

CHANCE
AND
THE
SOVEREIGNTY
OF
GOD

**A GOD-CENTERED APPROACH TO
PROBABILITY AND RANDOM EVENTS**

VERNON S.
POYTHRESS

“Learned and astute, this book on chance and probability demonstrates an absolute reliance on the authority of God’s Word. This is the only way that nothing can be left to chance.”

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“Many think Calvinists simply reject the idea of chance, random events, and probability. But that is not entirely true. My friend Vern Poythress shows in this book that the God of the Bible—and of Calvin—is in fact the foundation, both of causation and of randomness in the world. Poythress is well-suited to develop this argument, with doctorates in both New Testament and mathematics, and as the author of important recent books on logic and science. I do not fully understand the mathematics of this book, but the theology is entirely biblical, and I can’t imagine a better place to start for readers interested in this subject matter.”

John M. Frame, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

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A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events*

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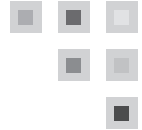
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INTRODUCTION

EXPERIENCES WITH UNPREDICTABLE EVENTS

One time, when my family and I were on vacation, I drove around a curve to find, directly ahead of me, a line of cars stopped dead because of roadwork. I put the brakes on hard, relieved that I had time to stop. But what about cars coming behind me? The highway, consisting of one lane in each direction, curved to the right, with a mountain rising just to the right of the road, and a drop-off to the left. The drivers coming in my direction could not see me because their vision was blocked by the mountain. Would they be able to stop in time? Should I run back to warn them? Should I blow my horn to warn them? If I blew the horn, would the sound be blocked by the mountainside? Before I could decide, looking backward I saw a car coming round the curve, too fast to stop. To avoid hitting us, the driver swerved left into the lane of oncoming traffic. Fortunately, no car was coming in the other direction, and he was able to stop in the lane to our left.

At that point I started blowing the horn. Too late. Another car came round the curve, again too fast. I thought, “It can’t stop. It is going to crash into us.” The driver braked hard but lost control, and the car spun 180 degrees. It ended up facing backward on the berm, squeezed between us and the mountain. The driver was emotionally shaken but physically intact. Now we had a car to our left and a car to our right. There was no more room. A third car followed, coming right at us, as our children in the back seat watched helplessly. It managed to stop a couple of feet behind us. Finally, the roadwork opened and we proceeded forward. All the people

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had escaped an accident. My family and I had escaped what seemed to be certain injury and a wrecked vehicle.

THE ISSUE OF CHANCE

What do we say about this incident? Some people would say we were “lucky.” We escaped “by chance.” It just *happened* to be the case that the oncoming cars found room to our left and to our right. Or was it the hand of God’s providence? We felt afterwards as if an angel had pushed the cars to this side and to that. God had sent an angel to protect us. But we did not actually *see* an angel. Nor did we see a hand reaching down from heaven to move the cars. Was it just our imagination? Was our escape a “miracle,” or was it just an “accidental” result of driver reactions and physical processes?

We escaped. But not everyone does. For every story of a narrow escape, someone else can tell a distressing story of not escaping. Someone tells of being in a horrible auto accident, nearly dying from the injuries, losing an arm or a leg, and spending months recovering. And the accident could have been avoided, if only the oncoming car had swerved a little earlier or a little later. Was the accident “by chance”? Was God in control? If I am ready to acknowledge God’s control when my family escapes an accident, should I also acknowledge that God is in control when someone else suffers from an unpredictable tragedy? Or do tragic cases involve pure chance, beyond God’s control? And if God is in control, did he actually *plan* the events beforehand, or did he just react to the unfolding events at the last moment?

Big accidents and near accidents have drama to them. But what about the small things? Yesterday I could not find my checkbook. Today I found it in a pocket of my briefcase where it did not belong. *Accidentally*, it must have fallen into the wrong pocket when I dropped it into my partially opened briefcase. It got misplaced “by chance,” someone might say.

What about totally unpredictable events, like the flip of a coin or the roll of dice? Every time we flip a coin, the result is unpredictable. It comes up heads or tails “by chance.” What do we mean by the word *chance*? What is it?

INTEREST IN CHANCE

People are most interested in chance when a chance event makes a big difference in their lives. Why did my family escape the mountain highway ac-

cident? Why did another person suffer from a “chance” accident? We would like to know. Is God in charge of these “accidental” events or not? If he is in charge, why does he let bad things happen? Is God good or not? And if he is not in charge, what should we think? It seems that we are at the mercy of events that have no innate meaning. No one knows when we will have to suffer without purpose. That is not good news.

We see another dimension of human interest when people try to find out about the future. About some future events we can be relatively confident. We expect the sun to rise tomorrow. We expect to wake up in the same bed and the same room in which we went to sleep. Yet we also know that there are troubling uncertainties about the future. Will a violent storm or earthquake destroy our home? Will someone in the family get cancer? Will we be in a car accident? Some people consult fortune-tellers, palm readers, and astrological charts to try to get extra clues about events beyond their control. The astrologer may warn them not to make a big purchase today, because there is too much danger of making a disastrous decision. Or he advises them to stay at home because there is too much danger of an accident. Or they should go out because they may begin a promising romance.

Compulsive gamblers have a fascination with chance—in particular, the chance of making a “killing” and winning a fortune on a hoped-for “lucky” day at the gambling tables. Some of them think they can see patterns in the events. If a roulette wheel has come up with an even number seven times in a row, they may feel that it is time for an odd number to come up, so they bet on odd. They are finding meaning in the chance alteration between odd and even.

On occasion a gambler does have a so-called “lucky” day. He leaves the casino \$500 or even \$50,000 richer. But if he goes back, his one-day winnings will soon be gone. The casino would not be in business if it did not make a profit in the long run. So was the gambler deluded in his feeling that it was time for an odd number to come up, or time for a big win from a slot machine? Do the casino managers know something that the gambler does not know? And how do they know? What is the truth about chance?

CHANCE IN DARWINISM

Chance events play a role not only in ordinary life but also in some scientific theories. In particular, chance plays a key role in the Darwinian theory

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of evolution. According to the standard Darwinian account, all the forms of life that we can observe today originated through chance events in the distant past. Darwinism says that the first life originated by chance. Once the first life existed, chance mutations led gradually to other forms of life; chance matings between living things led to new combinations of genetic material; chance deaths and escapes from death that befell living creatures led gradually to increasing fitness among the survivors. Chance changes in the habitats sometimes led to separation of species and various pressures on “fitness.” As a result of accumulating eons of such chance events, we enjoy the diversity of life that we see today.

What do we think of this Darwinist account? To evaluate Darwinism as a whole is beyond the scope of this book.¹ But it is appropriate to ask, what is this idea of “chance” on which Darwinism builds?

CHANCE IN SCIENCE

Chance and uncertainty also play an indispensable role in science as a whole. Some people might think that science is mostly about certainties rather than uncertainties, namely the certainties of scientific laws. They are thinking of laws like Newton’s laws of motion that completely determine the outcome, once we know the initial conditions. But not all scientific laws are of this kind. The laws of quantum mechanics intrinsically involve uncertainties. So do the laws of statistical mechanics. In this kind of case, most individual outcomes cannot be predicted, but a scientist can predict the average outcome or the probability of a particular outcome.

Moreover, virtually all forms of scientific experiment involve chance and probability. When scientists are trying to find new laws or regularities, they may repeat an experiment several times, or even hundreds of times, and obtain a record that includes chance variations. Even in a simple measurement like the measurement of a distance or a weight, there are minute variations when a scientist performs the measurement a second or a third time. For example, a scientist weighs a chemical sample on a precision scale and finds that it has a mass of 3.27 grams. If he weighs it a second or a third time, he obtains the same result. But if he tries to obtain more accuracy, he may find variations. A first weighing gives the result 3.2703 grams. A second weigh-

¹ See Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chapters 18 and 19; C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), chapters 16–18.

ing 3.2695 grams. A third gives the result 3.2698 grams. The exact result is unpredictable.

