

From How Long O Lord By D.A. Carson

Chapter 11 The Mystery of Providence

A little girl was asked why the sun rises. She replied (with the condescending scorn that only a little girl who is sure of herself can muster), "Because it is morning, of course!"

At one level, that answer is adequate; at many other levels, it is not. Even the idea of the sun rising will not fly in many courses on astronomy. Of course, at one level the notion of the sun rising is still adequate: just look at any newspaper, calmly announcing the time of the "sunrise" as if Copernicus and Galileo never existed. In all fairness, the average reader who wants to know what time the sun "rises" does not really need a great deal of information about the earth's rotation, the relationship between time and the speed of light, and curved space.

Similarly in almost every area of thought. Certain answers and perspectives are perfectly adequate for some purposes, hopelessly inadequate for others. Some Christians witness a terrible tragedy, and immediately remember that this is a fallen world, or that Jesus told the parable of the weeds and said, "An enemy has done this." Their immediate response is right, so far as it goes. For many purposes they need probe no farther.

But exposure to a cynical expert in, say, ethics or epistemology, may force the believer to think through possible responses at a much deeper level. Severe suffering may have the same effect, with much more urgency and poignancy than a merely intellectual problem is likely to have. We have returned to the subjective nature of the "epistemic dilemma" I outlined in the first chapter of this book.

Although in the course of this book we have reflected on many biblical themes and perspectives that bear on the problem of evil and suffering, we have not yet squared away on the central issue. If God is sovereign, all-knowing, and good, then whence evil? How are we to think of evil without impugning either the integrity of God, or his capacity to change things?

Believers are trapped in a dilemma. If they seek an explanation for the apparent incompatibility of God and evil, then it seems that they are trying to take heaven by storm. Yet if they rest their case in mystery, they run the risk of naive credulity, or even of believing self-contradictory nonsense. There really is no escape from this predicament, so we must be content with trying to "muddle through," as the British so aptly put it. There are no final answers, but surely some answers are better than others. So we seek the best answers we can find, all the while acknowledging the circumambient mystery.

So writes Richard Vieth,¹ and he is right.

There is no harm in trying to resolve the mystery. As Vieth says, some answers are better than others. But all the purported resolutions of which I am aware turn out on close inspection to involve the sacrifice of one or more clearly articulated biblical truths. The name of the game is reductionism. The place to begin is in attempting to locate just where

the mystery lies. If this is not properly done, inevitably the rest of the discussion will be skewed. But if certain biblical “givens” can be tied down, then among believers any discussion that happily sacrifices those “givens” (wittingly or otherwise) will not prove very attractive.

The issues to be dealt with in this chapter are sufficiently difficult and contentious that Christians often disagree over them. You must make up your own mind. My only suggestion is that as you make up your mind, you try to distinguish the biblical “givens” from the arguments often used to filter them.

I am deeply persuaded that, even though the kind of approach to suffering taken in this chapter and the next may not be the sort of thing you feel you need right now, it is nevertheless the sort of thing that many more Christians ought to absorb before the evil day strikes.

It may be helpful if I provide a brief “map” of where we are heading in this chapter and the next. In chapter 11, I try to locate the mystery, largely inductively, by considering a substantial number of biblical passages. Then I outline a few approaches to the mystery of providence that are inadequate, and provide some reasons why there is a mystery for us to confront, and why it is a mystery and not a contradiction or sheer nonsense. In chapter 12, I work out some of the practical implications of the mystery of providence, and how it should operate in our lives, especially when we face evil and suffering. But it may be convenient to begin by introducing a word.

Compatibilism Defined

The Bible as a whole, and sometimes in specific texts, presupposes or teaches that both of the following propositions are true:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
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.

In what follows, I shall argue that the Bible upholds the truth of both of these propositions simultaneously. The view that both of these propositions are true I shall call compatibilism. We could call this view anything we like, but for various historical reasons this seems like a good term to use. All I mean by it is that, so far as the Bible is concerned, the two propositions are taught and are mutually compatible.

I hasten to insist that this is not the imposition of a certain philosophical grid onto the biblical texts. That both of these propositions are true is based on an inductive reading of countless texts in the Bible itself, as we shall see. If in this chapter I have begun with compatibilism and not with the inductive study itself, that is because I have begun by giving you the first preliminary conclusion of the inductive study, before summarizing the evidence that supports it. The larger study on which this part of the chapter is based² began with inductive study, and introduced the term “compatibilism” only when enough

evidence had been compiled to warrant it.

I hold, then, that according to the Bible both of these propositions are true, that is, that the Bible everywhere teaches or presupposes compatibilism. So now we must turn to a summary of the biblical evidence.

Compatibilism Assumed or Taught in Scripture

The Sweep of the Evidence

We may begin with the first part of the first proposition: God is absolutely sovereign. The evidence is so sustained that a very large book would be required to expound all the relevant texts. "Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:2-3). "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). He not only assigns times and places (Acts 17:26), but so reigns that even the most mundane natural processes are ascribed to his activity. If the birds feed, it is because the Father feeds them (Matt. 6:26); if wild flowers bedeck the meadow, it is because God clothes the grass (Matt. 6:30). The writer of Ecclesiastes knows of the water cycle, but biblical authors prefer to speak of God sending the rain than to say, "It is raining." God is the One who opens and shuts, who kills and brings to life, who raises up and puts down kings. He calls the stars by name, and keeps track of the number of hairs on each head (a rapidly descending count in some cases).

God's sovereignty is so broadly inclusive that, from a biblical point of view, it is not surprising to find, say unintentional manslaughter (Exod. 21:13) and family misfortune (Ruth 1:13, 20) both related to the will of God. Nor is the human will exempt from his sway: "The king's heart [the center of human personality, the origin of human choice and freedom] is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Prov. 21:1). This is not true of kings only: "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (Prov. 16:9). "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). It was God himself who turned the hearts of the Egyptians "to hate his people, to conspire against his servants" (Ps. 105:25).

So certain is Amos of the Lord's sovereignty even in the military crushing of a city that he can mock the stupidity of those who fail to acknowledge it and learn from it (Amos 3:6). "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all those things" (Isa. 45:6-7). Doubtless God "does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men" (Lam. 3:33); but even so, "Who can speak and have it happen if the LORD has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?" (Lam. 3:37-38). God hardens whomever he pleases (Rom. 9:18). Shimei is wicked to curse the Lord's anointed but David rightly understands that behind Shimei is the God who "commanded" him so to speak (2 Sam. 16:10). God himself authorizes the spirit of deception who seduces Ahab's prophets (1 Kings 22:21ff.); God himself stands behind the refusal of the sons of Eli to bow to discipline, "for it was the LORD's will to put them to death" (1 Sam. 2:25); God himself sends certain wicked people a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie (2 Thess. 2:11); God himself, in his wrath, incites David to number the people (2 Sam. 24:1).

Now the most remarkable feature of these passages—and there are scores and scores more just like them—is that at no point is the human agent exonerated of responsibility just because God is in some way behind this or that act. We shall look at several passages more closely in a moment, but it is worth verifying the point in some of the passages just cited. God in his wrath incites David to take a census, but David is held fully accountable for his act. Eli's sons are wicked; those who are strongly deluded can also be described as those who refuse "to love the truth and so be saved." At no point whatsoever does the remarkable emphasis on the absoluteness of God's sovereignty mitigate the responsibility of human beings who, like everything else in the universe, fall under God's sway.

The second proposition could be demonstrated with equal detail. "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). This is one of only countless passages where human beings are commanded to obey, or where they are entreated to do something, or told to choose or take firm resolution. The Ten Commandments have bite precisely because they can be obeyed or disobeyed. The gospel call itself lays down profound responsibility: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'" (Rom. 10:9, 11). Human beings are tested by God, who wants to find out what is in their hearts (Gen. 22:12; Exod. 16:4; 2 Chron. 32:31). Human responsibility may even arise out of God's initiative in election (Exod. 19:4-6; Deut. 4:5-8; 6:6ff.; Hos. 13:4; Mic. 3:1-12). God utters moving pleas for human repentance, and finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Isa. 30:18; 65:2; Lam. 3:31-36; Ezek. 18:30-32; 33:11; Hos. 11:7ff.).

