

Excerpts from D.A. Carson's How Long O Lord

From chapter 11

1. **“God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.** “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths” (Ps. 135:6). Indeed, he is the one who “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11).
2. **Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.** “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. . . . But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:14-15).

We must tread carefully here. I am not saying that there is no sense in which the Scriptures picture God as contingent. He talks with people, he responds to them; he can even be said (in almost forty cases) to “repent” of his decisions (KJV), that is, to change his mind or to relent in his declared purposes. I shall return to such passages a little farther on. But in no case is human responsibility permitted to function in such a way that God becomes absolutely contingent: that is, God is absolutely stymied, thwarted, frustrated, blocked, quite unable to proceed with what he himself had absolutely determined to do.

Another important concept to keep in mind is that “Despite everything it says about the limitless reaches of God’s sovereignty the Bible insists again and again on God’s unblemished goodness. God is never presented as an accomplice of evil, or as secretly malicious, or as standing behind evil in exactly the same way that he stands behind good. “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (Deut. 32:4). “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

Illustration: Genesis 50:19-20

As Joseph explains, God was working sovereignly in the event of his being sold into Egypt, but the brothers’ guilt is not thereby assuaged (they intended to harm Joseph); the brothers were responsible for their action, but God was not thereby reduced to a merely contingent role; and while the brothers were evil, God himself had only good intentions.

Most people who call themselves compatibilists are not so brash as to claim

that they can tell you exactly how the two propositions I set forth in the last section fit together. All they claim is that, if terms are defined carefully enough, it is possible to show that there is no necessary contradiction between them. In other words, it is possible to outline some of the “unknowns” that are involved, and show that these “unknowns” allow for both propositions to be true. But precisely because there are large “unknowns” at stake, we cannot show how the two propositions cohere. I think this analysis is correct. But what it means is that I am still going to be left with mysteries when I am finished. All that I hope to achieve is to locate those mysteries more precisely, and to show that they are big enough to allow me to claim that when the Bible assumes compatibilism it is not adopting nonsensical positions.

If compatibilism is true and if God is good—all of which the Bible affirms— then it must be the case that God stands behind good and evil in somewhat different ways; that is, he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically. To put it bluntly, God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents, to secondary causes. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, And only derivatively to secondary agents.

If this sounds just a bit too convenient for God, my initial response (though there is more to be said) is that according to the Bible this is the only God there is. There is no other.

Both propositions make much of human moral responsibility. But so far I have not tried to tie human moral responsibility to the notion of freedom. That is because the notion of freedom, in any biblical perspective, is exceedingly difficult to nail down. I hasten to say that it is not only in Christian thought that the notion of freedom is more difficult than at first meets the eye. Among atheists, for instance, a debate is currently taking place as to what is meant by “human freedom.” Are human beings so tied to the banging around of subatomic particles, whose collisions and their effects are tied to immutable natural laws, that “freedom” is nothing more than illusion? Or are there necessarily uncertainties in these statistical collisions that allow human beings to have some kind of interactive influence on what takes place in their own universe? I mention these disputes among atheist scholars, not because they are exactly like those in Christian circles, but because far too many writers enter into discussion on these matters as if “freedom” itself is easy to understand, or entirely self-evident.

That is why some of the best treatments of the will have argued that freedom (sometimes called “free agency”) should be related not to absolute power to contrary but to voluntarism: that is, we do what we want to do, and that is why we are held accountable for what we do.

The problem of compatibilism, then, is tied to the fact that the God who discloses himself in the Bible and supremely in the person of his Son is himself both transcendent and personal, and not less than both. We have pursued the lines of

thought that suggest themselves from the Bible's straightforward adoption of compatibilism, and find they lead to the nature of God.

...We can identify some of the things we do not know about him. But some of these things that we do not know about God turn out to be facets of ignorance that make it reasonable to hold that both the propositions of compatibilism are also true, even though we do not see how they can be true.