After data have been collected from repeated measurements or repeated experiments, scientists analyze their data to see whether they reveal important regular patterns. The analysis uses mathematical methods that take into account the variations in experimental outcomes. These methods reckon with what might be called chance variations that occur in the midst of an experiment designed primarily to explore regularities rather than chance variation itself.

CHANCE IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Chance also plays an important role in many areas in social sciences. Social sciences study human beings. And any one individual human being is not completely predictable. Social scientists know very well that in many cases they cannot hope to formulate an exact law of human behavior that will have no exceptions anywhere in the world. Rather, they work with averages and with probabilities. They reckon with chance variations that belong to each individual case, but they achieve interesting results by averaging over the variations among a sufficiently large number of individual cases.

Thus, chance plays an integral role in the processes of experimental science. Since scientific theories are validated by experiment, chance lies at the foundation that supports scientific theories. Virtually the whole edifice of science—both physical sciences and social sciences—depends on assumptions about chance variations. So we need to look at the nature of chance not only to address personal questions that we have about the meaning of everyday events in human life, but to address the issue of what confidence we should have in the sciences and their claims.

PART I

**THE SOVEREIGNTY
OF GOD**



CHAPTER 1

THE BIBLE AS A SOURCE FOR KNOWLEDGE

What is *chance*? Can we know? How can we find out the truth about accidental events?

THE BIBLE AS A SOURCE

The Bible indicates that God is the ultimate source for knowledge. God knows all things, including everything that there is to know about chance. God's "understanding is unsearchable" (Isa. 40:28). Whatever we know, we know because God has made it known to us: "He who *teaches man knowledge*—the LORD—knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath" (Ps. 94:10–11).

God is the source of knowledge even of an ordinary sort (Isa. 28:24–29). He is present when we read a book or a page on the Internet, and he has given to the writers of books and Internet articles whatever abilities and sources that they use. He is also present in giving us memories and preserving them. I know from my memory and from my own eyesight what happened when my family escaped the near accident on our vacation. According to the Bible, such knowledge is a gift from God.

But some knowledge is not so ordinary. Can I know *why* my family escaped an accident? Why does one gambler win \$50,000 and another lose? Is there a reason? Or is it just "chance" or "luck"? Is there no further explanation? And what do we mean by "chance" or "luck"? What is it, at a fundamental level?

God knows the answer to such questions. But we do not—unless God says

something to us to explain and to give answers. The Bible claims to be God's own word: "All Scripture is *breathed out by God* and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). I believe that the Bible's claim is true. It does indeed give us God's instruction. So we can study the Bible to find answers to these questions. And when we do, we find that the Bible does have teaching about so-called "chance" events.

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

But we live in a time of widespread skepticism. People doubt whether God exists. Or if they think there is a God, they doubt whether the Bible is really God's word. Many books have argued the case.¹ We are not going to repeat all the arguments here, but we may briefly note two of them.

First, the Old Testament part of the Bible, written hundreds of years before the coming of Christ, contains prophecies about Christ's coming that were fulfilled in his earthly life. Christ was born in Bethlehem, just as it was prophesied 700 years beforehand in the prophecy of Micah (Mic. 5:2; compare Matt. 2:1–6). Jesus's crucifixion was prophesied 700 years beforehand in Isaiah 53. Jesus established God's reign of salvation during the time of the Roman Empire, just as Daniel had prophesied 600 years earlier (Dan. 2:44). Jesus's ministry was preceded by a forerunner, John the Baptist, just as the prophet Malachi had predicted 400 years earlier (Mal. 3:1; compare Mark 1:2–4).²

Second, Jesus himself testifies to the divine authority of the Old Testament when he says,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matt. 5:17–18)

¹For the question of God's existence, see, for example, Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008). For the character of the Bible, see Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979); Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967); Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, 3rd rev. printing (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010).

²Readers may be aware that, because of the importance of the Bible, arguments back and forth about its authority have continued for centuries. Over the centuries, skeptics have tried to come up with replies and attempted refutations with respect to virtually any piece of evidence that has been used to confirm the authority of the Bible. I do not wish to sweep under the rug the fact that these matters are all debated. But the pursuit of such debates belongs to other books.

We leave to other books the detailed arguments about the authority of the Bible. Here we are going to rely on it to instruct us about issues involving chance and chance events. If you are not yet convinced about God or the Bible, I would still invite you to read, because God may still be pleased to use his wisdom in the Bible to teach you both about him and about chance.



CHAPTER 2

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

According to the Bible, God created the world¹ and everything in it:

In the beginning, God *created the heavens and the earth*. (Gen. 1:1)

The God who *made the world and everything in it*, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. (Acts 17:24)

there is one God, the Father, *from whom are all things* and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

My help comes from the LORD, who *made heaven and earth*. (Ps. 121:2)

God created heaven and earth long ago. What about his *present* involvement in the world? The philosophy called *deism* says that God created everything, but afterwards was uninvolved. He made the world as if he were winding a clock. After the clock is wound up, it runs “by itself,” and the clockmaker—that is, God—does not need to attend to it.

But the Bible contradicts deism. It indicates that God continually sustains the world that he has made:

He [God the Son] *upholds* the universe by the word of his power. (Heb. 1:3)

In him [the Son] all things *hold together*. (Col. 1:17)

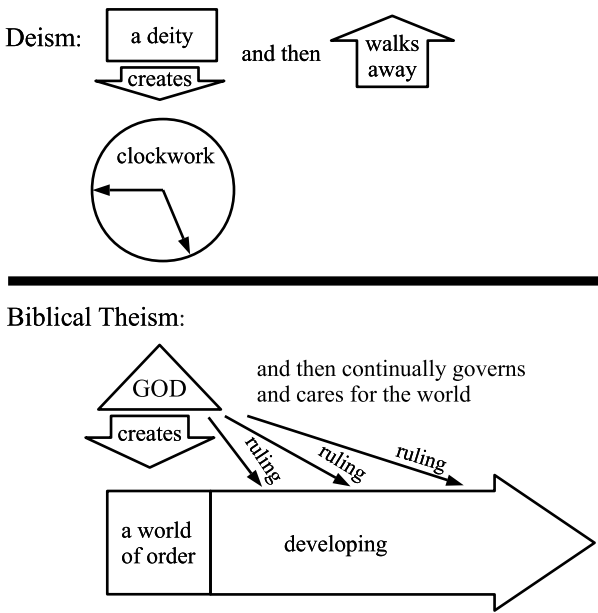
In him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

¹For a fuller exposition of the nature of God, creation, and providence, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002). For discussion of the relation of creation to modern science, see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

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In addition, Psalm 121:2 talks about “help” from the Lord in the present: “My help comes from the LORD.” God’s past work in creating the world, far from being an excuse for him to walk away, confirms and undergirds God’s availability in the present. (See fig. 2.1.) He is active with his power and his help. Psalm 121:2 adds the reminder “who made heaven and earth” partly to back up the conviction that, in the present time as in the beginning, “my help comes from the LORD.”

Fig. 2.1: Deism and Theism



Other psalms make the same point:

Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who *made heaven and earth*. (Ps. 124:8)

May the LORD bless you from Zion,
he who *made heaven and earth*. (134:3)

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God,
who *made heaven and earth*,

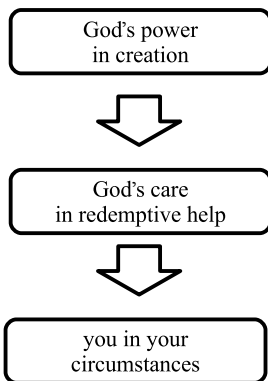
the sea, and all that is in them,
 who keeps faith forever; (146:5–6)

We can see a similar point in Isaiah 51:12–13:

I, I am he who comforts you;
 who are you that you are afraid of man who dies,
 of the son of man who is made like grass,
 and have forgotten the LORD, your *Maker*,
who stretched out the heavens
and laid the foundations of the earth,
 and you fear continually all the day
 because of the wrath of the oppressor,
 when he sets himself to destroy?
 And where is the wrath of the oppressor?

