

## The Mystery of Providence and Suffering

This phrase, mystery of providence, is borrowed from the Puritans.

The Puritan John Flavel wrote in **The Mystery of Providence**. We should worship God as we read the book of providence around us.<sup>13</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism gives us useful applications:

What does it profit us to know that God has created and by His providence still upholds all things? We may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move (Q. 28).

Here are two things as informed Christian that we need to try to grasp, to help us as we try to understand suffering.

### **1. God is absolutely and utterly sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions to reduce human responsibility.**

We have to understand that just because God is sovereign, it doesn't mean that we become non-responsible entities, just tools that have no responsibility. We're not fatalists, even while we confess God's sovereignty. That's the first proposition.

### **2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures, but human responsibility never functions to reduce God's sovereignty.**

It is like this, we believe and disbelieve, obey and disobey. We choose, and we do all kinds of things of that sort. All of those things are morally responsible choices. The Bible speaks of all of them. However, human responsibility never functions to reduce God's sovereignty.

Now, how do we put those two propositions together?

Let's look at three different scriptures concerning these.

#### **Genesis 50:19–20.**

Now at this point, the old man Jacob, the father of Joseph, has died. The brothers who sold Joseph into slavery are afraid that now that the old man has died, Joseph, who is functioning now as prime minister of Egypt, will take revenge. So they come at him with what is probably a cock-and-bull story about how the old man had said Joseph was to behave himself after the old man had died, and so on.

When Joseph hears all of this, he says to the brothers, Yes, you did sell me into slavery, I know that. **You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good**. That's what the text says. The two are put in parallel, it's very blunt. You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good.

Now think through what it doesn't say, God does not say my original intention was to have you go down to Egypt a much easier way, but unfortunately, those guys came along and mucked up my plans, so you ended up there as a slave instead.

It also doesn't say, those chaps sold you into slavery while I was having a snooze one day. I wasn't really paying a lot of attention. So you ended up in slavery, but I came along at the last moment, riding on my white mustang, and rescued you at the end.

It says, that in one and the same event, You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good. God was sovereign over the whole thing, with only good intentions. They were responsible for what they did, in this whole thing, and it really was evil.

**Let's look at another passage as we think this one through a little further.**

Isaiah 10:5. God is speaking through Isaiah to the Assyrians. The Assyrians were the regional superpower at the time, and they were a barbaric bunch. We know them from archaeology and other records. At this point, they had already destroyed the northern tribes, or were in the process of destroying them even further, and they were threatening Jerusalem.

God says to them, through Isaiah, in Isaiah 10:5 Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation. We need to understand that in the context, God is saying, I send these Assyrians, this brutal, pagan hoard, against the godless nation. That is, the Israelites themselves. God is using the Assyrians to punish his own covenant people for their sins. That's what's going on. However, he is also saying, Woe to the Assyrians who I am using in this way.

Verse 6: I send him against a godless nation, that is, 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. That's what God says he is sending the Assyrians to do to his own covenant people.

Verse 7: But this is not what he intends, that is, what the Assyrians think they're doing. This is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations. Are not my commanders all kings? he says.

That is, the Assyrian king is saying, even my military commanders are really minor royal figures. My military is so great and so strong, that even my commanders themselves are royal figures.

Verse 9: The king list cities that he has destroyed or about to destroy.

What the Assyrians are saying is, if I bumped off Damascus, if I can take Samaria, then I can certainly domesticate Jerusalem too.

V12 When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem. That is, when he has finished using the Assyrians to punish Jerusalem. God says, I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. For he says: By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding.

Then God says, Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? God, at one level, views the mighty Assyrian nation as nothing more than a tool, and what right does a tool have to boast against the one who uses it?

Therefore, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors, and so on.

There are several passages like that in the Prophets, where clearly, God is presented as sovereign over the nations, including the pagan nations whom he may use to chasten other nations. Yet that sovereignty does not mitigate the responsibility of the nations themselves.

The nations themselves are viewed as responsible for what they're doing, but that responsibility does not mean that God is asleep, not sovereign, or taking time off.

If your brain hurts at this one, it ought to. It has generated, across the centuries of the church, a lot of reflection about how to think about this. What this means is that God is so sovereign that he stands behind both good and evil, but he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically, He doesn't stand behind good and evil in exactly the same way.

He stands behind good in such a way that the good is always traceable to him, and He is to be praised for it. He stands behind evil in such a way that it never escapes the outermost boundaries of his sovereignty, but the evil is never chargeable to him. The evil is chargeable to the secondary causes (in this case, to the Assyrians).

If you think of any other model, you have even worse problems. If you say God is only behind the good, and his sovereignty doesn't play out over this bad stuff over here, then what's going on over here? Is there another God? A Satan? A secondary person? Something a bit like "the force" in Star Wars? There's a good side and a bad side, and which side wins depends on which side you give strength to?

That's not what the Bible says.

As long as you think that is the way things work in the universe, you can never, ever be sure which side is going to win, it's called dualism. As long as you hold to this kind of dualism, you can't ever be sure who is going to win. Listen, if God lost that one, then he could lose another one. Who knows, maybe he'll even lose at the end?

No!, the Bible insists that God is so sovereign that all the good and the evil that takes place never escapes the bounds of his sovereignty, but the goodness is always creditable to him, and the evil is not.

As difficult as it is to get your head around that kind of stuff, once you see it, it comes as a vast relief.

Because even the rotten stuff that happens, God, in dealing with this fallen world, because he is good, can use it for good and for his own glory.

**In this case, it brings punishment to the people. It brings repentance, ultimately. It brings a return to God in reformation. For God, that's far more important than whether everybody lives a comfortable life.**