The mystery of providence is in the first instance not located in debates about decrees, free will, the place of Satan, and the like. It is located in the doctrine of God. ...”If “free will” necessarily entails absolute power to contrary, will we enjoy such “free will” in heaven? Most Christians agree that in heaven there will no longer be any danger of apostasy: we will be kept from sinning. But if God can keep us from sinning there, does this mean that “free will” is sacrificed? Are human beings in glory deprived of this sublime capacity that (allegedly) makes them moral creatures?

(1) One of the common ingredients in most of the attempts to overthrow compatibilism is the sacrifice of mystery. The problem looks neater when, say, God is not behind evil in any sense. But quite apart from the fact that the biblical texts will not allow so easy an escape, the result is a totally nonmysterious God. And somehow the god of this picture is domesticated, completely unpuzzling.

After reading some neat theodicies that stress, say, that all suffering is the direct result of sin, or that free will understood as absolute power to contrary nicely exculpates God, I wonder if their authors think Job or Habakkuk were twits. Surely they should have seen that there is no mystery to be explained, and simply gone home and enjoyed a good night's sleep. It is better to let the biblical texts speak in all their power. Many things can then be said about the God who has graciously disclosed himself, but all of them leave God untamed.

(2) It is essential—I cannot say this strongly enough—it is utterly essential to doctrinal and spiritual well-being to maintain the diverse polarities in the nature of God simultaneously For instance, if you work through the biblical passages that bluntly insist God in some sense stands behind evil, and do not simultaneously call to mind the countless passages that insist he is unfailingly good, then in a period of suffering you may be tempted to think of God as a vicious, sovereign thug. If you focus on all the passages that stress God's sovereign sway over everything, and do not simultaneously call to mind his exhortations to pray, to intercede, to repent, to examine yourself, you may turn into a Christian fatalist, and mistake your thoughtless stoicism for stalwart faith. The same lesson can be configured in many more ways: provide your own examples of distortion.

(3) The mystery of providence defies our attempt to tame it by reason. I do not mean it is illogical; I mean that we do not know enough to be able to unpack it and domesticate it. Perhaps we may gauge how content we are to live with our limitations by assessing whether we are comfortable in joining the biblical writers in

utterances that mock our frankly idolatrous devotion to our own capacity to understand. Are we embarrassed, for instance, by the prophetic rebuke to the clay that wants to tell the potter how to set about his work (Isa. 29:16; 45:9)? Is our conception of God big enough to allow us to read “The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster” (Prov. 16:4) without secretly wishing the text could be excised from the Bible?

From chapter 12

The aim of this chapter, then, is to think through the way compatibilism (as defined in the previous chapter)—the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility—ought to function in the life of the believer, especially with reference to the problem of evil and suffering. But before turning to evil and suffering, it may help us get our bearings if we reflect a little on how this tension properly functions in other areas of Christian life and thought.

Regarding prayer: “If there are some Christians who think that intercessory prayer is likely to be successful in proportion to its length, fervency intensity volume, and high-mindedness, that individual conversions or even wide-scale revival can be had for the asking, and that the key to successful praying is badgering God into doing what he otherwise would not be willing to do, there are other Christians who have so elevated God’s sovereignty at the expense of his personality that they cannot quite see what the point of prolonged intercessory prayer is at all. They know, of course, they should engage in prayer: that point is too unmistakable in the Bible to be missed. But after they have said, “Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven,” there does not seem to be much point in intercession about details—not, at least, in intercession directed to a sovereign God.

It is important to see what is happening in both cases. In both instances Christians are drawing inferences about prayer that the Bible does not draw. To put the matter another way, they are permitting one aspect or the other of the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility to function in ways that never occur in Scripture. In particular, they are allowing inferences drawn from one leg of the tension to destroy the other leg of the tension. One side argues that prayer brings results, it “changes things,” and therefore the future cannot be entirely mapped out under God’s omniscience and sovereignty. God himself cannot be sovereign. The other side argues that since everything is under God’s sovereign sway, and the future is already known to him, therefore our prayers must never be more than an acknowledgment that his will is best. They cannot achieve anything, or make any real difference; God’s will must be done in the very nature of who God is, and our prayers simply bring our wills into line with his. And thus God becomes less than personal: he no longer responds to and answers prayer.