Isaiah 51:12–13 says that the LORD made the heavens and the earth. Before and after this key claim, the passage gives practical comfort. It says, “I, I am he who *comforts you*”; and it counsels God’s people not to fear the power of man or the power of “the oppressor.” Why do they not need to fear? Because God is more powerful—in fact, supremely powerful. The power exhibited when God created the world is still available for the comfort and protection of God’s people today. Thus, biblical teaching on creation supports faith in God in the present. (See fig. 2.2.)

Fig. 2.2: God’s Power in Creation



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Psalm 121:2 and Isaiah 51:12–13 fit together with many other passages that confirm God’s continued involvement with the world:

You [God] *cause the grass to grow* for the livestock
and *plants* for man to cultivate. (Ps. 104:14)

From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. (104:13)

You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the beasts of the forest creep about. (104:20)

These [animals] all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground. (104:27–30)

For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
He makes peace in your borders;
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.
He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?
He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.
He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and rules to Israel. (147:13–19)

We also find summary statements that affirm God’s universal control over what happens:

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom *rules over all*. (Ps. 103:19)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him *who works all things according to the counsel of his will*. (Eph. 1:11)

Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
Is it not *from the mouth of the Most High*
that good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37–38)

For his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and *he does according to his will* among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, “What have you done?” (Dan. 4:34–35)

This universal control is called God's *providence* or his *providential rule*.²

PROVIDENCE AND SCIENCE

How does God's rule over the world fit in with modern sciences? Sciences study regularities in the present order of the world. These regularities are the product of God's specification. For example, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). By speaking, God not only created the world but also continues to rule it. Note in other verses the key role of God's word:

By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the *breath of his mouth* all their host. (Ps. 33:6)

He sends out his *command* to the earth;
his *word* runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?

²The biblical teaching on God's control, which we discuss in this and the following chapters, is also covered in Frame, *Doctrine of God*, chapters 4 and 14.

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He sends out his *word*, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow. (147:15–18)

He upholds the universe by the *word* of his power. (Heb. 1:3)

Who has *spoken* and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has *commanded* it?
Is it not from the *mouth* of the Most High
that good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37–38)

The Bible uses other kinds of descriptions as well, but the descriptions in terms of God’s speech are particularly useful as we think about science. God’s speech is the *real* law governing the world. Scientific theories approximate God’s speech, and so in their theories scientists think God’s thoughts after him. God planned the character of the entire universe. His thoughts about the world were in his mind even before he created it. Scientists are made in the image of God, and so their minds have the capability of imitating God’s thoughts. They imitate God when they try to reconstruct the laws that originated in God’s mind. There is no tension between God’s providence and science, when we understand science in harmony with what the Bible says about God’s speech.³

GOD’S PLAN

The Bible also indicates that God’s ongoing providential rule is in accord with a plan that he has already made. Ephesians 1:11 indicates that what happens is in accord with “the counsel of his will”:

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to *the counsel of his will*.

The events have “been predestined,” that is, determined beforehand, indicating that God’s plan is already in place. Isaiah makes a similar point about God’s purposes as he proclaims the superiority of God to all idols:

for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,

³For further explanation, see Poythress, *Redeeming Science*.

declaring the end from the beginning
 and from *ancient times* things not yet done,
 saying, "My counsel shall stand,
 and I will accomplish all *my purpose*,"
 calling a bird of prey from the east,
 the man of my counsel from a far country.
 I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it. (Isa. 46:9–11)

Ephesians 1:4 says that "he chose us in him [Christ] *before the foundation of the world*," indicating that God's plan goes back to before the beginning of creation. These verses indicate the magnificence of God's power and wisdom; they also underscore the security of those who are chosen by God, because God's purposes for them will be accomplished.

PRACTICAL TRUST

God's providential rule has practical implications. As we saw from Psalm 121:2, we are meant to trust that he can come to help us. Similar language about trusting God occurs in other psalms:

The LORD is on my side; I will not fear.
 What can man do to me? (Ps. 118:6)

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
 though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble at its swelling. (46:1–3)

The Bible indicates that our trust in God should extend to all areas of life. We should trust in matters of war:

Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
 but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.
 They collapse and fall,
 but we rise and stand upright. (20:7–8)

We should trust when beset by enemies:

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O my God, in you I trust;
let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me. (25:2)

We should trust when we are afraid:

When I am afraid,
I put my trust in you. (56:3)

We should trust in him for the security of our lives:

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever. (125:1)

Psalm 62:8 sums it up: “Trust in him *at all times*, O people.”

CHRIST’S CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

General principles about God’s faithfulness and control over the world fit together with many particular examples that the Bible records. The supreme example occurs in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, which were prophesied in the Old Testament and predicted by Christ during his earthly life (Isa. 53:7–12; Matt. 16:21; 17:11, 22–23; 20:18–19; 21:39; 26:2, 24, 31–32, 45–46). What happened to Christ was “whatever your [God’s] hand and your plan had *predestined* to take place” (Acts 4:28). God’s commitment to us through Christ gives us security:

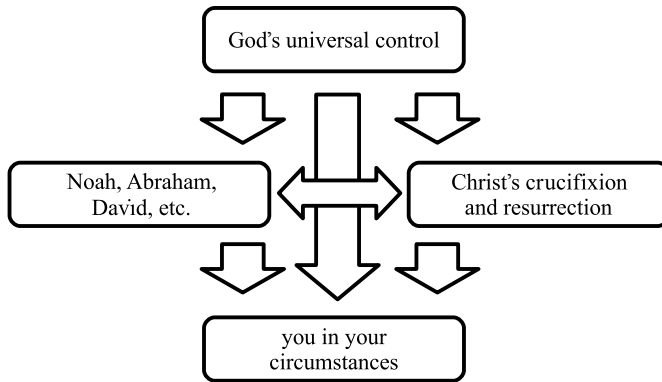
If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:31–32)

The book of Romans indicates that since God is committed to people in this way through Christ, all things work for good for those who belong to Christ:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

The general principles and the particular cases work together, as shown in fig. 2.3.

Fig. 2.3: God's Universal Control



Charles Spurgeon speaks about the security that a Christian should experience from knowing God's power and purposes:

[The Christian] believes that an invisible hand is always on the world's tiller, and that wherever providence may drift, Jehovah steers it. That re-assuring knowledge prepares him for everything. He looks over the raging waters and sees the spirit of Jesus treading the billows, and he hears a voice saying, "It is I, be not afraid" [alluding to Matt. 14:27 and parallels]. . . . and so, believing that God rules all, that He governs wisely, that He brings good out of evil, the believer's heart is assured, and he is enabled calmly to meet each trial as it comes.⁴

HONORING GOD

We honor God when we trust him, as we respond to him in the way that he deserves. Honoring God includes other aspects of life as well. First Corinthians 10:31 says, "So, whether you eat or drink, or *whatever* you do, do all to the *glory* of God." God is deserving of all glory and praise. Everything we do should serve to honor him and to reflect his glory.

This principle includes within its scope whatever we do in our *thinking*. In the pages that follow, we should honor God and magnify his greatness as we think about issues related to chance. We should look for ways

⁴Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 436 (morning, August 5).

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to praise him for controlling the world and for displaying his wisdom in the world.

Those of us who follow Christ have a further motivation. The Bible indicates that Christ is now exalted in heaven and rules over everything:

He [God] raised him [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put *all things* under his feet. (Eph. 1:20–22)

He [Christ] *upholds the universe* by the word of his power. (Heb. 1:3)

Christ is Lord of all. So we should serve him in every thought and in every sphere.



CHAPTER 3

UNPREDICTABLE EVENTS

What about seemingly random events? Does God control them?