Yet nowhere does such material ever function to make God absolutely contingent, that is, absolutely dependent for his being or choices on the moves taken by human beings.

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. There is nothing in the Bible quite like those modern writings that argue, for instance, that because men and women make moral choices, therefore God must be limited in power or knowledge (whether self-limited or limited in his very being). If there were such absolute constraints upon God, of course, then the first proposition could not possibly be true. But the remarkable thing about the Bible is that it adopts compatibilism: that is, it assumes or teaches that both propositions are true.

There is one more biblical emphasis that must be enunciated before we go on to look at a number of specific passages. It is to be distinguished from the two propositions that constitute compatibilism, but it is profoundly related to the theme of this book. It is this: 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. How to hold all this together we shall struggle with in due course; but the fact itself cannot reasonably be doubted. "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). It is precisely because Habakkuk can say to God, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (Hab. 1:13), that he has a difficult time understanding how God can sanction the terrible devastations of the Chaldeans upon his own covenant community. Note, then, that the goodness of God is the assumption, the non-negotiable. Heaven swells with the chorus, "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy" (Rev. 15:3-4).

In the selection of passages that follow, no attempt is made to offer a detailed exposition. Rather, my aim is to show how biblical compatibilism can be assumed or taught within concrete texts. One does not have to trace out the sweeping themes that I have just outlined; one can find the tension between the two propositions within the same contexts. The examples that follow are only a small but representative number of the many that could have been adduced.

Genesis 50:19-20

After Jacob's death, his sons approach Joseph out of fear that he may have been awaiting their father's death before exacting revenge. They had, after all, sold him into slavery. As the first minister of Egypt, he held them entirely in his power. What would he do?

Joseph allays their fears, and insists he does not want to put himself in the place of God. Then he looks back at that brutal incident when he was so badly treated, and comments, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

The parallelism is remarkable. Joseph does not say that his brothers maliciously sold him into slavery, and that God turned it around, after the fact, to make the story have a happy ending. How could that have been the case, if God's intent was to bring forth the good of saving many lives? Nor does Joseph suggest that God planned to bring him down to Egypt with first-class treatment all the way, but unfortunately the brothers mucked up His plan somewhat, resulting in the slight hiatus of Joseph spending a decade and a half as a slave or in prison. The story does not read that way. The brothers took certain evil initiatives, and there is no prior mention of Joseph's travel arrangements.

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.

Leviticus 20:7-8

"Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees

and follow them. I am the LORD who makes you holy.” This is only one of many passages where the command and responsibility to perform in a certain way or to be a certain thing are paired with the assurance that it is God who does the work in people. It must be remembered that in Hebrew “to consecrate,” “holy,” “to make holy [or to sanctify]” all have the same root (cf. Lev. 22:31-32).

1 Kings 8:46ff

At the dedication of the temple, Solomon not only can ask that God will respond to His people in a certain way when they repent of their sin and turn again to Him, but he can also say, “May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep the commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers” (v. 58).

1 Kings 11:11-13, 29-39; 12:1-15 [cf. 2 Kings 10:15; 11:4]

The writer tells us that God became angry with Solomon for his flagrant idolatry not least because the Lord had graciously revealed himself to the king twice. In consequence God tells him, “I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen” (11:11-13). About the same time, the prophet Ahijah from Shiloh tells a man called Jeroboam that God will give him ten tribes to rule (11:29ff.).

When the story actually plays out, however, Solomon’s son Rehoboam is found responding to the people’s request for a lighter levy of tax and labor. He consults his advisors. The older, wiser heads unite in advising him to follow the wishes of the people; the young turks tell him to respond harshly and make repression sting the more. Rehoboam foolishly follows the counsel of the latter group. “So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam the son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite” (12:15). The result is predictable: there is a rebellion, and the kingdom is split.

A secular observer would have seen nothing of the Lord’s dealings in these events. Such an observer might bemoan the folly of Rehoboam, and lament the breakup of so splendid a kingdom. And indeed there was folly; a great kingdom was broken up. But even so, the same event that was Rehoboam’s folly was the Lord’s wise dealing. God’s sovereign action did not mitigate Rehoboam’s insensitive stupidity; Rehoboam’s stupidity did not bring about events that were either unforeseen or unplanned by God himself.

Isaiah 10:5ff.

Here God addresses the mighty Assyrian nation. “Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath!” (v. 5). In other words, God has been using the Assyrians as his instrument of wrath, his own chastening hand, his “rod” and his “club” against his own covenant people. “I send him against a godless nation [God is referring to the Jews], I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets” (v. 6). But if God is using the Assyrians in this way, why is he now pronouncing a “woe” on them? He goes on to explain. Although God is using the Assyrians as his own weapon, “this is

not what he [the Assyrian] intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations” (v. 7). In the verses that follow, the Assyrians make many boasts: even their commanders are like the kings of other nations. Look at the lengthy list of cities that have been destroyed! The Assyrian boasts, “Shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?” (v. 11).

The prophet Isaiah comments, “When the Lord has finished all his work [!] against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, ‘I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes’” (v. 12). And why will God do this? Because the Assyrian says, “By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings” (v. 13). In other words, what God is holding Assyria responsible for, and the reason why he is pronouncing his “woe” upon the nation, is not because they punished the Lord’s covenant people, but because they thought in their arrogance that they were doing it by their own strength. This is nothing less than an act of rebellion against God himself, the worst sort of proud self-love. “Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it?” (v. 15). “Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors; under his pomp a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame. The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame. . .”(vv. 16-17).

This one passage—and there are dozens like it in the prophets—demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that Isaiah, at least, was a compatibilist.

John 6:37-40

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (v. 37). This verse has often been taken as a fine example of the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. God’s sovereignty is understood to operate in the first part of the verse: by God’s choice, certain people are given by the Father to the Son, and they are the ones who come to Jesus. Human responsibility is then understood to operate in the second part of the verse: it remains true that whoever comes to Jesus he will certainly receive.

Doubtless both points are true, and can be sustained from other passages. But it is doubtful if the second one is taught in this verse. The clause “I will never drive away” does not mean “I will welcome in, I will happily receive,” or the like, but “I will certainly keep in, I will certainly preserve.” The flow of the thought, then, is this: All those whom the Father gives to Jesus will come to him, and whoever thus comes to him, Jesus will never drive away—or, to put it positively, these people he undertakes to preserve, to keep in.

There are several ways of demonstrating that this is what the text means, but perhaps the most convincing is what follows next in the text. Whoever comes to me, Jesus promises, I will never drive away; “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (v. 38, emphasis added). And what is that will? “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day” (v. 39). In other words, in its context verse 37 affirms both God’s election and his preservation, through the Son, of all those he gives to Jesus.

But that does not mean it is not possible to describe the same sort of thing by placing a little more emphasis on the individual convert: “For my Father’s will is that

everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (v. 40, emphasis added).

Once again, this is but one passage among scores of similar examples in the New Testament. The Book of Acts, for instance, can report Peter’s evangelistic pleading, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (2:40), and describe the response of the crowd: “Those who accepted his message were baptized” (2:41). Yet elsewhere, at another evangelistic meeting, without any blush of embarrassment Luke describes the conversions this way: “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (13:48). Compatibilism is simply assumed.

Acts 18:9-10

When Paul arrives in Corinth, apparently he is tired and somewhat discouraged. The opening stages of his first efforts at evangelism in Europe have included a severe beating and imprisonment at Philippi, being run out of town in Thessalonica, and remarkable intellectual challenges in Athens. True, he has seen considerable fruit. Even so, the emotional drain has been enormous. Corinth presents another challenge: it was known throughout the empire as a notoriously immoral city.

