

Are you one to judge a book by its cover? Do headlines tend to draw you in to read the full article? How about the title of this article, does it cause you to want to read on? While my purpose is not to purposefully pull you in, I do want to speak about the tensions that surround this topic. In truth, the discussion of "God's sovereignty verses man's free will" has long been a subject of theological debate, and today's article is one that I hope (and trust) will be a help to us as we consider the landscape of our current times.

We live in a world of chaos and confusion. Covid-19 has crippled the planet; protests and unlawful riots are flaring up all over the country; and if that were not enough, politics continues to make a muddled mess of it all because it is an election year. If anything, it is easy for us to look around, and with a horizontal perspective be tempted to question God. Is He in control? Does He care about what is going on? Why does He not step in? All sorts of questions can run through our minds at this time, so my purpose in this article is to help us anchor both our minds and hearts to this truth: **God knows and does what is best for us.** I hope to show us that as we consider God's sovereignty and man's free will.

Let's start with Romans 8:28: *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.* **Notice the determiner** in that verse—*all things work together for good.* **Now notice the qualification**—*to them who are called according to his purpose.* What Paul is saying is that if you know Christ as your Savior, nothing happens by coincidence, happenstance, or luck. All of life—the goods and the bads are under the control of God's Sovereign hand. That hand of control is often summed up in this word: Providence

What is Providence? Etymologically, the word is a combination of two Latin words: *Pro*—"Before; In front of" and *Vide*—"to see." Put together, providence means "to see beforehand." When we speak of God's providence, we are referring to God's ability to see something beforehand. It is NOT a reference to God learning something—as if God looks down the corridor of time in order to see and learn what will happen. That teaching actually "ungods" God because God has never learned anything. He is omniscient and knows all things. He has always known the end from the beginning of everything, so providence *DOES NOT* refer to God's learning.

God's Providence is a reference to His control. It is the teaching that *because* God knows the end from the beginning, He has the ability to control the outcome. Drawn out to its maximum conclusion, when we speak of God's providential control, we are saying that God knows every possible outcome of every possible event, and then controls those events to bring about the outcome He deems best. In that aspect, we would say that God ordains the future. That is what Christ refers to when He says that the hairs on our head are numbered by God (Mt 10:30). Psalm 31:15 says, "*My times are in Thy hand.*" Put together, those verses tell us that nothing will take our life too early! Because of God's providential control, we can be confident that God ordains the future and nothing derails it.

Providence speaks to God's control in terms of knowledge and sight. *Everything* is before His eyes at all times. In 2 Chronicles 16:9 we read, "*For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth....*" Nothing escapes His eye, His knowledge, or His will; therefore, He is able to providentially bring about the best end for everything. However, living before the all-seeing eye of God ("Corum Deo") is terrifying thought for many because every one of us has a keen sense of privacy into which no one can pry. All of us have secret things in our lives that we wish no one else to see. It began when man fell in the Garden as Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit and "*the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked...and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.*" (Gen 3:7-8). People have been hiding ever since. In his book, *When People are Big and God is Small*, Ed Welch says that we all like to "hide and spy"—spying on others while trying to avoid their spying on us.

When it comes to God, we want Him to see us when we do something good and/or right. We want Him to see us when we need help. We want Him to see us when we help others. However, most of the time we want Him to *overlook* us because we want privacy. However, God sees us at ALL TIMES. He sees behind our masks. He sees into the hiding places of which we are most vulnerable. He sees us and knows us better than we even know ourselves. That is a fearful thing to many, but it is one aspect of God that allows Him to be Sovereign. Nothing escapes His sight: not even smallest virus, particle, or wave throughout the entire universe. He has total awareness of everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen; therefore, He is able to bring about whatever is necessary to make us more like Christ. All of those

things are brought about through His *providential guidance*. Because God is loving, kind, merciful, and good, and because His providence is always worked out for His glory, we can affirm that truth of Romans 8:28, that if we know Christ as our Savior, whatever God allows is for our good.

That leads me to this question: *Does God Cause Bad Things to Happen to Good People?* If you were to read Rabi Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, you would find that his answer is, "No, God is all good, but He is not all powerful." Kushner's book teaches that some things are outside of His control; therefore, when bad things happen to good people, God's heart bleeds for them despite His inability to come to their rescue. That is a very bad, heretical theology, and Kushner's book full of false teaching! First, he assumes that mankind is basically good! Yet the Scriptures teach that we are sinners whose heart is so desperately wicked that we cannot know it or even trust it (Jeremiah 17:9)! Second, Kushner assumes that God is not Sovereign—in control of everything at all times. The Bible teaches us that God is both all good and all powerful—He *is* sovereign. Kushner's whole premise is backwards from the beginning!

We would explain "bad" things happening to "good" people in terms of *primary* and *secondary causes*. God is the source of *primary* causes—He is the FIRST cause. Nothing happens outside of Him. RC Sproul says, "[God] is the Author of all that is, and He continues to be the primary cause of human events and of natural occurrences" (*Does God Control Everything?* Pg 14). Think of the creation: *In the Beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth* (Gen 1:1). If God had not spoken, nothing would be here. He is the first cause of creation and life. Coupled with primary causes, we also have *secondary causes*. God is our primary cause who gave us power for life; as a *secondary cause*, He has enabled us to have the power to reproduce. Our ability to have children is a *secondary cause*—power given to us from the One who is the Primary Cause.