THE FLIGHT OF AN ARROW

First Kings 22 contains a striking case. Micaiah, speaking as a prophet of the Lord, predicts that Ahab, the king of Israel, will fall in battle at Ramoth-gilead (1 Kings 22:20–22). Ahab disguises himself in battle to avoid being a special target for enemy attack (v. 30). But God’s plan cannot be thwarted. The narrative describes the crucial event:

But a certain man drew his bow *at random* and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he [the king] said to the driver of his chariot, “Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded.” (v. 34)

“A certain man drew his bow at random.” That is, he was not aiming at any particular target. An alternative translation would be that he drew his bow “in his innocence” (ESV marginal reading). The alternative translation might mean that the man shot at Ahab, but he did not know who it was (he was “innocent” of knowing it was the king). Whichever interpretation we take of this detail, we should notice that the arrow struck in just the right place. Ahab was dressed in armor. If the arrow had struck Ahab’s breastplate, it might have simply bounced off. If it had struck his scale armor, it would not have wounded him. But there *happened to be* a small space between the scale armor and the breastplate. Perhaps for just a moment Ahab turned or bent in such a way that a thin opening appeared. The arrow went

right in, exactly in the right spot. It wounded him fatally. He died the same day (1 Kings 22:35), just as God had said.

God showed that day that he was in charge of seemingly random events. He controlled when the man drew his bow. He controlled the direction of his aim. He controlled the moment the arrow was released. He controlled the flight of the arrow. He controlled the way Ahab's armor was put on earlier in the day, and the position that Ahab took as the arrow came nearer. He controlled the arrow as it struck in just the right spot and went in deep enough to produce fatal damage to organs. He brought Ahab to his death.

Lest we feel too sorry for Ahab, we should remind ourselves that he was a wicked king (1 Kings 21:25–26). Moreover, by going into battle he directly disobeyed the warning that Micaiah the prophet gave in God's name. It was an act of arrogance and disobedience to God. God, who is a God of justice, executed righteous judgment on Ahab. From this judgment we should learn to revere God and honor him.

Ahab's death was an event of special significance. It had been prophesied beforehand, and Ahab himself was a special person. He was the king of Israel, a prominent leader, a key person in connection with the history of God's people in the northern kingdom of Israel. But the event illustrates a general principle: God controls seemingly random events. A single outstanding event, like the arrow flying toward Ahab, has not been narrated as an *exception* but rather as a particularly weighty instance of the general principle, which the Bible articulates in passages where it teaches God's universal control.

COINCIDENCES

We can find other events in the Bible where the outcome depends on an apparent coincidence or happenstance.

In Genesis 24, Rebekah, who belonged to the clan of Abraham's relatives, *happened to come out* to the well just after Abraham's servant arrived. The servant was praying and waiting, looking for a wife for Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 24:15). The fact that Rebekah came out at just the right time was clearly God's answer to the servant's prayer. Rebekah later married Isaac and bore Jacob, an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Years later Rachel, who belonged to the same clan, *happened to come out* to a well just after Jacob arrived (Gen. 29:6). Jacob met her, fell in love

with her, and married her. She became the mother of Joseph, whom God later raised up to preserve the whole family of Jacob during a seven-year famine (Genesis 41–46). When God provided Rachel for Jacob, he was fulfilling his promise that he would take care of Jacob and bring him back to Canaan (28:15). Moreover, he was fulfilling his long-range promise that he would bless the descendants of Abraham (vv. 13–14).

In the life of Joseph, after Joseph’s brothers had thrown him into a pit, a caravan of Ishmaelites *happened to go by*, traveling on their way to Egypt (Gen. 37:25). The brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. They in turn *happened* to sell Joseph to Potiphar, “an officer of Pharaoh” (v. 36). Joseph’s experiences were grim, but they were moving him toward the new position that he would eventually assume in Egypt.

False accusation by the wife of Potiphar led to Joseph being thrown into prison (Gen. 39:20). Pharaoh *happened* to get angry with his chief cupbearer and his chief baker, and they *happened* to get thrown into the prison where Joseph now had a position of responsibility (40:1–4). While they were lying in prison, both the cupbearer and the baker *happened* to have special dreams. Joseph’s interpretation of their dreams led to his later opportunity to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams (Genesis 41). These events led to the fulfillment of the earlier prophetic dreams that God had given to Joseph in his youth (37:5–10; 42:9).

After Moses was born, his mother put him in a basket made of bulrushes and placed it among the reeds by the Nile. The daughter of Pharaoh *happened* to come down to the river and *happened* to notice it. When she opened it, the baby *happened* to cry. The daughter of Pharaoh took pity and adopted Moses as her own son (Ex. 2:3–10). As a result, Moses was protected from the death sentence on Hebrew male children (1:16, 22), and he “was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). So God worked out his plan, according to which Moses would eventually deliver the Israelites from Egypt.

Joshua sent two spies to Jericho. Out of all the possibilities, they *happened* to go to the house of Rahab the prostitute (Josh. 2:1). Rahab hid the spies and made an agreement with them (vv. 4, 12–14). Consequently, she and her relatives were preserved when the city of Jericho was destroyed (6:17, 25). Rahab then became an ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:5).

Ruth “*happened to come* to the part of the field belonging to Boaz”

(Ruth 2:3). Boaz noticed Ruth, and then a series of events led to Boaz marrying Ruth, who became an ancestor of Jesus (Ruth 4:21–22; Matt. 1:5).

During the life of David, we read the following account of what happened in the wilderness of Maon:

As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Saul, saying, “Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land.” So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. (1 Sam. 23:26–28)

David narrowly escaped being killed, because the Philistines *happened* to conduct a raid at a particular time, and the messenger *happened* to reach Saul when he did. If nothing had happened to interfere with Saul’s pursuit, he might have succeeded in killing David. The death of David would have cut off the line of descendants leading to Jesus (Matt. 1:1, 6).

When Absalom engineered his revolt against David’s rule, a messenger *happened* to come to David, saying, “The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom” (2 Sam. 15:13). David immediately fled Jerusalem, where otherwise he would have been killed. During David’s flight, Hushai the Archite *happened* to come to meet him, “with his coat torn and dirt on his head” (v. 32). David told Hushai to go back to Jerusalem, pretend to support Absalom, and defeat the counsel of Ahithophel (v. 34). As a result, Hushai was able to persuade Absalom not to follow Ahithophel’s counsel for battle, and Absalom died in the battle that eventually took place (18:14–15). Thus, happenstances contributed to David’s survival.

When Ben-hadad the king of Syria was besieging Samaria, the city was starving. Elisha predicted that the next day the city of Samaria would have flour and barley (2 Kings 7:1). The captain standing by expressed disbelief, and then Elisha predicted that he would “see it . . . but . . . not eat of it” (v. 2). The next day the captain *happened* to be trampled by the people who were rushing out the gate toward the food (v. 17). “He died, as the man of God had said” (v. 17), seeing the food but not living to partake of it. His death was a fulfillment of God’s prophecy.

When Athaliah was about to usurp the throne of Judah, she undertook to destroy all the descendants in the Davidic family. Jehosheba *happened* to be there, and she took Joash the son of Ahaziah and hid him away (2 Kings 11:2). So the line of the Davidic family was preserved, which had to be the

case if the Messiah was to come from the line of David, as God had promised. Joash was an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

During the reign of king Josiah, the priests *happened* to find the Book of the Law as they were repairing the temple precincts (2 Kings 22:8). Josiah had it read to him, and so he was energized to inaugurate a spiritual reform.

The story of Esther contains further happenstances. Esther *happened* to be among the young women taken into the king's palace (Est. 2:8). She *happened* to be chosen to be the new queen (v. 17). Mordecai *happened* to find out about Bigthan and Teresh's plot against the king (v. 22), and Mordecai's name then *happened* to be included in the king's chronicles (v. 23). The night before Haman planned to hang Mordecai, the king happened not to be able to sleep (6:1). He asked for an assistant to read from the chronicles, and he happened to read the part where Mordecai had uncovered the plot against the king (vv. 1–2). Haman happened to be entering the king's court at just that moment (v. 4). A whole series of happenstances worked together to lead to Haman's being hanged, the Jews being rescued, and Mordecai being honored.