In this context, then, God graciously speaks to Paul in a night vision, and reassures him: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” Clearly, certain responsibilities are laid on Paul. God uses means in evangelism, and in this instance Paul figures centrally in those means. Nevertheless the encouragement that God showers on Paul depends on the doctrine of election. The “many people” that God “has” in Corinth are the people whom he regards as his own even before they are convened. Thus election in this passage functions as an incentive to evangelism.

Philippians 2:12-13

“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

This passage is extremely important, as much for what it does not say as for what it does. It does not say that God has done his bit in your salvation, and now it is up to you. Still less does it suggest that because God is working in you “to will and to act according to his good purpose” you should therefore be entirely passive and simply let him take over. Nor is it (as not a few commentators wrongly suggest) that God has done the work of justification in you, and now you must continue with your own sanctification.

Paul describes what the Philippians must do as obeying what he has to say, and as working out (not working for!) their own salvation. The assumption is that choice and effort are required. The “working out” of their salvation includes honestly pursuing the same attitude as that of Christ (2:5), learning to do everything the gospel demands without complaining or arguing (2:14), and much more. But at the same time, they must learn that it is God himself who is at work in them “to will and to act according to his good purpose.” God’s sovereignty extends over both their willing and their actions.

Indeed, far from being embarrassed by this candid compatibilism, Paul sees in God's sovereignty an incentive to encourage the Philippians on their way. "Work out your own salvation," he tells them, "for it is God working in you." God's sway in their lives is, for Paul, not a disincentive to action, but an incentive: get in step with what God is doing.

Acts 4:23-31

After Peter and John have been released from prison, following their interrogation after the miraculous healing of the cripple who had lain for years at the temple gate called Beautiful (Acts 3:1ff.), they return "to their own people" (v. 23)—to Christians—and report the details of what had occurred. The response of the church is to pray. The prayer begins by acknowledging God's sovereignty over the heaven and earth that he himself created. They then recall Psalm 2:1-2, words that God himself spoke "by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David" (v. 25): "Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One" (vv. 25-26). Naturally enough, the Christians cannot help but see the fulfillment of this Scripture in the events surrounding Jesus' death. But it is the way they phrase themselves that is so important: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (vv. 27-28). They then proceed with their petition.

There is lots of guilt to go around: Herod, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, the people of Israel—all were involved in a conspiracy. The word is a strong one, and in light of the psalm just quoted leaves no doubt that the Christians held them all to be profoundly guilty before God. Yet at the same time, the Christians could confess to God that the conspirators "did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

It only takes a moment's reflection to show that, if the Christian gospel is true, this tension could not have been otherwise. If the initiative had been entirely with the conspirators, and God simply came in at the last minute to wrest triumph from the jaws of impending defeat, then the cross was not his plan, his purpose, the very reason why he had sent his Son into the world—and that is unthinkable. If on the other hand God was so orchestrating events that all the human agents were nonresponsible puppets, then it is foolishness to talk of conspiracy, or even of sin—in which case there is no sin for Christ to remove by his death, so why should he have to die? God was sovereignly at work in the death of Jesus; human beings were evil in putting Jesus to death, even as they accomplished the Father's will; and God himself was entirely good.

Christians who may deny compatibilism on front after front become compatibilists (knowingly or otherwise) when they think about the cross. There is no alternative, except to deny the faith. And if we are prepared to be compatibilists when we think about the cross—that is, to accept both of the propositions I set out at the head of this chapter as true, as they are applied to the cross—it is only a very small step to understanding that compatibilism is taught or presupposed everywhere in the Bible.

Compatibilism Explored

Granted that the Bible everywhere teaches or assumes that compatibilism as defined in this chapter is true, we have still not come any closer to thinking through how it is true. Perhaps the following reflections will help to clarify the issue, or at least to specify a little more closely where the mystery lies—which is, after all, what I set out to find at the beginning of this chapter!

(1) 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.³

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.

(2) 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.

In other words, if I sin, I cannot possibly do so outside the bounds of God’s sovereignty (or the many texts already cited have no meaning), but I alone am responsible for that sin—or perhaps I and those who tempted me, led me astray, and the like. God is not to be blamed. But if I do good, it is God working in me both to will and to act according to his good pleasure. God’s grace has been manifest in my case, and he is to be praised.

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

(3) 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.

If compatibilism is true—and I cannot see how the biblical evidence supporting it can be evaded—then any Christian definition of freedom must lie within two constraints. First, human freedom cannot involve, absolute power to contrary; that is, it cannot include such liberal power that God himself becomes contingent. That would deny the second of the two propositions that constitute compatibilism. 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.

For instance, no matter how God operates behind the scenes in the crucifixion of his Son, Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the others did what they chose to do; they did what they wanted to do. That is why they are rightly held responsible. But that is quite different from saying that they had absolute power to contrary in the event, for then God himself would have been contingent, and then the cross becomes an afterthought in the mind of God. It certainly becomes impossible to say that the human participants did what God ordained would happen! The human participants were thus not absolutely free; for if they were, God could have ordained that the events of the crucifixion take place, and then the human beings involved could have decided otherwise. But God did not ordain that they do something as if they were mere puppets, or, still worse, against their will. They did what they wanted to do, and that is why they are rightly held accountable.

Second, human freedom since the fall cannot be discussed without reference to the fall. Jesus insists that everyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). Even when doing our best, we hear a little whisper over our shoulder telling us how good we look while we are doing it. We devote ourselves to God for an hour of prayer, and spend part of the time wondering if people realize how pious we are. We give ourselves sacrificially to some good cause, then spoil it by being condescending or unforgiving to those who have not similarly given themselves. We live for a few moments or a few hours with God genuinely at the center of our affections, our desires, our goals, and then get sidetracked by personal ambition, lust, or greed. Our wills, then, are not truly free; they are enslaved by sin.

Within this framework, real freedom is freedom to obey God without restraint or reserve. It is not absolute power to contrary; it is wanting to please God at every moment.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the Christology of John’s Gospel.⁴ There Jesus is repeatedly shown to be the one who fulfills what has been written of him and who aligns himself with the Father’s plan, but who does this in self-conscious obedience to his Father. The cross is inevitable: Jesus is the lamb of God, the predicted “hour” must arrive, the passion is foreseen in Scripture; yet on the other hand, no one simply takes Jesus’ life from him: he voluntarily lays it down of his own will (10:18). In Jesus the divine determining and the perfection of human obedience come together in one person, since his very food is to do the will of him who sent him (4:34), and he always does what pleases the Father (8:29). Here we see “free will” operating at its best!

(4) The real nub of the tension lies in the kind of God who presents himself to us in the Bible. This is best seen by reflecting a little more on the nature of human responsibility.

For the Christian, virtually all of what we are held responsible for, all that we obey

or disobey, all that we choose or disavow, is foundationally defined by what God has commanded or forbidden, But the notion of God commanding or forbidding depends on understanding that God is personal. Christians are not saying that there is an impersonal “it” fled up with the creation, and we must get ourselves in line with the way the creation operates if we are to function smoothly within creation. Christians are saying that there is a personal “he” out there, a heavenly Father, separate from the creation. What makes sin heinous is that it is defiance of what he prescribes or forbids. Our moral responsibility is tied to our accountability to him.

The trouble comes from the fact that all that we customarily mean by personhood or personal or personality is time-bound and finite. I speak to my wife, she speaks to me: that involves sequence, time. I tell my son to get dressed for school, he obeys or disobeys, as the case may be. My daughter asks my wife a question; my wife answers. She asks me for chocolate; I say yes or no. We love each other; we resent each other; we forgive each other. These are functions that are characteristic of what it means to be a person. And all of our (admittedly earthly) models entail finitude.

But when I say that God is personal, I must also say that he is transcendent—above space and time, and utterly sovereign. When God asks a question, does he not, on the Bible’s showing, also know the answer? When he pleads, or forgives, or forbids, or exhorts, I dare not forget that he cannot be personal in exactly the same way that finite human beings are personal; for God’s transcendence and sovereignty establish one of the poles in compatibilism. That he is a person is the presupposition behind my moral accountability; but that does not permit me to think of him as finite, for I know he is not.

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.