Methodologically, they (both arguments above) err the same way: they permit inferences drawn from one pole of the biblical presentation of God to marginalize or eliminate the other pole.

What we must ask, then, is what inferences the biblical writers themselves draw from each pole. How do the poles in the tension between God the transcendent and God the person function in the prayers of the characters in Scripture? When believers have answered that question, they should firmly resolve to make the poles of the tension function in their own prayers in the same way—and in no other. In other words, compatibilism must be applied in our prayers in the same way it is applied in the prayers of Scripture.

In his prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus begins with the words, “Father, the time [lit. hour] has come.” In John’s Gospel, the “hour” is above all the Father’s appointed time for Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, and exaltation—in short, for his glorification. With the cross now immediately impending, Jesus sees that the “hour” for his glorification has arrived. So he prays, “Glorify your Son. . . .” It is the connection between the two clauses that is important for our purpose. The “hour” marks God’s own time for the death/exaltation of his Son. That is God’s sovereign plan. But Jesus does not therefore conclude there is no point praying. Rather, he prays in line with God’s sovereign plan. The logic is: “The sovereignly determined time for the glorification of the Son is here, so glorify your Son.”

So also we must learn to handle the “given” of compatibilism: God is sovereign, and we are responsible, and these two truths are so construed in Scripture that neither is allowed to relativize the other. To the “givens” of compatibilism we add the “given” that **God loves us, and is unfailingly good. And yet evil and suffering exist. The fall occurred. How shall we hold these pieces together?**

What we must not do is to draw inferences from part of the evidence that contradicts other parts of the evidence. The presence of evil does not function in the Bible so as to deny the goodness of God. The absoluteness of God’s sovereign sway never operates so that his ultimacy behind good and evil is entirely symmetrical. Nor does the presence of evil function in such a way as to deny God’s sovereignty, or his personal attachment to his covenant people.

Applications:

(1) God’s sovereignty functions to assure us that things are not getting out of control. Coupled with his love, God’s sovereignty assures the Christian that “in all things

God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28, emphasis added).

Illustration: This is particularly important where suffering is compounded by sheer uncertainty. As I write, reports are coming in of a Canadian missionary in Pakistan who has disappeared, possibly a victim of the hostility of the Afghan community. He has been gone for weeks; the police are providing little help and less hope. Meanwhile, his wife, already in Canada, awaits the birth of their third child.

Doubtless she will be buoyed up to some extent by family and friends, by a supportive church, by the comforts of home. But the fact remains there is a very good chance she will not see her husband in this world again. At some point she will wish at

least to know whether he is alive or dead. But it is quite possible she will never officially know whether she is a widow.

If someone were to come up to her just now and quote Romans 8:28 to her, it might well be unbearably insensitive, even cruel—not because the text is not true, but because the quick quotation could easily be viewed by her as a formulaic sop thoughtlessly uttered by someone who did not understand the depth of the hurt. Such pastoral questions I shall briefly address in the next chapter. Yet the fact remains that this young woman needs to discover and rest in Romans 8:28 for herself. Her uncertainties will not thereby disappear but they will be reduced to proper proportions: they will be brought under the hand of the God she knows. She may not know the future, but she knows the God who controls the future.

(2) We repeatedly learn from Scripture that the scale of time during which God works out his purposes for us is far greater than our incessant focus on the present.

Toddlers pester their parents with their urgent cries of “Now!” From God’s perspective, we adults cannot appear greatly different.

Illustration: Ruth and Naomi - Naomi never knew she would be an ancestor of Jesus the Messiah. She could not possibly have enjoyed any prospect of being written up in the canon of Scripture that hundreds of millions of Jews and Christians alike would read for millennia. Her time-scale was far too small for that.

