entire affair? The Egyptians who died—in many cases, violent deaths during the destruction of Egypt's power—had little or no choice in the matter. In addition, they came to comprehend God's power only for a brief period of time, which did them no good and brought Him precious little honor. He may have received honor in the form of terror, and little or none in the form of grateful appreciation, admiration, and obedience from them. God, however, has a longer-range view: The time is coming when they will remember and give true honor to Him in thankfulness.

In Romans 9:14-25, Paul explores some of the concepts involved in God exercising His sovereignty on behalf of His purpose and plan:

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "Even for this same purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name might be declared in all the earth." Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared before hand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? As He says also in Hosea: "I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved."

Romans 11:22 adds a concluding thought: "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off."

Sometimes these concepts are tough mental nuts for us to crack and swallow because we emotionally recoil at thinking of God as doing the things Paul mentions. Nevertheless, the Bible's record is true. Clearly, the sovereign God, in working out His plan, purposely makes people for destruction, while at the same time giving abundant grace in His calling to others who are just as worthy of destruction as those destroyed! Were Pharaoh and the Egyptians any worse sinners than the Israelites? Hardly, but in God's purpose they died while the Israelites received grace.

As Paul says, there is no unrighteousness in God. He is free to exercise His powers as He wills. His actions are always done in love, and in the end, they will produce righteousness, love, and honor for Him. The Egyptians will be saved. When God gives them grace in the Great White Throne Judgment, they will come to know Him and glorify Him as their God too.

Confrontations Abound!

The confrontation into which God brought Moses and Aaron with Pharaoh is an early example of a persistent theme that runs through the whole of the Bible. At some time in nearly every prophet's service to God, God brings him into confrontation with His enemies. Sometimes they are slain for their efforts. When we look at the New Testament record, we find it to be no different. The confrontations between Jesus and the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and finally Pilate fit the pattern. Traditional Christian history informs us that all the apostles too, except possibly John, were martyred. In the end time, God will bring the Two Witnesses into confrontation with the Beast power for three and a half years until they are put to death.

Since the record is so clear, should we not expect God to bring us into conflict with His enemies in this era of the church? Surely, He will! In fact, just as His Word prophesies of the battles of the Two Witnesses, it also prophesies the church in general will face them too. The first-century church left us a record of what happened to them. Notice the history and prophecy in II Peter 2:1-3:

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who brought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

Jude 3-4 adds:

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is nothing fuzzy about this; God means exactly what He says. These apostles were not only experiencing the confrontations, they had ample evidence of this repeating pattern from the Old Testament record, and in addition, the fairly recent words of Jesus Christ during His ministry. Notice the Parable of the Wheat and Tares:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

When understood in the light of what Peter and Jude wrote about false prophets being marked out beforehand to be part of the church fellowship, this can be easily seen as a prophecy. It occurred in

the apostles' day, and it occurs in ours. We should not be surprised that both the converted and unconverted fellowship in the same congregations.

An even more pointed and specific prophecy from Jesus about the end-time church occurs in the Olivet Prophecy:

And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, I am the Christ, and will deceive many. . . . Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. . . . Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect." (Matthew 24:4-5, 11-12, 23-24)

The most frequent warnings in this prophecy are concerning false teachers—all of which are for our time! False teachers work to test and destroy the faith and love of the brethren. Iniquity is not only in the world, but also in the church.

Paul and John also make forceful remarks on this point. In I Corinthians 11:17-19, Paul makes a rather remarkable statement to the Corinthian congregation:

Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

The phrase "must also be" has the sense of "it being necessary." Paul understands factions as God-ordained because he could see the pattern of them from Old Testament times, as well as the benefits derived from them.

The Corinthian congregation was a troubled group divided into factions by heresies (I Corinthians 1:10-13). This circumstance was not helping the already-calamitous situation, but Paul says that the calamity would eventually produce a good result. The true sons of God would be revealed by their reactions to the false teaching. They would not accept it, and thus would be witnesses to the weaker for the truth of God.

At a time later than Peter, Jude and Paul's letters, the apostle John writes in I John 2:18-20:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.