It should now be a little clearer why, in chapter 10 of this book, I was unwilling to endorse the doctrine of the so-called impassibility of God. That doctrine is too tied to just one side of the biblical evidence. But that does not mean that the other side—that stresses God’s suffering, his love, his responding—is any more reliable if it is abstracted from the complementary pole of God’s transcendence. We must zealously hold, as well as we are able, to the fullest biblical picture of the nature of God, lest we create a mere subset of God, an idol that suits us but that does not really exist.

(5) It appears, then, that the problems involved in holding to the truth of both of the propositions that constitute compatibilism are profoundly tied to the very nature of God himself. Ironically, this provides us with a way forward. We are reasonably well placed to isolate some of the things we do not know about God; that is, we see that the Bible describes God as both transcendent and personal, and in part we justify this strange pairing because 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.

Examples may help. The God of the Bible created all things; he lives above or

outside time and space as we know them. He is transcendent. But that means I do not really understand his relationship to time and space. I see that he has revealed himself to human beings in time and space, but I don't have a clue how he manages it, or how it looks to him. I cannot be certain, for instance, whether he experiences sequence. If he does, it cannot be exactly the way I do, for my notion of sequence is bound by the categories of space and time. Yet that he is not bound by space and time does not entail the conclusion that he does not experience sequence in any sense. Certainly he has chosen to reveal himself to us in the space/time categories we more or less understand. Clearly this has enormous relevance to foreordination, predestination, to affirmations that the conspirators at Jesus' crucifixion did what God decreed beforehand that they would do, to the notions of prophecy and fulfillment. But if he had been willing to sacrifice the biblical emphasis on the personhood of God, on the personal, speaking, interacting, responding nature of God, he could have conveyed the impression of transcendence without overlaying it with this emphasis on God the person. The problem of compatibilism reduces to a number of things we do not know about the very nature of God.

I see that he presents himself as personal, but I have no idea how a personal God can also be transcendent.

I see that the Bible ascribes everything to him in one way or another, that his sovereignty leaves nothing out. I see that the biblical descriptions of his causation of evil deeds insist that he is good, and that secondary agents are evil. I do not know how he uses secondary agents in this way. Transparently, how he does this is related to who he is, to his "domain" outside or above space and time, to the nature of his sovereignty and his choices as a person: but I still do not see how he does it.

So I am driven to see not only that compatibilism is itself taught in the Bible, but that it is tied to the very nature of God; and on the other hand, I am driven to see that my ignorance about many aspects of God's nature is precisely the same ignorance that instructs me not to follow the whims of many contemporary philosophers and deny that compatibilism is possible.

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.

Compatibilism Defended

There are many Christians who deny the account of compatibilism just given. Before trying to use what we have gleaned in this chapter to address the problem of evil and suffering, I should say a few words about the objections that are most commonly raised. I shall restrict myself to objections raised by those who have a high view of Scripture but who nevertheless reject the account of providence I have lightly sketched in this chapter. Three are worth noting.

The Ruthless Definition

Here objections are made possible because those who object make use of a priori definitions that force the evidence into an artificial mold. By "a priori definition" I mean a definition of a crucial term that is based not on an evenhanded and inductive study of the

biblical evidence, but on some prior assumption, usually a philosophical bias.

Doubtless the most frequent abuse in this regard concerns the expression “free will.” Everyone who holds that human beings are not just puppets who cannot be held responsible for what they say, do, think, and are holds to some definition of free will. But many people simply assume that free will must entail absolute power to contrary.⁵ And that brings free will into irreconcilable conflict with the biblical evidence that denies God ever becomes absolutely contingent. For instance, when the Basingers posed the question of the book they edited, they put the matter this way: “To what extent does human freedom pose limitations on God’s sovereign control over earthly affairs?”⁶ That of course, begs the question. They have assumed that any definition of human freedom must “pose limitations [sic: I think they mean “impose limitations”] on God’s sovereign control.” And they have done this without reflecting on whether such an assumed definition of freedom is either warranted or forbidden by the biblical texts themselves. The result is that theologians and thinkers in this camp take all kinds of creative steps that cannot be squared with the biblical evidence. Bruce Reichenbach cannot believe that Ephesians 1:11 means what it says, so he reinterprets it to mean nothing more than that “everything God does he does in conformity with his purposes.”⁷ That is such a truism it is scarcely worth saying; in any case, it is not what the text of Scripture says. In the same volume, one author adopts this definition of free will and limits God’s power but not his knowledge: God knows what free moral agents will do in advance but does not in any way determine it. Another author, who lapses into regrettable sarcasm, limits God’s knowledge: the nature of free decisions is such that not even omniscience could know the outcome. But neither of these authors works through any of the relevant biblical material that flatly eliminates their a priori definitions.

Quite apart from the failure of these writers to engage the biblical texts, they have not addressed the most common of objections.⁸ For instance, 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? Is it not better to question whether the a priori definition is right?

Or consider the term “foreknowledge.” Certainly the Bible gives numerous instances of God knowing certain things in advance. In an earlier chapter we even charted evidence of God knowing things that would have occurred under different circumstances (so-called middle knowledge). But when Paul says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son . . .” (Rom. 8:29), is that the kind of “foreknowledge” Paul has in mind? Countless philosopher-theologians simply assume it is, and in consequence insist that predestination is nothing more than God choosing to do what he foresees the human being will choose to do. This way of wording things, of course, makes the human being the pivotal “decider”; God’s decision is not predestination in any meaningful sense, but a kind of ratification-in-advance. Moreover, too little attention is paid to the fact that this text does not speak of God foreknowing that such and such will take place, but that God foreknows the person. Many have shown that in Semitic thought “to know” a person can have

overtone of intimacy: if a husband “knows” his wife, for instance, he has sexual intercourse with her. For God to “foreknow” certain people, especially in the context of Romans 8:28-30, means (as most serious commentators point out) that God has a personal relationship with the individual in advance. Those whom God foreknows in this sense, he predestines “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” Besides, it is a strange method that takes a doubtful definition of one occurrence of “foreknowledge” and pits it against the many references in which it is clearly stated that God has chosen his people (e.g., Deut. 4:37-39; 7:6-9; Ps. 4:3; Matt. 24:22, 31; Luke 18:7; John 15:16; Acts 13:48; Gal. 4:27, 31; Eph. 1:4-6; 2 Tim. 2:10; 1 Pet. 1:2). Those who opt for this route have “made sense” of a mystery that should not be explained away, and have done so in defiance of the biblical evidence.⁹

In short, the ruthless definition must not be permitted to disallow the clear teaching of biblical texts.

The Triumph of Mutual Annihilation

This technique is also fairly common. It is found, for instance, in the more responsible essays in the two books edited by Clark Pinnock on this subject, namely, *Grace Unlimited* and *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*. I am thinking of the essays of I. Howard Marshall, Grant R. Osborne, and others.

Osborne’s approach is revealing, because he thoughtfully lets his readers in on his mental processes. He can weigh up a number of texts that emphasize the sovereignty of God, for instance, and be quite careful not to permit his exposition of them to curtail what they actually say. Then he turns to those texts that emphasize human responsibility, human choices, human failures, or the like, and tries hard not to milk them for more than they are worth. The doubtful step comes when he sets the conclusions of the one set of texts against the conclusions of the other set of texts. Some kind of mutual annihilation takes place (as when a quark smashes into an antiquark). The result is that neither set of texts means quite what we thought they meant after all—though in Osborne’s hands it is the set of texts on divine sovereignty that suffers the most.

But if the inductive study of the passages I have surveyed in this chapter is correct, not to mention many more passages like them, this is precisely what must not be done. It is another way of pitting human responsibility or human will or human freedom against God’s sovereign activity as if they were mutually limiting, as if they must be mutually limiting. But that assumption is what Scripture expressly disavows: namely, that the biblical writers are compatibilists.

