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## God's Tests

By David Servant

### Part 2 Who's in Control Here?

#### SEVEN Two Views

Who *is* ultimately running the world? Is it God? Is it the devil? Is God truly sovereign? Has God turned everything over to chance and human choice?

Those are important questions, and if we are to understand much about God's tests, we'll have to understand the answers.

To obtain those answers, we can't simply skim over the surface of the Scriptures. On the contrary, we must plunge to deeper depths than many Christians are accustomed.

Let me assure you, however, that as we study the subject of God's sovereignty, we will not swim so deep as to drown. So take a deep breath. Let's stay under for a while as we explore some beautiful revelations from Scripture.

#### Diving In

Scripture affirms that God is indeed 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" in 1 Timothy 6:15.

Although God is sovereign, 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. The Bible 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 choice have made the 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.

We must understand that anyone who has 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 obtain authority. If there were, we must conclude that God is not all-powerful and all-knowing as the Bible tells us He is.

If authority was taken by force from God by one of His creatures, then that creature was more powerful than its Creator, and the Creator is not all-powerful. If authority was swindled from God by one of His creatures, then that creature was smarter than its Creator, and the Creator 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 and Non-Sovereignists**

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, there seem to be two extreme camps of believers when the subject of God's sovereignty is discussed: the "hyper-sovereignists" and the "non-sovereignists."

The hyper-sovereignist has taken God's sovereignty to an unbiblical extreme, having concluded that God is the one who causes everything that happens. The hyper-sovereignist totally ignores Satan and, in many cases, the wills of rebellious humans. The hyper-sovereignist makes statements such as, "We can never be certain of what God will do because, you know, God is sovereign; He can do anything He desires." This person leaves the impression that God is sovereign to the extent that He will actually transgress His own Word and fail to keep His promises. That, of course, is entirely incorrect. God will *never* break His Word. God *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 then, 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 think 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.

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

The non-sovereignist in the boat would retort, "I'm sorry, but your theology is all wrong. You see, God is good, and He would never send a storm to cause us all to drown here 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."

Who's 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 who have read the end of the story know. It was not God's

will for Jesus and His twelve disciples to drown that evening on the Sea of Galilee. No one can intelligently argue against the non-sovereignist on that one.

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 might object, saying that severe weather is just a “naturally occurring phenomena in our fallen world full of sin.” That is, however, an explanation that is not really an explanation at all. What do people mean when they make such statements? Certainly they can’t mean that severe weather occurs just because of the *presence* of sin. If that is the case, then severe weather is man-made. They must be saying 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 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 that those forces would 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 now does. Only two possibilities exist: Either God or Satan was responsible for the storm on the Sea of Galilee that evening. So who was it?

### **Does Satan Have Control of the Wind?**

Does Satan have the power and authority to send a storm over the Sea of Galilee? Interestingly, the Bible most often gives God credit for control of such things, not the devil. When credit for wind is given, only once is Satan given credit, and he first had to receive permission from God to send it (see Job. 1:12,19). All other times, God is given the credit (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; Jon. 4:8; Hag. 2:17; Rev. 7:1). Here are a few scriptures I didn’t 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 God caused the storm, or perhaps 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 Sea of Galilee.

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. Anything and everything that happened to me was supposedly God's ordained will, and my job was to learn and grow through the difficulties that God allegedly sent my way. I read their books on being "fully surrendered to the Lord." They didn't realize it, but to some degree, they were actually teaching me to surrender to Satan's attacks that God wanted me to resist.

Later I became influenced by the non-sovereignist view and was swayed to believe that there was absolutely no divine purpose in any circumstance that seemed negative. It was just me versus Satan.

Both viewpoints are unbalanced and will lead to extremes.

Because the hyper-sovereignist often does not recognize Satan's attacks, he is an easy target. Satan can send adversity his way and laugh as the hyper-sovereignist humbly accepts his difficulties as being sent from God. He is a person who is "destroyed for his lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6). (Hyper-sovereignists, however, do tend to be much more developed in the graces of patience, longsuffering, and kindness than the non-sovereignist. No wonder; they are always trying to learn from their hardships.)

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 into a place where he will experience difficulties as He did the Israelites. He laughs at the idea of learning lessons from God when difficulties strike. He ignores scriptures that talk 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 wrongdoing. In his mind, if a Christian sins and then sickness strikes as a result (a biblical concept; see 1 Cor. 11:28-32), God played no sovereign role in the difficulty—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. However, when such expressions are accepted apart from a scriptural balance (which they have been), they can lead to serious doctrinal error.