John informs us that the antichrists were right in the church fellowshiping with the truly converted! No doubt, they performed the same function in John's areas of responsibilities as they did in Paul's. They created a measure of havoc in the church through heretical teaching and then left the fellowship, proving they were not really part of the church. They were tares.

Do we see the pattern being carried through that began with Adam and Eve? God created the circumstances through which Satan tempted Adam and Eve. With some minor variations, God followed the same basic pattern with Job, when He again employed Satan, and He is following it again within His church. After we receive instruction in His Word, God tests us by allowing a confrontation with false doctrine right within the fellowship. Were we not attacked from within? Just as the Bible clearly records that God engineered those previous tests, we should understand that He engineered ours in this era. A key to our survival is to understand what we must do: faithfully follow the message that converted us.

Deuteronomy 13:1-4 is an early warning that this infiltration of enemies will occur:

If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods which 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 know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him.

This is the earliest formal warning to God's people that attacks against their faith would take place within the fellowship of His children, and the pattern has occurred repeatedly. God raises up a prophet or minister to instruct His people. Opposition arises, usually in the form of ministers who see things differently, who force the people to choose which way they will follow. Understand, God is not passively watching. He actively tests His children's loyalties through such calamitous situations.

The Pattern Continues

Now it is happening to us. It is easy for us to overlook God's hand in the church's calamity by casually blaming Satan. Satan certainly had his part to play. Notwithstanding, God engineered the whole tragedy, using Satan just as He did in Job's day, as well as when the lying spirit persuaded Ahab (I Kings 22:15-28). False ministers and false brethren are tares placed in the church to create havoc, primarily through wrong doctrine and secondarily by spreading destructive attitudes that can influence true brethren toward negativity, suspicion, cynicism, sarcasm, and doubt.

From time to time, I used to wonder why Herbert Armstrong did not get rid of some of the people surrounding him. Now I understand that he may not have been able to rid himself of them until their work of testing, confusing, and destroying was completed.

It is similar to David's relationship with Joab, his nephew, who in some ways was a very fine man. He was courageous, efficient at his job, and influential in the nation. For a long time, he was very loyal to David, even playing a large part in mediating a peace between David and Absalom. Yet, he was also a thorn in David's side, especially politically. The relationship developed such animosity that one of David's deathbed wishes for Solomon was "take care of Joab":

Moreover you know also what Joab the son of Zeruiah did to me, and what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, to Abner the son of Ner and Amasa the son of Jether, whom he killed. And he shed the blood of war in peacetime, and put the blood of

war on his belt that was around his waist, and on his sandals that were on his feet. Therefore do according to your wisdom, and do not let his gray hair go down to the grave in peace. (I Kings 2:5-6)

It is not known why David apparently felt powerless to do anything himself. However, as soon as David was dead, Solomon saw an opportunity and had Joab executed. In some relationships, in some situations, one has no power to act. It is as if one is held back until other, unknown factors fall into place.

At the 1994 Feast of Tabernacles, I first gingerly said in a sermon that I believe God is responsible for the scattering of the church. Most were slow in noticing its significance. Other ministers may not have rejected the idea, but most were afraid to give it voice. Now I am certain of it because the Bible shows that our God is not a passive God. He is actively creating.

My belief grew out of a Bible study on the book of Lamentations. As I prepared it, it occurred to me that Lamentations very precisely pictures the church in its current crisis. I began to see statements there that are similar, almost word for word, to statements I heard brethren making about the scattering of the church!

Something else came very forcefully to mind as I studied Lamentations 2:1-8:

How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! He cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool in the day of His anger. The Lord has swallowed up and has not pitied all the habitations of Jacob. He has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought them down to the ground; He has profaned the kingdom and its princes. He has cut off in fierce anger every horn of Israel; He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy. He has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire which devours all around.