The Early Creation of Grids

All of us, of course, create grids or models of what we have understood from the text, and these grids or models help us to interpret other material we find in the texts. But these grids must not be built too early in the inductive process, and they must remain open to correction from the text itself. If the grid is built too early or is too rigid, then instead of being a helpful guide to the text and a useful organizer of fresh material, it becomes a way of filtering out of the text whatever cannot slip through the grid. For example, consider the thirty-five or so passages that speak of God “repenting” of something or other (to use the language of the KJV). It can easily be shown that much of

this repenting is not quite like human repenting. Human beings repent of moral evil; God never does, since he performs no evil of which to repent. That is why most modern translations use words such as “regret,” “relent,” “grieve over,” “retract,” or the like. Still, the passages are intriguing. God can “relent” over a step he has already taken (Gen. 6:6-7; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35). He may “relent” over what he has said he would do or even started doing (Pss. 90:13; 106:44-45; Jer. 18:7-10; 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13-14; Jon, 3:9-10; 4:3), perhaps in response to the prayer of an intercessor (Exod. 32:12-14; Amos 7:3-6). On the other hand, there are certain matters and occasions over which he will not “relent” (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Jer. 4:28; 15:6; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14). In one remarkable passage, God does “relent” because he is not a human being (Hos. 11:8-9): God is so compassionate that his heart “is changed within [him],” and he does not carry out the fierce anger and devastation he had planned for Ephraim. These passages are not all of a piece. God’s “relenting” and not sending a promised judgment turns on a repeated and sometimes articulated pattern: if a people to whom judgment is promised turn from their sin, the Lord will not carry out the judgment (e.g., Ezek. 33). If God “relents” or “grieves over” the choice of Saul as king (1 Sam. 15:11, 35), it is after we have been told that God has already sought out another man, a man after his own heart (1 Sam. 13:14).

Nevertheless these passages are part of the web of the biblical narrative. They are part of the picture of God as a personal God who interacts with his people. But it is precisely for that reason that one must be very cautious about extrapolating such texts to the point where they are in danger of denying complementary truths about God the transcendent Sovereign. For instance, in a generally fine article on the “repentance” of God, Terence Fretheim crosses over this forbidden line when he draws this conclusion: “To confess that God is a God who repents says something about a God who is ready to reverse himself. ... It says that God’s own history (what has been said and done in the past) may not be fully adequate for dealing with a changed present.”¹⁰ This assumes that God has a “history” in the same way that we do; it assumes a God locked into space and time categories. Above all, it fails to wrestle with the problem as to how this set of texts should be linked with those that stress God’s immutability, boundless wisdom, omniscience, and power.

For another example, consider the verse, “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). There are only four principal things it could mean: (1) God wants everyone to come to repentance, and so therefore everyone will finally be saved, since no one can thwart his will; (2) God wants everyone to come to repentance, but for whatever reason he cannot bring this to pass, since some will not be saved; (3) the “everyone” whom God wants to be saved is established by the context to be the elect only; or (4) the text establishes God’s saving stance toward the entire world: he is the God who wants everyone without exception to be saved. But since this is not the only way the Bible speaks of God’s “wants” or his “will” one must not appeal to the text to say anything for or against some particular view of election or free will.

A universalist might well adopt the first position. Appealing to this text and one or two others like it, the universalist then creates a grid, and any text that speaks of some not being saved (and there are hundreds) has to be explained away. Someone else might

appeal to the text assuming the second interpretation is correct. In this view God has done everything he can, and now any individual's salvation depends entirely and exclusively on the "free will" (understood to entail absolute power to contrary, as already defined) of that individual. The grid is constructed, and all that the Bible has to say about election is simply filtered through that grid. The result is never any real choice on the part of God, but at most a kind of ratification-in-advance. And so we could work our way through the third and fourth options.

In fact, biblical theologians have long noted that when the Bible says God wills something or wants something, the language is used in different ways. God sometimes wills something in a sense no different from decree, from efficient accomplishment. The texts previously cited provide many examples: what God wills in heaven and on earth takes place, and he works everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. On the other hand, the Bible can speak of what God wills in terms of his desires. God's will is that we Christians should be holy (1 Thess. 4:3), but it does not take many powers of observation to note that this cannot be a reference to God's efficient or decretal will. Still other passages speak of God's permission, as, for instance, when God grants Satan permission to afflict Job. Similarly, God gives sinners over to their evil ways (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28); in this sense God does not willingly afflict his people (Lam. 3:33): that is, he permits it, but it is not his desire. Because he is slow to anger and rich in mercy only reluctantly does he afflict his people.

We must be extremely careful how we handle this diversity of uses when we come, say to 2 Peter 3:9. At the risk of simplification, it appears that when the Bible speaks of God's will in an efficient or decretal fashion, that use of language belongs to the assumption that God is transcendent and sovereign; when the Bible speaks of God's will as his desire, quite possibly unfulfilled desire, that use of language belongs to the assumption that God is a person who interacts with other persons. To appeal to such usage to deny that God is sovereign is as irresponsible as it is to appeal to the first usage to deny that God is personal.

Similarly, when the Bible speaks of God's permission of evil, there is still no escape from his sovereignty. A sovereign and omniscient God who knows that, if he permits such and such an evil to occur it will surely occur, and then goes ahead and grants the permission, is surely decreeing the evil. But the language of permission is retained because it is part of the biblical pattern of insisting that God stands behind good and evil asymmetrically (in the sense already defined). He can never be credited with evil; he is always to be credited with the good. He permits evil to occur; the biblical writers would not similarly say that he simply permits good to occur! So even though permission in the hands of a transcendent and omniscient God can scarcely be different from decree, the use of such language is part and parcel of the insistence that God is not merely transcendent, but that he is also personal and entirely good. That God's permission of evil does not in any way allow evil to escape the outermost bounds of God's sovereignty is presupposed when we are told, for instance, that the Lord persuades the false prophet what to say (Ezek. 14:9), or that his wrath incites David to sin by taking a census (2 Sam. 24:1). When the Chronicler describes the same incident and ascribes the effective temptation to Satan (1 Chron. 21:1), this is not in contradiction of the passage in 2 Samuel (for the biblical writers, including the Chronicler, are far too committed to compatibilism to

allow such a view), but in complementary explanation. One can say that God sends the strong delusion, or one can say that Satan is the great deceiver: it depends on whether the sovereign transcendence of God is in view, or his use of secondary agents.

Some theologians are shocked by and express bitter reproach against other theologians who speak of God “causing” evil in any sense. At one level, they are to be applauded: everywhere the Bible maintains the unfailing goodness of God. On the other hand, if you again scan the texts cited in this chapter, it must be admitted that the biblical writers are rather bolder in their use of language than the timid theologians!

Little is gained by being more “pious” in our use of language than the Bible is, and much may be lost. By being too protective of God, we are in fact building a grid out of only a subset of the biblical materials, and filtering out some of what is revealed in the Bible about the God who has so graciously disclosed himself. The result, rather sadly is a god who is either less than sovereign or less than personal, either incompetent and frustrated or impassive and stoical. But the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is utterly transcendent and passionately personal. These are among the “givens” of Scripture, and we sacrifice them to our peril.

Some Concluding Reflections

(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.

Perhaps I can make the point another way. In an earlier book I discussed the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility at some length.¹¹ One writer who has taken me to task on some points, William Lane Craig, follows the line of my

exposition in some places, and then inserts statements like this: “Carson admits that the Scriptures do sometimes distinguish between what God does and what humans do.... Carson also concedes that there is in the Scriptures a sort of asymmetry in the way in which our deeds are ascribed ultimately to God.”¹² The truth of the matter is that I neither “admit” nor “concede” anything of the sort: I insist on them. Craig’s work has considerable value; but he has wrongly tried to make me out to emphasize only one side of the tension, so that I can be shown to be forced into “concessions” and “admissions.” That way I can serve as a foil for Craig’s own philosophical agenda! But my point, in both that earlier book and this chapter, is that the fullness and balance of the biblical tension that surrounds the doctrine of God must be vigorously maintained.