The book of Jonah also contains events that worked together. The Lord sent the storm at sea (Jonah 1:4). When the sailors cast lots in order to identify the guilty person, "the lot fell on Jonah" (v. 7). The Lord appointed the fish that swallowed Jonah (v. 17). The Lord also appointed the plant that grew up (4:6), the worm that attacked the plant (v. 7), and then the blazing of the sun and the "scorching east wind" (v. 8).

Zechariah the priest, the husband of Elizabeth, happened to be chosen by lot to burn incense in the temple (Luke 1:9). The time was just right, shortly before the conception of John the Baptist and the coming of Jesus (vv. 24–38).

When Dorcas died in Joppa, Peter *happened* to be nearby in Lydda (Acts 9:32, 38). The disciples in Joppa happened to hear that he was there. So they sent for Peter, and as a result Dorcas was raised back to life.

While Paul the apostle was in prison, the son of Paul's sister *happened* to hear about the Jewish plot to kill Paul (Acts 23:16). He passed the news on to the Roman leader, the tribune, who had his soldiers take Paul to Caesarea. Paul was saved from being killed because of a happenstance.

We could multiply instances of this kind. The storm and the fish that the Lord sent to Jonah might be considered miraculous, but for the most

part we have focused on incidents where a bystander may not have noticed anything extraordinary. In each case, the narrative as a whole shows that God was accomplishing his purposes. He was in control of these apparently “happenstance” events. We could add to our list many incidents in the Bible of a more extraordinary kind, where God exerted miraculous power. He brought the plagues on Egypt, divided the waters of the Red Sea, gave manna in the wilderness.

We see a supreme exhibition of God’s control when we look at some of the apparently “happenstance” events during Jesus’s crucifixion and death.

When Jesus was crucified, the soldiers *happened* to cast lots to divide his garments. They thus fulfilled the Scripture,

They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots. (John 19:24; Ps. 22:18)

When Jesus had died, one of the soldiers *happened* to pierce his side with a spear, fulfilling prophecy:

But one of the soldiers *pierced* his side with a spear, . . . (John 19:34)

And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have *pierced*.” (John 19:37; quoted from Zech. 12:10)

After the death of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man (Matt. 27:57), took the body of Jesus and laid it in his own tomb, which *happened* to be nearby and which was empty. He thus fulfilled prophecy:

And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb (Matt. 27:59–60)

And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a *rich man* in his death (Isa. 53:9)

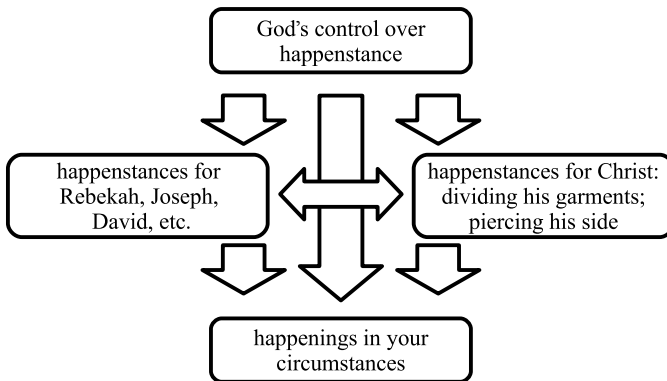
In Acts, the believers took courage as they reflected on how God had controlled the events of Jesus’s crucifixion (Acts 4:25–28). They prayed that God would continue to act in power in their lives:

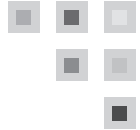
“And now, Lord, look upon their threats [from the religious leaders] and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are per-

formed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (vv. 29–31)

God is the same God today. We can infer that God is in control of the apparently happenstance events in each of our lives. All of us have to face events over which we have no control: “time and chance happen to them all” (Eccles. 9:11). It is a great comfort to know that God controls such things, because God knows what he is doing. Romans 8:28 reminds us that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Let us praise God for his majesty. And let us trust God for the future, including “coincidences” and “happenstance.” (See fig. 3.1.)

Fig. 3.1: God’s Control over Happenstance





CHAPTER 4

DISASTERS AND SUFFERING

We can confirm the point about God's control over apparently random events with another case, namely the disasters that befell Job.

DISASTERS IN THE BOOK OF JOB

Job 1 describes several disasters. The key passage is worth quoting in full:

Now there was a day when his [Job's] sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's

womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. (Job 1:13–22)

Some of these disasters seem to be random. For one thing, how come they all happened on the same day? That in itself seems unlikely, because they are not causally connected to one another. One of the disasters was that “the fire of God fell from heaven” (Job 1:16). When and where it would fall was totally unpredictable. Why did it fall when it did on Job’s sheep and servants, and not elsewhere? How was it that “a great wind” came (v. 19), and why did it hit the house and not elsewhere, and why did it hit at the moment when Job’s sons and daughters were inside the house?

Job was faced with a series of seemingly random events. He was emotionally devastated by the losses. But how did he deal with the question of *why*? Did he think, “Well, things just happen by chance because the world has chance in it”? No, he saw the hand of God: “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away” (1:21).

A consistent deist would have to say, “It was all part of the clockwork.” Deism might lead to the conclusion that God created the world with both order and randomness. According to deistic thinking, the randomness just has to be accepted. God is not responsible for disasters, because he has walked away from the clock that he made. Other people might still want God to be responsible for the good things and the blessings that come to us. But they cannot stomach the idea that he was responsible for a disaster like Job’s. They would say that they want to protect the goodness of God.

Yes, the Bible does teach that God is good and does good (Ps. 86:5; 100:5; 107:1; 119:68). But it flatly contradicts those who want to “protect” him by removing his control over disasters. Job made it clear that he thought God was in control: “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away” (Job 1:21). Was Job wrong? From the surrounding narrative in Job 1 we learn that Satan engineered the disasters:

And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand.

Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” (Job 1:12)

But Satan did not act without God’s permission (see Job 1:10–11). We see *three* distinct causes: God, Satan, and human raiders (vv. 15, 17), all acting

within the same events. The plans of Satan do not negate the sovereignty of God.

As we have observed, Job's reaction includes a strong affirmation of the sovereignty of God: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away" (v. 21). It also includes an affirmation of God's goodness: "blessed be the name of the LORD" (v. 21). At this early point in Job's experience, he did not understand the reasons why God had brought the disasters, but he was still willing to affirm God's goodness and to bless his name. God approves: "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (v. 22).

Some people would like to "correct" Job if they could. They think Job was wrong to imagine that God brought the disasters. But the Bible clearly indicates that Job is right and they are wrong. The Bible says, "Job did not sin" (v. 22).

Later in the book of Job, we see Job struggling with the mysteries. Why was God doing what he was doing? His three "friends" Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar wanted to help. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar wrongly supposed that the disasters must be a consequence of some particular sin or sins that Job had committed. The dialogue goes back and forth between them and Job. At the end of the book, God indicates that the friends were mistaken in their inference about sin. But the friends share with Job a common conviction—that God was behind what happened to Job. No one—none of the three friends, not Elihu, not Job himself—considers the possibility that bad things "just happen" and that God does not control them. Everyone assumes that God is thoroughly in control, even over events of a disastrous and inexplicable kind.

This common conviction among the participants is *never* challenged throughout the book. Rather, it is confirmed by God himself, when he appears to Job and overwhelms Job by a recital of the power and wisdom of his works:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding. (Job 38:4)

Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his? (40:9)

Job's reaction affirms the greatness of God's sovereignty:

I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (42:2)

Job's new depth of conviction about God's sovereignty actually gives Job support. Even though Job still does not know the reasons why God brought disasters on him, he has a certain peace, based on trust in God. God knows. God plans wisely. Even when Job does not know, he can trust. The same principle applies to each of us. When we do not know why, we are still called upon to trust God. This view of disasters is not only biblical and true, but spiritually healthy.