Standing like an enemy, He has bent His bow; with His right hand, like an adversary, He has slain all who were pleasing to His eye; on the tent of the daughter of Zion, He has poured out His fury like fire. The Lord was like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel, He has swallowed up all her palaces; He has destroyed her strongholds, and has increased mourning and lamentation in the daughter of Judah. He has done violence to His tabernacle, as if it were a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly; the Lord has caused the appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion. In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest. The Lord has spurned His altar, He has abandoned His sanctuary; He has given up the walls of her palaces into the hand of the enemy. They have made a noise in the house of the Lord as on the day of a set feast. The Lord has purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion. He has stretched out a line; He has not withdrawn His hand from destroying; therefore He has caused the rampart and wall to lament; they languished together.

Why does God claim responsibility for all this destruction if He is not responsible? He claims responsibility because He *is* responsible! None of this exonerates us of our irresponsibility that caused Him to punish as He has. We are not innocent victims! This section, far more descriptive, follows the same principle as I Kings 12:24: ". . . this thing [the dividing of Judah from Israel] is from Me."

Where Do We Go From Here?

Recall from last month's article that I have been asked, "Since all the spin-offs from the Worldwide Church of God have basically the same doctrines, why aren't you doing something to bring us all together?" A children's nursery rhyme runs:

Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses
And all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

This rhyme says much the same thing as Ecclesiastes 7:13. "Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked?"

The Scriptures make clear that when God scatters, what He scatters remains scattered until *He* brings it back together. Has Israel reunited since God divided them? Did not Judah remain scattered until He brought back a remnant to Judea under Ezra and Nehemiah? Any effort we would make at this point would achieve only a political unity, and that does not work for very long in a church because people's hearts are too deeply involved in their belief system. God is the only One who can straighten what He has made crooked.

However, this does not mean we are doing nothing. We can be unified with God even though we are separated from other corporate groups. Our charge at a time like this is to find a group to fellowship with (Hebrews 10:25), to strive not to compete with others or to have a superior attitude, and all the while work to overcome and return to the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). God will bring us together in His good time and way. Christ describes the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 as very different assemblies, but He still considers them one church.

God always initiates and creates unity in the same general manner. He raises up one individual as His prophet or apostle and then enables His people to grasp that He is working through him. Then, they voluntarily put themselves under that chosen one and support him in the work God has set him apart to do. Notice Zechariah 4:11-14:

Then I answered and said to him, "What are these two olive trees, one at the right of the lampstand and the other at its left?" And I further answered and said to him, "What are these two olive branches that drip into the receptacles of the two gold pipes from which the golden oil drains?" Then he answered me and said, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No, my lord." So he said, "These are the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth."

When these verses are combined with the information regarding the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11: 1-13, it is clear the olive trees feeding the lampstand with oil, empowering it to give light, are the Two Witnesses feeding the entire church. If we are indeed nearing the time for God to raise up the Two Witnesses, then we should expect first one, then the other to come to the attention of the church. A spiritual unity will develop as church members voluntarily submit themselves to be fed and led by the Two Witnesses.

If we know what to look for, because we are familiar with the patterns God has revealed to us, it will put us into the position to see God regathering and reforming the church from the destructive calamity that He put it in for its good. He is actively creating whatever it takes to save His people from their sins.

Philippians 1:6 shows God's faithful determination to complete what He has begun in us: ". . . being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." Though we can be extremely confident God will do His part, our part remains for us to be faithful to our responsibilities. Notice Paul's admonition in Philippians 2:12-16:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring or disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as light in the world.

Never think that God is just passively standing on the sidelines while all the action is taking place out on the field. He created the field. He created us, the players. He created the game. He created the opposition. He is calling the plays so the game will end exactly the way He has planned.

There remains much yet for us to learn. Ahead of us is a great deal of growth in understanding and using the instructions and gifts God has given us. The scattering of the church is an act of love for our eternal good.

A most important thing to learn is that our Creator God is absolute Sovereign, executing His will in consideration of His own glory. Proverbs 16:4 says, "The Lord has made all things for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom." Does He not have a perfect right to do so? Since God is God, who has the right to challenge His prerogatives? To murmur against Him is rebellion. To question His ways is to impugn His wisdom. Never forget who He is: "All nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless. To whom then will you liken God?" (Isaiah 40:17-18).

The Lord God Omnipotent reigns. Nothing in this vast universe can happen apart from the will of this God. Here is a solid foundation for faith.