(3) The mystery of providence defies our attempt to tame it by reason. I do not mean it is illogical;¹³ 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? We voice our “Amen!” to many truths written by Paul. Can we voice our “Amen!” to this? “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” (Rom. 9:19-20). This side of glory at least, there is no other answer. Paul is prepared not only to live with it, but to tease out its implications: “‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ [Isa. 29:16; 45:9].’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory... ?” (Rom. 9:21-23).

Of course, this would be intolerable, if it were all that Paul says about God, all that the Bible says about God. But Paul still assumes that the “objects of his wrath” are guilty, that God is holy, that God loves us, that God has disclosed himself to us, and so forth. He can let each relevant truth spring forth in power. And if that means he does not know, cannot now know, just how God operates in this fallen and broken world, or even why God sanctioned the fall in the first place, he refuses to domesticate God to get out of the dilemma. He is prepared to sound not a little like God addressing Job: “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?”

(4) But how should the mystery of providence function in my life as a believer? Do I simply throw up my hands, acknowledge God’s mysterious providence, and stagger on, struggling under the bondage of evil or suffering?

That is the topic for the next chapter.

Questions for Further Study

1. What is meant by saying that the biblical writers assume or teach compatibilism?
2. How should one arrive at a definition of free will? What definition would you offer? Why?
3. Choose two or more of the specific texts where God's sovereignty and human responsibility are in close proximity, and memorize them. Then explain them to someone else.
4. What is meant by saying that God stands behind good and evil asymmetrically? Why is this important?
5. What are some things we do not know about God?
6. Find a number of biblical passages that reflect the different ways the Bible speaks of God's "will" or "desire" or the like.
7. Why is it "essential to doctrinal and spiritual well-being" to maintain the diverse polarities in the nature of God simultaneously?
8. In anticipation of the next chapter, how do you think the mystery of providence should function in your life?

Chapter 12 The Comfort of Providence: Learning to Trust

To say that something is mysterious is not to say that nothing can be said of it. Christians learn to accept two or three profound mysteries: the nature of the Trinity, for instance, or the way the human and the divine unite in Jesus Christ. Much has been said about these subjects, some of it wise and insightful. Not a little of what has been said seeks to demonstrate that we are not dealing with contradictions but with mysteries. Other works attempt to trace the connections between one aspect or another of these mysteries, and the entire structure of Christian doctrine.

So it is—or should be—with the mystery of providence, part and parcel of the larger tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. In practice, however, the implications of this tension bear so immediately on the way we live, pray, conceive of evangelism, think about suffering, and much more, that we may be somewhat stymied in our Christian growth before we learn to handle the tension responsibly. For example, everyone knows of Christians who come into some deepened awareness of the sovereignty of God, and who in consequence find the urgency of their prayer life wilting. It is not enough to say this shouldn't be; we need to find out why this happens, and take steps to prevent it.

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.

Compatibilism Applied: Living Responsibly under God's Sovereignty

I shall begin by stating the principle, and then apply it to two or three areas. When seeking to apply to any part of life and thought the biblically based tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, or between God's sovereign transcendence and his personhood, the most useful constraint is the close observation of how each component in the tension functions in Scripture. Success in this endeavor is wonderfully liberating; failure always corrodes the beauty of the biblical balance, and generates enervating fanaticism or catastrophic fatalism.

Examples make plain the operation of this principle more quickly and clearly than abstract discussion.

Prayer

It is very easy to show how the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility can tie people up in knots when it is applied to prayer. For example, Clark Pinnock, who holds that human "free will" includes absolute power to contrary (discussed in the previous chapter) and insists that God's omniscience cannot include knowledge of our future free decisions (or else, he says, they would not be truly "free"), writes, "If you believe that prayer changes things, my whole position is established."¹ But if God is so impotent that he cannot save my unconverted cousin (for that would infringe upon my cousin's free will), then why bother praying for this at all? On the other hand, J. I. Packer argues that our habit of praying that God would save this person or that proves that when we are on our knees we really do think that it is God alone who has the power to bring about salvation.² That is doubtless true, but opponents may be pardoned for asking why it is necessary to pray at all, since God's election has already established who will and who will not be saved, and all the praying in the world is not going to change God's sovereign decree.

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. They find it easier to make sense of Jesus' injunction not to let our prayers rabbit on and on under the assumption we will be heard because of our many words (Matt. 6:7), than to imitate Jesus' example in praying right through the night (Luke 6:12).

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.

If we grant that the tension between God’s sovereign transcendence and his personhood, outlined in the previous chapter, is of the very essence of God’s gracious self-disclosure to us in Scripture, then both of these approaches to prayer cannot possibly be right. Methodologically, they 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.

It would take up too much space to provide a comprehensive catalogue of such applications: this is not, after all, a book on prayer. But a few examples will illustrate the point.

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.”

This is not anomalous. To pray in Jesus’ name is to pray (among other things) in accord with all that Jesus’ name represents; it is to pray in accord with Jesus’ will. When the persecuted church cries, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” it is not talking Jesus into something he does not plan to do.

When the church prays after the first whiff of persecution (Acts 4:23ff.), the believers address God as “Sovereign Lord,” but that does not inject fatalism into their requests. They might have said (had they followed some contemporary models): “Sovereign Lord, if we are to be persecuted, so be it. Your will be done. Amen!” Instead,

they see their persecution as of a piece with the opposition and suffering their Master endured—suffering which was predicted by Scripture and brought about through evil men by the hand of a sovereign God working out his plan of redemption. And then they pray, “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders though the name of your holy servant Jesus.” In this they assume that the God whom they address is a prayer-hearing, responding God. The implicit ground of their petition is the scriptural presentation of God as so sovereign that he laughs at the machinations of the nations and the “peoples” who “plot in vain.”

One of the most remarkable prayers in Scripture is the intercession of Moses after the idolatry of the golden calf. When the Lord threatens to wipe out the nation and replace it with a nation made up of Moses’ descendants, the language God uses is very strong: “I have seen these people... and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation” (Exod. 32:9-10).

But Moses will not “leave the Lord alone.” Why should the Lord abandon the people whom he brought out of Egypt? After going to all that work, shall he now simply write them off (32:12)? Does God want to become the laughing-stock of the pagan nations? “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?’” (32:12). “Turn from your fierce anger,” Moses pleads. “Relent and do not bring disaster on your people” (32:12). Then Moses appeals to the faithfulness of God, the immutability of his own declared purposes: “Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever’” (32:13). In other words, God is never less than personal, and never less than sovereign. Both poles of the biblical presentation of God are appealed to by Moses—never to reduce the one by the other, but only in mutual reinforcement.

And the outcome? “Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened” (32:14).

Perhaps we gain another insight when we compare two or three other Old Testament passages with a similar theme. In Amos 7, the prophet repeatedly intercedes on behalf of Israel when the Lord threatens various judgments: “I cried out, ‘Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!’” (v. 2). Repeatedly we read, “So the LORD relented” (vv. 3, 6). By contrast, the false prophets of Israel are denounced in these terms: “You have not gone up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the LORD” (Ezek. 13:5). That is a metaphorical way of saying that they have not interceded with God on behalf of the nation: that is the way the wall is maintained (both here and in Ezek. 22). That would have been God’s way; but instead, the false prophets have prophesied false visions and uttered lying divinations. So judgment threatens: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezek. 22:30-31, emphasis added),

This is remarkable. God seeks out believers who will pray in this intercessory way. He expects to be pleaded with along these lines. It is true (though inadequate) to say that he sees prayer as a means to the end, the preservation of the people. Certainly in the light of his own covenant promises and the larger presentation of his sovereignty in the pages of the Old Testament, it is hard to believe that he would become hopelessly frustrated if he could not “find” someone to stand in the gap, for where God determines to save his people he is always able to ensure that deliverance will come “from another place” than the one people expect (Esther 4:14).