The book of Job as a whole contains more dimensions than those of which Job was aware. Job 1–2 introduces God in heaven, and Satan appears before him. Satan accuses Job of serving God only because of the benefits that God gives him. We as readers can understand one reason why God permits Satan to bring disasters. By reading the whole book, we can also see that God's intentions are wholly good, while Satan's intentions are wholly evil. God intends to vindicate his name. He also intends to vindicate Job's integrity, because Job's perseverance shows that he does not serve God merely because of a payoff in prosperity. Finally, God causes Job to grow spiritually through the painful experiences that he goes through.

Satan intends the opposite. He intends to destroy Job's faith and bring him to spiritual disgrace, as well as to undermine God's glory reflected in Job's life. Both sets of intentions—God's and Satan's—come to expression in the very same events, the disasters that befall Job. Thus the book of Job can help us to see that the goodness of God is consistent with his control over disasters.

The book of Job provides extra insight by giving us special access to the discussion with Satan that took place in God's presence. But we also know that in most cases we are in a position like Job's rather than like that of the angels. Most of the time God does not give us any access to angelic discussions. Most of the time we do not hear directly the divine reasoning that lies behind particular events in this world. The book of Job underscores the extraordinary character of the information that it provides in Job 1–2. By doing so, it indirectly implies that when we do not have such information—which is almost all the time—we should not presumptuously claim to know all the reasons why God is doing what he is doing. Job reaches a

similar conclusion. When God's confrontation with Job at the end of the book (Job 38–41) reminds Job of how puny his power and knowledge are, he confesses his own limitations:

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.’
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:1–6)

Like Job, we should move in the same direction. We should take to heart what God tells Job in Job 38–41, and also what Job 1–2 tells us about our limited power and knowledge. Like Job, we should admit that we do not know enough to see why God is doing what he is doing.

We will still have to suffer. We may still go through Job-like experiences, in which God's plan seems inexplicable. Worse, it may seem to limited human judgment as if God is acting cruelly or spitefully or unjustly. The book of Job comes to aid us in such circumstances, by reminding us of our limitations as well as God's greatness.

THE SUFFERING OF CHRIST AND OUR SUFFERING

We should not leave behind the case of Job without reckoning with its forward connection to Christ. The book of Job does not by itself give the fullest answers about suffering and disaster. It looks forward to a future time of salvation (Job 19:25–27).

We should observe that, though Job was not sinlessly perfect, he was fundamentally in the right, while his friends were in the wrong. That is, his friends wrongly claimed that Job must be suffering because he had committed some particular grievous sins of which he should repent. Job rightly claimed that their accusation was not true. Job was not suffering because of

particular sins that he had committed. Rather, he was a righteous sufferer. As such, his suffering points forward to Christ. Why did Christ suffer? In Christ's suffering we see the climax of human suffering, and it has a purpose. Christ suffered and died *for sinners, to redeem us*:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also *suffered for you*, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself *bore our sins* in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.
(1 Pet. 2:21–24)

Christ's suffering was unique, because he died for our sins. But it is also an encouragement for us when we have to suffer. As we see the purpose in Christ's suffering, it gives us greater confidence that God has purposes for our own suffering, even when we cannot see how. Christians "may share his [Christ's] sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10), and our sufferings may become an occasion to understand and appreciate more deeply how much Christ suffered for us.

Moreover, God knows our suffering. Christ is able to sympathize with us in our suffering and distress, because he suffered:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
(Heb. 4:15–16)

For these reasons, we need not hesitate to believe that God is in control even when suffering comes to us. We can praise God for his wisdom and goodness and compassion, even when we do not understand the reasons for individual cases of suffering.

PURPOSES FOR SUFFERING

Though many times we do not know why suffering comes into people's lives, God does give us passages in Scripture that indicate positive purposes

for some instances of suffering. These passages can aid us by reminding us that God can bring good out of suffering.

First, suffering can be used by God to produce godly character:

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces *endurance*, and endurance produces *character*, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:3–5)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith *produces steadfastness*. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2–4; see 1 Pet. 4:1)

Second, suffering can increase our respect for God's word:

Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word. (Ps. 119:67)

It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes. (v. 71)

I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous,
and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. (v. 75)

Third, suffering can bring glory to God by showing the quality of our faith:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in *praise and glory and honor* at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 1:6–7; see 4:12–16)

Fourth, as we indicated, suffering gives us a fellowship in Christ's sufferings, and helps us to appreciate more deeply how he suffered for us (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:19–24).

OTHER PASSAGES

The general principle about God's control over disasters comes to expression in other passages:

48 THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

I form light and create darkness,
I make well-being and *create calamity*,
I am the LORD, who does all these things. (Isa. 45:7)

Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and *bad* come? (Lam. 3:38)

Does *disaster* come to a city,
unless the LORD has done it? (Amos 3:6)

In addition, we could multiply instances where the Lord brings specific judgments on people in the form of disaster and death.

But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then *all these curses* shall come upon you and overtake you. (Deut. 28:15)

“Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year *you shall die*, because you have uttered rebellion against the LORD.”

In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died. (Jer. 28:16–17)

We conclude that God is in control of suffering, disaster, and death. Sometimes, as in the examples just given, God brings disasters as a judgment on sin. But at other times, as with the suffering of Job and the suffering of Christ, suffering is *not* a judgment on personal sins. Christ bore the judgment for the sins of *others*; he did not sin himself:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. (1 Pet. 2:22)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (v. 24)

AN INITIALLY GOOD CREATION

One other principle helps us in confronting suffering and death. The Bible indicates that when God created the world, it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). The world that exists today is no longer very good. The entrance of sin has brought about disasters. Present-day disasters are a loud reminder that all is not well with the world. They remind us that the world is no longer what it once was. They remind us of the need for redemption. They also remind

us to hope for a future world, the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1), in which suffering, disaster, and death are completely overcome by God:

He [God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Rev. 21:4)

Thus, even the dark events in this world can be used by God to teach us. We can respond by turning to God's promises, and increasing our longing for the new heavens and the new earth, which God will create. We can glorify God in our suffering.

Some disasters, like Cain's murder of his brother Abel, are the direct result of sin. Abel died because sin infected Cain's heart and then Cain's envious and murderous heart led to murderous action. He killed his brother (Gen. 4:5–8). Other kinds of suffering are not the direct result of sin in any way that we can easily see. But the Bible indicates that sin has *indirect* effects. For example, Genesis 3 indicates that after Adam's first sin, thorns and thistles grew up, and man's labor became difficult and sweaty:

Because you [Adam] have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
“You shall not eat of it,”
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the *sweat* of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken; . . . (Gen. 3:17–19)

Some people think that the thorns and thistles refer to new kinds of plants that God created after the fall, with the express purpose of making man's life difficult. But that interpretation seems unlikely, in view of the fact that God's work of creating different types of plants was completed during the six days of creation in Genesis 1. It is more likely that the verse means that vegetation types that already existed outside the Garden of Eden would no longer cooperate with man but would appear at times and places

that would frustrate his work. A weed is simply any plant that is out of place from the standpoint of human purposes. Weeds will continue to be with us in this life, because the fall into sin has had indirect effects on the relationship of mankind to the plant kingdom. The principle applies not only to weeds but more broadly to all kinds of events that result in disaster and frustrate human life and human purposes. Disasters testify that the world is affected by sin.

Disasters also remind us that a final judgment is coming. Jesus shows us this principle when he comments on disasters that took place during his time on earth:

There were some present at that very time who told him [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:1–5)

Thus, among other things, disasters can remind us that the final judgment of God is coming, and that we should repent before it is too late.