Let me pause and bring some things together. First, God's providence says that He has absolute control over all the affairs of life, and that He is bringing about the very best for us to His glory. How then do we explain "trouble"? The answer lies in our understanding of *secondary causes*. Bad things happen because of sin; we choose to disobey God. Before the Fall of man, God pronounced everything good, yet when sin entered the world, death reigned. Our desires changed. The world changed! Chaos took over. "Bad things" happen to "good" people because of the secondary causes that result from of sin. However, the beauty of God's glory is that in His sovereignty, God has the ability to work out His good in our lives despite the devastating ravages of sin

This brings me to this question: *What about the Free Will of Man?* If the doctrine of "second causes" allows for sinful choices of men, but God providentially controls all events at all times, then, *is man really free to exercise a "Free" will?*

The answer depends on your definition of "Free will." If you mean that man has the ability to move, act, and decide *apart from* God, you boarder on heresy (at the worst) and are guilty of false teaching (at the best). God is *never* paralyzed by choices and actions of man. IF His freedom is limited by our freedom, then He does not have complete control. If anything, we have the control because we are the ones who limit God. In those terms, we limit God to a divine being who really wants our best, but does not have the power to bring it about due to our own devisings (Rabi Kushner). In truth, the Free will of man never derails, interrupts, or unsettles God's divine plans or purposes. ***So what is man's free will?*** It is the teaching that man has the choice to obey or disobey God. Yet even in those actions, God is always in control. He not only knows the choices we take, but He calculates them into His divine will and providential outcome.

Let me give some Bible examples as we finish up. In Genesis 50, when Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers are terrified that he will take revenge. They come to Joseph and say, "Before dad died, he told us to tell you to forgive us of what we did to you so many years ago." Verse 17 tells us that Joseph wept when they told him this. Verse 18 says that they fell down before Joseph and said "*We are your servants.*" Then we read Joseph's very familiar words: "*as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good.*" (v19-20)

>Let's go back to when it began, with dad giving the coat of many colors to the Joseph

<>Had dad known what would transpire, do you think he would have ever given that coat

<>Do you think that God somehow coerced, manipulated, or even forced Jacob into giving that coat?

><**NO! 1000 times NO!**

- >But did God know way beforehand what would happen in the giving of that coat?
 - >Could He have prevented the giving of the coat?
 - >Did He know the jealousy that would grow in the hearts of the brothers?
 - >Did He know what the dreams would do in tipping those boys over the edge?
 - >Did He know they would sell Joseph as a slave into Egypt?
 - >Did He know about Potiphar, the prison sentences, the raising up to Pharaoh's 2nd hand?
- <>**ABOSOLUTELY! 1000 times YES!**

- >So why did God not prevent the giving of the coat?
 - <>Because in His sovereign control, God's providential hand worked through the free will of men to do what was best for His glory and the good of His people
 - <>The brothers meant it for evil, but God's controlling hand meant it for Good

We see Man's Free will exercised in the Life of our Lord

- >700 years before Christ was ever born, Isaiah wrote of the Suffering Messiah (Is 53)
- >And when He comes, Joseph must take Him down to Egypt—in order to fulfill prophesy
- >When they return, they can't return to Jerusalem, so they go back to Nazareth—in order to fulfill prophesy
- >When Christ begins His ministry, He endures great temptation and persecution from both Satan and the Religious authorities
- >Ultimately they hang Him on a cross as a curse for all to see—Just like Isaiah predicted!
- >And when Peter preaches Pentecost, he says this to the men gathered: "*Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:²³ Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:²⁴ Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. (Act 2:22-24)*

- >Who delivered Christ to the Cross—God or man?

- <>Both!
 - ><Is 53:10—*It pleased the Lord to bruise (crush) Him* (PRIMARY CAUSE)
 - ><Acts 2:23—*He was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God*
 - ><But it was through the wicked hands of wicked people that He was crucified. (SECONDARY CAUSE)

- <>What Peter is saying is that God was in control of that action before the foundation of the world!
 - ><Yet it was their free choice to disobey God...refuse to believe in Christ...and nail their Messiah to the cross
 - ><Neither Judas or Pilate or any of the man will ever be able to stand up and say, "If it hadn't been for me, there would have been no cross, no atonement, no salvation—I'm the one who made it possible!"
 - ><NO, God's sovereign control allowed the free choice of men to do what His ultimate plan was—the bringing of peace and atonement between God and man.
 - ><These men were responsible for their own sin, for they freely chose their own way.
 - ><Yet despite their own sinful actions, God was never hindered by what they set out to do.

That brings me to a conclusion about God's Sovereignty. First, when it comes to the sovereignty of God, we are in waters WAY WAY over our heads! He is in absolute, divine control over all things at all times in every place, and because of this, He is able to use His providential guidance to work in harmony with the free choices we make. In His divine providence, God makes sure those choices and actions bring about His desired will in making us more like Christ. Therefore, with assurance and confidence, we can sincerely affirm Romans 8:28—*All things are working together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.* God is sovereign, and He is in complete control!