For that matter, judging by the still larger categories of God’s ultimacy behind all good acts, of his Spirit working in the hearts of men and women, of his sway in all matters small and great, the responsibility of his people to pray rests heavily upon them, while if his people do in fact pray it is already a mark of his grace. For the prayer itself does not escape God’s sovereignty; yet it is not meaningless recital since it is addressed to a personal God. And thus if God does not “find” someone to intercede before him “in the gap,” it would be true to say, simultaneously, that it is because those who should have been praying have failed to do so and will be held morally accountable for their failure, and that God himself has withheld his gracious work in their lives because he is determined to bring down the judgment he has long threatened. Thus both God’s sovereignty and God’s personhood, rightly applied, become an incentive to pray.

Evangelism

To many modern minds, the free offer of the gospel entails the view that men and women are so free that God himself becomes contingent, and therefore that what the Bible says about election must be denied or explained away by appealing to an exegetically doubtful understanding of “foreknowledge” (discussed in the previous chapter). To others, once they believe that the Bible insists on God’s sovereign election of some men and women to eternal life, some of the fire goes out of their enthusiasm for evangelism. If people are going to close with God, they will close with God regardless of what I do: though few would be so crass as to put it that way, one comes away with a vague feeling that there is no point getting too upset over the lost. Where these attitudes are displayed, of course, they reinforce all the biases of the zealous evangelists on the other side: See, they say, as soon as you start believing in the absoluteness of God’s election, you cut the heart out of evangelism.

The problem, again, is that biblical truths are not being permitted to function in biblical ways. Inferences are being drawn from things truly taught in the Bible that are being used to disallow what the Bible clearly says elsewhere. The solution, again, is to insist that biblical doctrines function in our lives and thinking the way they do in the Bible.

It is not possible in this short chapter to do more than offer a few samples of the kind of usage to which election and free invitations to trust Christ are put in the Scriptures. We have already seen that in Acts 18:9-10 election functions as an incentive to evangelism, not as a disincentive. The idea is that if God has “his people” out there, then the appropriate thing for Christians to do is to get involved in evangelism, precisely because that is working with God and not against him. Moreover, if God has his people out there, Paul is assured of results—not because he is such a gifted evangelist, but

because God's people will in due course come to him. I know more than one missionary working quietly in exceedingly difficult situations who press on with their hard and, from a merely human standpoint, thoroughly unrewarding work, because they are convinced that God has his people, who will come to him in God's own good time. Historically, there is no necessary connection between a firm belief in what the Bible transparently says about election and some sort of cooling of evangelistic ardor. One need only think of George Whitefield and Howell Harris, or of most of the early British missionaries, or of many of the Southern Baptist leaders in the last century.

Another function of election is the abatement of human pride. This is true in many passages. At the end of John 6, for instance, when many are deserting him, Jesus asks the Twelve if they will also drift away. Simon Peter replies with a trace of bravado: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (6:68-69). Confronted by a claim like that, Jesus chooses this opportunity to make a counterclaim by his gentle rhetorical question: "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? And [not "Yet," as in the NIV] one of you is a devil!" (6:70). Thus Jesus informs Peter that the initiative rested with Jesus himself, and that in any case Peter should not speak for all of the Twelve: one would prove to be the betrayer. Even this was not outside Jesus' knowledge or control: he himself chose the Twelve, yet he knew that one of them would betray him. Some election may be to less than eternal life! In Romans 9, election is again tied to the freedom of grace: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (v. 15). But this does not mean that saving faith is simply imposed, that the prospective "convert" is dragged, kicking and screaming, to confess faith that is not really personal faith. "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom. 10:10, emphasis added). Our hymns sometimes keep this tension together better than our prose:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
 He moved my heart to seek him, seeking me;
 It was not I that found, O Savior true;
 No, I was found by Thee.

Thou didst reach forth Thy hand and mine enfold;
 I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea;
 'Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold
 As Thou, dear Lord, on me.

I find, I walk, I love, but O the whole
 Of love is but my answer, Lord to Thee!
 For Thou wert long beforehand with my soul;
 Always Thou lovedst me.

In some instances the emphasis on obedient hearing is used to locate blame and responsibility. Paul insists that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard though the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). But this does not function in his thought

as a mitigation of divine election. It functions, rather, to focus blame on the nation of Israel for hearing yet not believing (10:18ff.).

The challenge “And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?” (10:14-15) not only justifies Paul’s ministry but probably also prepares his readers, in the context of this epistle, to provide some help for the apostle in his projected evangelistic expedition to Spain (15:24ff.).

Much more could be said, but the point is simple enough: we will not be so likely to destroy the mysteries that are part of the warp and woof of Scripture, of Scripture’s disclosure about the nature of God, if we take care to allow the poles of these mysteries to function only in the way they do in Scripture.

Other Examples

In chapter 11, I briefly sketched other examples without exploring them. Nor can I take the space to explore them here, but it might be worth mentioning them.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is simultaneously the one whose ministry and death/exaltation are determined by his Father’s will (whether expressed in Scripture or in Jesus’ inner awareness), and the one who voluntarily obeys his Father. His obedience therefore provides us with a model of how we ought to respond to the claims of God’s sovereignty. Indeed, the Son’s dependence and obedience are so perfect that it is precisely in such dependence upon and obedience to his Father that the Father’s will is communicated and his sovereignty extended (5:19ff.).

Above all, it is the cross of Jesus Christ where all the elements of these mysteries coalesce. The cross was nothing less than God’s sovereign plan, and his sovereign sway extended not only to many details “modeled” in advance in Old Testament prophecy but to the wicked machinations of the human agents who arranged for Jesus to be executed. Yet Jesus went to the cross voluntarily: he chose to obey the Father. He prayed, “Not my will, but yours be done!”—a prayer which needed praying, even though at one level it is scarcely conceivable that God’s redemptive will on the cross could not have been accomplished. Here is the outbreak of the most odious evil, and here is the ultimate manifestation of God’s love. Here is vile, brutal injustice, and here the justice of God is manifested as he justifies sinners. Here the Son learns the climactic lesson in obedience, and here is the hour of the power of darkness.

In each case, we have learned to live with irony and paradox, because we have come to see that, for the cross to make any sense at all, we simply must affirm that God was sovereign, that human beings were rebellious and morally responsible, that God’s love and justice were displayed, and that Christ died voluntarily. If we forsake any one of these truths, the significance of the cross is destroyed and we are lost.

Learning to Trust

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.

After we have accepted that the "givens" are non-negotiable and done our best to see just where the mystery lies—at heart, it is bound up with the very nature of God—we must ensure that biblical truths function in our lives in much the same way that they function in Scripture. That way we will avoid implicitly denying one truth when we affirm another; we will grow in stability; above all, we will better know the God who has in his grace disclosed himself to rebels like us, taken up our guilt, participated in human suffering, and sovereignly ensured that we will not be tempted above what we are able to bear. In knowing him better we will learn to trust him; and in trusting him we will find rest.

In what follows, then, I offer a mixture of principles and vignettes that articulate or suggest the way God's sovereignty functions in the minds of biblical writers when they observe evil or suffering taking place under its aegis. In a sense, most of the book you are reading has been dealing with this topic. To avoid repeating myself, I shall focus on a few of the many passages and emphases still but little explored.

(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).

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.

To our limited perspectives, there are plenty of accidents that determine so many tragedies. To the eyes of faith, there are, finally, no accidents, only incidents; and in these, Paul assures us, God is working for our good. To walk into the unknown with a God

of unqualified power and unfailing goodness is safer than a known way.

(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.

Naomi and her husband abandon their homeland because of the curse of drought. The years pass, and Naomi loses her husband, then both sons—this is in an age and culture when men provided the support and ballast of life, when a single woman was in a precarious position. Small wonder that when she returns to her homeland, accompanied by only one of her daughters-in-law, she complains, “Don’t call me Naomi [Pleasant]... . Call me Mara [Bitter], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (Ruth 1:20-21).

When things begin to look up because of the personal interest Boaz shows in Ruth, Naomi exclaims, “The LORD bless him! . . . He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.³ . . . That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers” (Ruth 2:20). When Boaz and Ruth are united in marriage, it is the Lord who enables her to conceive and bring forth a son. The women say to Naomi: “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you more than seven sons, has given him birth” (Ruth 4:14-15).