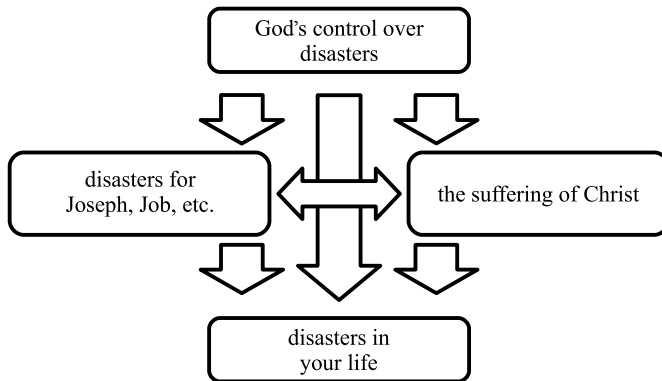
We would rather live in a world where everything gave us comfort. But we do not. This world is not always pleasant. We do not know all the reasons that God has behind the suffering and disasters that he controls. But we can at least discern that there are sometimes some reasons. (1) Disaster can remind us that this world has been infected by sin and its consequences (Rom. 8:20–22). (2) Disasters that directly result from sin remind us of the terrible character of sin and can teach us to take more seriously the importance of avoiding sin ourselves (Rom. 6:23). (3) Disasters warn us of the coming of God’s final judgment (Luke 13:1–5). (4) For Christians, suffering can increase our appreciation for what Christ suffered for us. We suffer *in fellowship with* Christ (Phil. 3:10). (5) Suffering can remind us of the importance of Christ’s compassion for us, because he himself suffered (Heb. 4:15; 5:7). He compassionately understands our suffering. (6) Sufferings can be used by God to sanctify our character

(Rom. 5:3–5; James 1:2–4). (7) Sufferings can refine our faith and give glory to God (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

Though the Bible enables us to understand some of God’s purposes for some of our sufferings, much remains mysterious. When we confront the mysteries in suffering, we need to trust that God is good even though we cannot see how, because he has proved himself trustworthy in key situations that he describes in Scripture—above all, the situation of the crucifixion of Christ. The Bible calls us to exercise such trust, even when we are in the midst of trials.

In sum, a number of biblical teachings fit together to instruct us about disasters, including disasters that may come to us or to those around us. (1) The Bible affirms as a general principle that God controls disasters. (2) The Bible illustrates the principle with many individual cases, like the case of Joseph and his brothers. (3) The supreme case where God brings good out of evil is found in the crucifixion of Christ, where the Bible clearly affirms God’s control. (4) The Bible indicates that we should apply its lessons about disasters to ourselves and our circumstances. (See fig. 4.1.)

Fig. 4.1: God’s Control over Disasters



ALTERNATIVES ARE NOT REALLY BETTER

Let us now consider the alternatives. The main alternative is to say that God is not thoroughly in control. It says that some disasters “just happen,” apart from God’s control. This alternative is superficially attractive, because it

appears to protect the goodness of God. It relieves God of responsibility for anything unpleasant that happens to us. But further reflection shows that it is not satisfying—in fact, it is spiritually devastating.

Consider a particular disaster—an auto accident that causes serious injury or death, or a tsunami that causes widespread death and destruction. If God is in control of it, we have to wrestle with a major difficulty, because it is hard to see how a good God could bring such suffering. But we also have a consolation such as the Bible provides, namely, that God is able to bring good out of evil. He brought good out of evil when Joseph's brothers sold Joseph into slavery (Gen. 50:20). He brought good out of evil above all in the crucifixion of Christ, which brought us salvation. We usually cannot see how God can bring good out of present-day evils, but we can have hope if we trust in the wisdom of God and his power, based on what he has demonstrated in cases such as Joseph and the crucifixion of Christ.

On the other hand, what if we say that God is not in control of the disaster? God might still do something good in response. But the disaster itself is still out of control, and inherently unredeemable. There is no comfort to be had for it. We are left with fear for the future. Thus, even in practice, removing disasters from God's control does not actually help at the deepest level.

It is better to follow what God says in Scripture, even if we ourselves do not understand the meaning of events. In the Bible God says,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths. (Prov. 3:5–6)

PRACTICAL CONSOLATION

We have focused on what the Bible teaches about suffering and disasters, and in particular whether God controls disasters. But much more could be said. Sufferings impinge on people in practical ways, and the Bible gives direction and consolation to people who are in the middle of suffering. Practical books on grief and suffering can help those who are in the midst of it. I recommend J. I. Packer's *A Grief Sanctified*,¹ which includes the entire text of the Puritan writer Richard Baxter's memoir of his wife's life and death.

¹J. I. Packer, *A Grief Sanctified: Through Sorrow to Eternal Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).



CHAPTER 5

HUMAN CHOICE

Some happenstance events involve no human agency. For example, in the book of Job, the “fire of God” burned up Job’s sheep and servants (Job 1:16); a “great wind” struck the house where Job’s children were (v. 19). But other events do involve human agents. The Sabeans fell upon Job’s oxen and donkeys, and the Chaldeans raided Job’s camels (vv. 15, 17). The Sabeans and the Chaldeans made these raids at just the time when the other disasters were happening to Job.

HUMAN AGENTS

What do we say about these events? Is God still in control? How does God’s control mesh with human agency?

Rebekah decided to go out to the well at a particular time, when Abraham’s servant happened to be there. Likewise Rachel decided to go out to the well when Jacob was coming. Ruth decided to go out to the field, the field that Boaz owned.

In the battle at Ramoth-gilead, a certain soldier drew his bow and shot at random; then his arrow hit Ahab in the crack between pieces of his armor.

Likewise, the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, mentions events involving human agents. Pharaoh got angry with his chief cupbearer and his chief baker and decided to put them in custody (Gen. 40:2–3). Another agent, the keeper of the prison, put Joseph in charge (39:22–23). He then appointed Joseph to take care of the cupbearer and the baker (40:4). There was nothing remarkable about any of these actions, taken by themselves. But the whole series of actions worked together to put Joseph in the right place at the right time. Joseph then became the crucial human agent whom

God used to save his people, the family of Jacob, as well as the Egyptians, from the coming famine.

In these cases and many others, human agents were acting in normal ways, and their actions contributed to the eventual outcome. The outcome *happened* to advance the purposes of God. But we can imagine how the events could have turned out very differently. What if Rebekah had not come to the well? What if the soldier at Ramoth-gilead had shot in another direction or at another time? What if the Sabeans and the Chaldeans had decided to relax that day, or to conduct raids in a different direction? What if Pharaoh had decided just to send away the cupbearer and the baker, rather than imprison them? What if, what if?

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER HUMAN CHOICE

What should we think about cases that involve human choice? Is God in charge? Is he in control? And if he is in control, is he in control merely in some kind of vague, broad way, a way that actually leaves out of his control various specific human choices, in order to create space for free human action? On the other hand, if he controls specific human choices, does his control abolish human responsibility?

These are important questions. A full exploration of the questions could easily take up a whole book. We must direct readers elsewhere for a full discussion.¹ Here we will give only a summary.

God's ways are higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8–9). We cannot expect to receive an exhaustive answer to the profound questions about human choice. God knows fully. But for us there remains mystery.

Nevertheless, Scripture has not left us in the dark about the basic issues. In the course of working out history, God uses human choice for his own purposes. The choices are genuine. At the same time, the result comes out exactly as God planned it. God controls human choices, without dissolving the reality of those choices. The choices are real choices by real human beings. The examples given above fit into this pattern. And there are many others. Joseph says,

As for you [his brothers], you meant evil against me, but *God meant it for good*, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Gen. 50:20)

¹ See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010), 119–159.

Joseph affirms the genuine responsibility of his brothers, when they sold him. “You meant evil against me.” The actions were real, and the intention—in this case, a sinful intention—was real. The brothers chose to sell him when they had other alternatives. They were responsible for their choice, and they rightly felt guilty when the close questioning and harsh-looking treatment by the governor of Egypt brought their guilt to mind:

Then they said to one another, “In truth we are *guilty* concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.”
(Gen. 42:21)

At the same time, Joseph affirms the reality of God’s control. God exercised his control in the *very same events* where the brothers were sinning and making their crucial choices: “God meant it [these events] for good.”