I am not blaming her. I am saying that there are many instances in Scripture where the time-scale on which God works out his purposes is vastly greater than what we can imagine.

(3) If God is the God of the Bible, then for him there are no surprises, no insuperable problems. Far from breeding fatalism, in the Scriptures that truth breeds confidence and faith. It teaches us to trust. It teaches us to read and reread Hebrews. Much mental suffering is tied to our false expectations. We may so link our hopes and joys and future to a new job, to a promotion, to certain kinds of success, to prosperity, that when they fail to materialize we are utterly crushed. But quiet confidence in God alone breeds stability and delight amid “all the changing scenes of life.”

(4) The modern, frequently unvoiced view of God is that he is in charge of the big things, the major turning points; it is less clear that he is in charge of anything beyond that. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount argues just the reverse (Matt. 6). The sad truth is that science has taught many of us to adopt some version of the “God-of-the-gaps theory” In this view, God sets everything in motion and allows it to chug along in line with the laws that he himself sets in place. But every once in a while God intervenes. He actually does something. We call that a miracle. Biblically speaking, of course, this is nonsense. I would never deny that God has created an ordered universe. But **the biblical view of God’s sovereignty is that even now, at every second, he sustains that universe.** Indeed, he now mediates every scrap of the infinite reaches of his sovereignty through his Son (1 Cor. 15:25), who even now

is “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). A miracle is not an instance of God doing something for a change; it is an instance of God doing something out of the ordinary.

(5) Yet God is a personal God who responds. That is one of the great lessons of the psalms; it is one of the grand assumptions of the prayers of Paul. We have already observed a number of instances in which David, oppressed by illness, enemies, defeat, tragedy, guilt, turns to the Lord and begs him not to hide his face. The Lord responds, and the psalm ends in a shout of triumph.

This fact goes beyond mere intellectual argument. Unbelievers will simply not follow me here. Consider Paul: he prays three times that his “thorn in the flesh” (whatever that is) will be taken away. When I was a child, I was told that God normally had three answers: yes, no, and wait. It seems safe enough: God can’t lose, no matter what happens. But that is not God’s answer to Paul. God’s answer was this: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

The degree of our peace of mind is tied to our prayer life (Phil. 4:6-7). This is not because prayer is psychologically soothing, but because **we address a prayer answering God, a personal God, a responding God, a sovereign God whom we can trust with the outcomes of life’s confusions.**

One of the hymns of Augustus Toplady (1740-1778) superbly captures the integrity of biblical balance, and shows how the diverse poles in the very being of God, as he has revealed himself to us, conspire to bring comfort:

A sovereign protector I have,
Unseen, yet for ever at hand,
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend,
And walls of salvation surround
The soul He delights to defend.
Kind Author and ground of my hope,
Thee, Thee, for my God I avow;
My glad Ebenezer set up
And own Thou hast helped me till now.
I muse on the years that are past
Wherein my defence Thou hast proved;
Nor wilt Thou relinquish at last
A sinner so signally loved.
Inspirer and Hearer of prayer,
Thou Shepherd and Guardian of Thine,
My all to Thy covenant care
I sleeping and waking resign.
If Thou art my Shield and my Sun,

The night is no darkness to me;
And, fast as my moments roll on,
They bring me but nearer to Thee.

In short, God is less interested in answering our questions than in other things: securing our allegiance, establishing our faith, nurturing a desire for holiness. An important part of spiritual maturity is bound up with this obvious truth. God tells us a great deal about himself; but the mysteries that remain are not going to be answered at a merely theoretical and intellectual level. We may probe a little around the edges, using the minds God has given us to glimpse something of his glory. But **ultimately the Christian will take refuge from questions about God not in proud, omniscient explanations but in adoring worship.**

Jerry Nelson also found a Great illustration of God's work behind the scenes in C.S. Lewis' The Horse and the Boy chapter "The Unwelcome Fellow Traveler" specifically pages 136-139.