This is all very interesting: a love story with a happy ending, in which God is seen to be operating behind the scenes. But the writer sees more than that, more than Naomi herself could have known. He comments, “And they named him [the child] Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David” (Ruth 4:17). The writer then ends with the genealogy spelled out.

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.

Perhaps the way you or I hold up under suffering may be instrumental in the conversion of someone who in turn brings up his family in the fear of the Lord, so that his daughter’s son becomes the next Whitefield or Spurgeon or Carey or Wilberforce. There comes a time when by rereading the Scriptures it dawns on us that God frequently utilizes and blesses small acts of faithfulness in the context of deep misery to bring forth blessing we could not possibly have asked for, but would have been happy to suffer for.

The ultimate “time-scale,” of course (if I may stretch a term), ends up in the new heaven and the new earth. God is getting his people ready for heaven. I do not pretend that elementary truth “solves” everything. But the vantage from the End (see chap. 8) certainly transforms our assessment of many things.

(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 11.

To an omnipotent God, there cannot be degrees of difficulty; there cannot be an unforeseen setback. Elijah flees to the desert and longs for death because the glorious confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel did not bring about the reformation he expected. He is still running for his life from a vicious queen (1 Kings 19). His expectations were false—a frequent cause of depression. God's were not. God had to teach Elijah that sometimes he operates not through the mighty confrontation and the powerful, dramatic storm, but through a still, small voice that reserves to himself seven thousand who have not yet bowed the knee to idols.

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). Jesus assumes his heavenly Father sovereignly watches over each sparrow and each flower, and argues from the lesser to the greater: if God cares for even these things—surely of relatively little account on the eternal and cosmic scales of things!— should we not trust him to provide men and women, made in his own image, with all that we need?

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. That God normally operates the universe consistently makes science possible; that he does not always do so ought to keep science humble. Above all, this view of God's sovereignty means that we should draw comfort and faith even by observing the world around us—as Jesus did.

(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).

Eventually Paul does not merely put up with this answer: he exults in it. His heart’s cry is that in his own life and ministry he might experience the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Phil. 3:10). Here he learns the secret of it: God’s power is made perfect in Paul’s life when Paul himself is weak. “Therefore,” says Paul, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (1 Cor. 12:9). The thorn in the flesh helps keep him humble (12:7). As a matter of principle, Paul understands this to be crucially important: “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (1 Cor. 12:10). This is the New Testament equivalent to the exultation of a David when God himself comes near in the midst of suffering.

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. And we learn, with time, that if God in this or that instance does not choose to take away the suffering, or utterly remove the evil, he does send grace and power. The result is praise; and that, of course, is itself enjoyable, in exactly the same way that lovers enjoy giving each other compliments.

I cannot tell you how many times I have visited some senior saint who is going through serious suffering, perhaps terminal illness, only to come away feeling that it was I who benefited from exposure to a believer who was already living in the felt presence of God. When my friend and colleague Cohn Hemer lay dying, he made jokes about a lengthy manuscript he had almost completed: “It is a great blessing that someone else will have to compile the indexes,” he grinned. In his last thirty-six hours or so, as he drifted in and out of consciousness, he spoke the word for “grace” in the many languages he knew. Among his last coherent utterances was an expression of quiet curiosity as to what God would have for him to do in glory

What is clear is that it is in extremity that many Christians drink most deeply of the grace of God, revel in his presence, and glory in whatever it is—suffering included—that has brought them this heightened awareness of the majesty of God.

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.

God himself is both our shield and our very great reward (Gen. 15:1).

(6) There is a sense in which the entire Bible is fodder for this chapter. From beginning to end, it is concerned to teach us to trust and obey.

This means, then, that the object of much of the biblical revelation is not to make us comprehend exhaustively, but something else. Doubtless God could have told us more than he has; doubtless we will find out more things in the new heaven and the new earth. But we are sufficiently self-centered that extra knowledge about God would simply pander to our desire to be gods ourselves.

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.

In an analogous way, we conclude that God tells us a great deal about evil and suffering. 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 think through Scripture, seeking to ensure that the polarities of God's character function in our lives as they are modeled in Scripture. But ultimately Christians will take refuge from their questions about evil not in proud theories that explain evil away, but in combating evil, opposing it, especially evil within themselves but also in the larger world as well. Christians will take refuge from their questions about suffering not in bitterness, self-pity, resentment against God, or trite clichés and religious cant, but in endurance, perseverance, and faith in the God who has suffered, who has fought with evil and triumphed, and whose power and goodness ensure that faith resting in him is never finally disappointed.

Questions for Further Study

1. What is the primary lesson to be learned from this chapter?
2. What inferences about prayer (and about election and evil) does the Bible not draw from God's sovereignty?
3. If God were not personal, what differences would it make to the way we should pray?
4. If God were not transcendent and sovereign, what differences would it make to the way we should pray?
5. Repeat questions #3 and #4, replacing "the way we should pray" by, first, "the doctrine of election," and then by "the problem of evil and suffering."
6. What instances can you give of God meeting your suffering, or the suffering of someone you know, not with the elimination of the cause of suffering, but with grace that is (to use Paul's term) "sufficient" for them?

Notes

Chapter 11

Richard F. Vieth, *Holy Power, Human Pain* (Bloomington: Meyer-Stone, 1988), 55.

See D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

See R. Young, *Freedom, Responsibility, and God* (London, 1975).

Carson, *Divine Sovereignty*, 146-60.

To cite but one example of hundreds, see Michael L. Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), who argues that it is logically impossible for an omnipotent God to control a free being. But it is logically impossible only if the definition of freedom already embraces absolute power to contrary. The definition of freedom has ensured his conclusion, without any attempt to see if such a definition is either required or permitted by Scripture.

Basinger and Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will*, 10.

Ibid., 52.

E.g., Roger Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 357.

The point is implicitly conceded by Paul K. Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 77, when he asks whether the approach of Arminius (using "foreknowledge" to explain "predestination") is justified. Jewett comments: "I would suggest that it is. We may or may not agree that his doctrine is biblical, that his exegesis is sound, but we can hardly doubt that it makes sense in its own right, that it resolves the problem." Exactly. And that is the problem.

Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10 (1988): 60.

Carson, *Divine Sovereignty*.

William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

Owing to the popularity of the little book by J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, it has become common to designate the two truths, that God is utterly sovereign and human beings are morally responsible, as an antinomy. But there is some confusion over the term, and a comment may help.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an antinomy is: (1) "a contradiction in a law, or between two equally binding laws"; (2) "a contradictory law, statute, or principle; an authoritative contradiction"—and here an illustration is drawn from Jeremy Taylor, who in 1649 wrote that certain signs of grace "are direct antinomies to the lusts of the flesh"; (3) "a contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable, or necessary; a paradox; intellectual contrariness"—and this last meaning OED attributes to Kant.

Packer means none of these things. He certainly does not see in these truths a genuine contradiction (meanings 1 and 3), nor does he see in them the kind of opposition one finds between signs of grace and lusts of the flesh. He means something like "an apparent contradiction that is not in fact real."

Although OED does not offer that as one of its definitions, the term has come to have that meaning in some branches of philosophy (whence, probably, Packer borrowed it). In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant was occupied in exposing the fallacies that arise when one applies space and time and some other categories to things that are not experienced. He argued that if these categories are not appealed to, we necessarily find four antinomies (which we need not detail here). Superficially, Kant thus uses the term in the OED sense of real contradictions: the antinomies arise only when the categories of space and time are adopted. But precisely because he says these categories should not be adopted, the antinomies turn out not to be real contradictions, but only apparent ones. This generates

the implicit meaning of “antimony” that Packer utilizes.

My sole point in this note is to insist that when antinomy be applied to these truths, we understand that we are dealing with mystery, not contradiction.

Chapter 12

Clark Pinnock, In Basinger and Basinger, Predestination and Free Will, 152.

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 15-16.

She is probably thinking of her husband and two sons. If a relative marries Ruth, and they have children, they will be counted as the heirs and successors of the family line. Property is passed on the same way.