Let's take a Christian who sins, and then sickness attacks his body. Someone tells him that his sickness is the work of the devil and that God has played no sovereign part in his sickness. God is not sovereignly or even remotely involved in his circumstance.

If that is the case, then God's discipline upon sin has been 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 actually made Satan look somewhat holy (the devil is now punishing wrongdoing).

So what is the truth of the matter? The truth is that God may sovereignly 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. God can *permit* Satan to act or *restrain* him to any degree. *Satan can do nothing except what God permits.*

I realize that some readers may object to what I have just stated. Allow me to explain.

### **Has God No Authority Over the Devil?**

Some readers may say, "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* given the church responsibility and authority to resist the devil, and we should resist him.

That fact, however, does not detract from the point I am making, that Satan can do nothing except what God permits him to do. Such readers are referring to us taking *our* God-given responsibility to resist the devil; I am referring to God using *His* authority over Satan, which He has not given us.

God certainly has authority over Satan that He has never given to the church. God has given us *limited* authority.

Again, some will immediately 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? Why don't you? You know exactly why—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. Notice that every scripture in the New Testament epistles that mentions or implies our authority over Satan is talking about our authority over Satan as far as our own personal lives are concerned (see Eph. 6:10-17; Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 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. God will permit Satan to dominate us if we will permit Satan to dominate us.

So here is the balance: Satan can do nothing except what God permits him to do. God, in His sovereignty, has given us limited (but sufficient) authority over Satan. Therefore, God will not do our job for us—He won't restrain Satan from dominating us if we allow it. That principle, however, doesn't detract from the fact that God is sovereign.

If you believe what the Bible says about our authority over Satan and our responsibility to resist him, be careful that you don't take those truths to an extreme. We are entirely wrong if we conclude that God no longer has any authority over Satan because He has supposedly given all His authority to the church.

Some who have made this very error go on to teach that "God's hands are tied," and that He is now powerless to do anything about the devil! The real truth is this: God has all authority in the universe. *Some* of that authority He has given to us. Now it is our responsibility to use our God-given authority, not God's. But God still has plenty of authority that we don't have.

An example would be if I had a million dollars and gave one hundred dollars to you. Now it's your money. I can't spend it for you because now it's yours, not mine. If you want to waste it, that's your business, not mine. 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 what I'm saying from Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we read:

No temptation has overtaken you but such 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).

This scripture promises that God will not *allow* us to be tempted beyond what we are able. Of course, we know that Satan is the tempter, not God (see Jas. 1:13). God, however, restrains Satan to the degree that He "will not allow" Satan to tempt us beyond what we are able. Satan can do no more than what God permits.

This one verse in 1 Corinthians gives us an idea of where our authority ends and where God's begins. We have no authority to control the degree of temptation that Satan sends, but God does. In fact, we have no authority to stop *any* temptation from Satan. If we had unlimited authority, then we could command Satan never to tempt us again. We don't have that much authority, however, only God does. We do have authority to resist temptation and not be overcome by the devil.

### What is Satan Doing Here Anyway?

Have you ever wondered why God has even permitted Satan to be on this 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 didn't have to share space with the devil?

To gain a glimpse of at least part of the answer, let's look at Deuteronomy 13:1-3. There Moses said:

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* (Deut. 13:1-3, emphasis added).

I don't think any serious Bible student would say that God was the one who inspired that false prophet or gave him the ability to work a false sign or wonder. It must have been Satan's power that was behind it, not God's. Yet God permitted that Satan-empowered, false prophet to arise for a reason. What was that reason? To *test* His people, as we have just read.

Here is at least a partial answer to the question of why Satan is on the same planet and why God permits Satan to tempt us: in order that He (God) might know what is in our hearts. God is testing all of us. Do we love God enough to obey Him and resist Satan's temptations?

We have already examined numerous examples of God's tests in the Bible, so this should come as no surprise to us. God uses Satan's temptations to test men. 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 principle agrees 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" sees God's sovereignty in all

things. Even Satan's temptations are more than just temptations—they serve a higher purpose—they are also tests from God.

Now please don't misquote me. I have never said that God and Satan are working together or that they are on the same team. I just 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.

Why would God do such a thing? In part, because God wants to bless us and wants to 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?

Take money for example. If 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.

It is a sobering thought indeed to realize that our reaction to temptation reveals our love, or lack of love, for God.

We've only begun to study the subject of God's sovereignty and His restraining power over Satan. If you're not convinced of what I'm saying, keep reading because there are many more scriptures we'll examine. You may want to re-read this chapter again so that your objections are clear in your mind. Then you'll be better prepared for the next chapters, where I hope to answer any objection you have.