The supreme case of God’s control over human choices took place with the crucifixion of Christ. Note how the Bible describes the relation of human choice to God’s control:

This Jesus, delivered up according to the *definite plan* and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of *lawless* men.
(Acts 2:23)

The expression “definite plan” (as well as “foreknowledge”) shows that God controlled the events. Far from being simply one more death of a common criminal, the crucifixion of Christ took place in order that God might accomplish his climactic act of salvation through it. At the same time, the expression “lawless men” indicates the sin and responsibility that belong to Pontius Pilate, Herod, and the Jewish leaders who brought about the crucifixion on a human level. The text clearly affirms the sovereignty of God over the events and at the same time the normal human responsibility for human actions. Both are true.

Moreover, both sides *need* to be true in order for the crucifixion of Christ to have the meaning that it actually does have according to biblical teaching. On the one hand, we have God, not man, to thank for our salvation. We have to say that God was in control of these events. At the same time, it is theologically important that Christ was innocent and that the crucifixion was unjust. His innocence was necessary in order that he could

bear the punishment for our sins. He had no sin (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22). Pilate and the leaders were *guilty* for what they did.

Can any Christian bring himself to say, “Since human beings were involved, God did not control the outcome. So I really cannot thank God for what happened and for my salvation. I have to thank men.” It is clear that we are supposed to thank God. God does claim to control the events—these events above all. The situation is parallel to the case with Joseph in Genesis 50. In a manner parallel to Genesis 50, we can say, “Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” The goodness of God is not compromised in any way, since we can see that his intentions were good, even in the midst of horrible human sins that led to the crucifixion.

Acts 4:24–28 is similar. After quoting from Psalm 2, Acts applies it to the crucifixion, showing that the crucifixion is a fulfillment of God’s plan as articulated long beforehand in Psalm 2:

“Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed”—

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever *your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*. (Acts 4:25–28)

The final expression, “your hand and your plan had predestined to take place,” makes plain the complete control of God, both during the events and beforehand (his plan). God accomplished his plan through the sinful rebellion “against the Lord and against his Anointed” in which “the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel” engaged. God used human sin to accomplish salvation: “. . . you meant evil . . . , but God meant it for good.”

Scripture contains other, more minor instances of the same principle. God used Assyria as a “rod” to punish Israel, but afterward judged Assyria for its sinful attitude (Isa. 10:5–7, 12). He raised up Pharaoh to resist him, in order to exhibit his power (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:17). God fulfilled his prophecy against David’s wives (2 Sam. 12:11–12) when Absalom sinfully went into

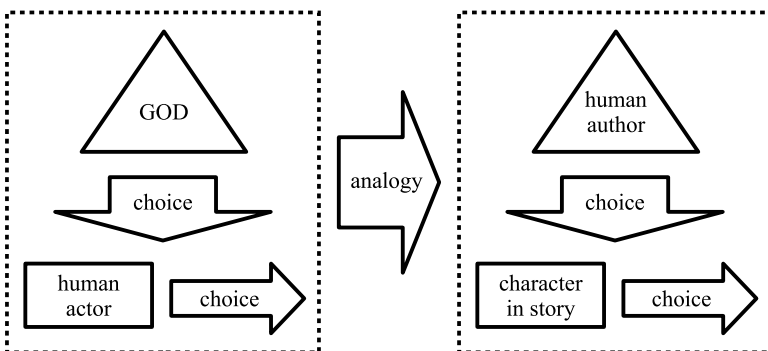
the tent with them on the rooftop (16:22). Note God’s strong assertion of his sovereignty in this event:

Thus says the LORD, “Behold, *I will raise up evil* against you out of your own house. And *I will take* your wives before your eyes and *give them* to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but *I will do this thing* before all Israel and before the sun.” (2 Sam. 12:11–12)

How can we understand how God’s sovereignty is compatible with human responsibility? Theologians use the term *concursum*, which in Latin means “running together.” God’s action and human action run along together. God’s action and God’s control happen in addition to and alongside human action and influence. We have abundant examples in the Bible of such divine action. But it remains mysterious to us exactly *how* God’s action relates to human action in such a way that God is fully in control and human agents are at the same time fully responsible.

John Frame uses the analogy of a human author who creates fictional characters.² God’s governance of human action is like an author’s governance over the characters in his story. God and the human author are completely in control, but it is also true that the human actors in God’s history and in an author’s story make decisions that lead to consequences. (See fig. 5.1.)

Fig. 5.1: Analogy of Human Author



²Ibid., 156–159.

This analogy stems from the fact that God made human beings in his image. God’s power to write the “story” of world history is analogous to a human being’s power to write a story with human characters in it. The analogy goes back to the fact that God creates and governs the world by *speaking* (chapter 2). Because a human author is made in the image of God, he can control the fictional “world” of his characters by writing, which is a form of speaking.

THE ORIGIN OF CREATIVITY

We may consider the reality of God’s speech more deeply. God’s speech has a trinitarian character. John 1:1 calls the second person of the Trinity “the Word.” God the Father is the speaker, and God the Son is the speech. In addition, the Holy Spirit is like the breath of God, carrying the speech to its destination and giving it powerful effect (note the representation of the Spirit as breath in Ezek. 37:10, 14).³

These personal relationships within the Trinity are the original pattern, which forms the basis for God’s speech governing the world. John 1:1 invites us to see a relationship of God to the creation of the world, because the phrase “in the beginning” alludes to Genesis 1. So does the language about creation in the next verses, John 1:2–4. In Genesis 1 God creates the world by speaking. For instance, he creates light by saying, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). These particular speeches of God have their ultimate roots in the eternal speaking where God the Father speaks his Word, which is God the Son.

This trinitarian communication is the expression of the character of God the Father. It is always consistent with his character. At the same time, God the Father expresses something distinct from himself, namely his Word, who is God the Son.

The original trinitarian reality within God is analogically expressed when God creates the world. His acts of creation conform to his character—they express his goodness, wisdom, truth, and power. That is, they display the character of God the Father. At the same time, they bring forth something new. (God has a plan from before the foundation of the world, but the execution of his plan takes place at particular times.) The words of

³ Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 24–26.

command, such as “Let there be light,” are new words. And they produce something new in the world—in this case, they produce light. This new product reflects the creativity of God’s word, which has its foundation in the original creativity of God the Son. In addition, the Holy Spirit is present when God creates the world (Gen. 1:2). By the Spirit’s presence and power, the light that comes into being conforms to God’s word that calls it into existence. The creation reflects the power and control of the Holy Spirit.

We have associated the character of God especially with God the Father, who is the original speaker. We have associated creativity with the Son, and control with the Holy Spirit. But all these characteristics also belong ultimately to all three persons of the Trinity. The persons of the Trinity are in harmony with one another. God’s work of creation is the work of all three persons, who have goodness and creativity and control.

Now we may consider the incarnation. When Jesus Christ became man, he continued to be fully God. He was both God and man, in one person (John 1:14). On earth, he acted in harmony with the will of his Father. As the eternal Word become flesh, he acted in harmony with his Father’s character and will:

I always do the things that are pleasing to him. (John 8:29)

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. (John 12:49)

He did not act independently, but in subjection to the Father’s commandment. At the same time, he acted with the full creativity of God. He did “the works that no one else did” (John 15:24). He acted with divine power, in communion with the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18).

Jesus in his human nature is the model for what we are to become, as we are transformed into his image (2 Cor. 3:18). “Freedom” comes in personal communion with the Spirit: “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (v. 17). In communion with Christ, we find satisfaction, goodness, wisdom, and creativity, because we are in communion with the goodness, wisdom, and creativity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

In short, we can understand human creativity—and thus also the reality

of human choices—by using analogy. We begin with the divine character and creativity and control in the Trinity. Then we have the expression of creativity in God’s acts of creation. Then we have expression of creativity in the incarnate Son, with respect to both his divine nature and his human nature. And then we have expression of creativity in our own human nature. Our choices are free and responsible precisely because they take place in communion with God through Christ, who is the source of all creativity. (See fig. 5.2.) The alternative is slavery to sin (John 8:34–36).⁴

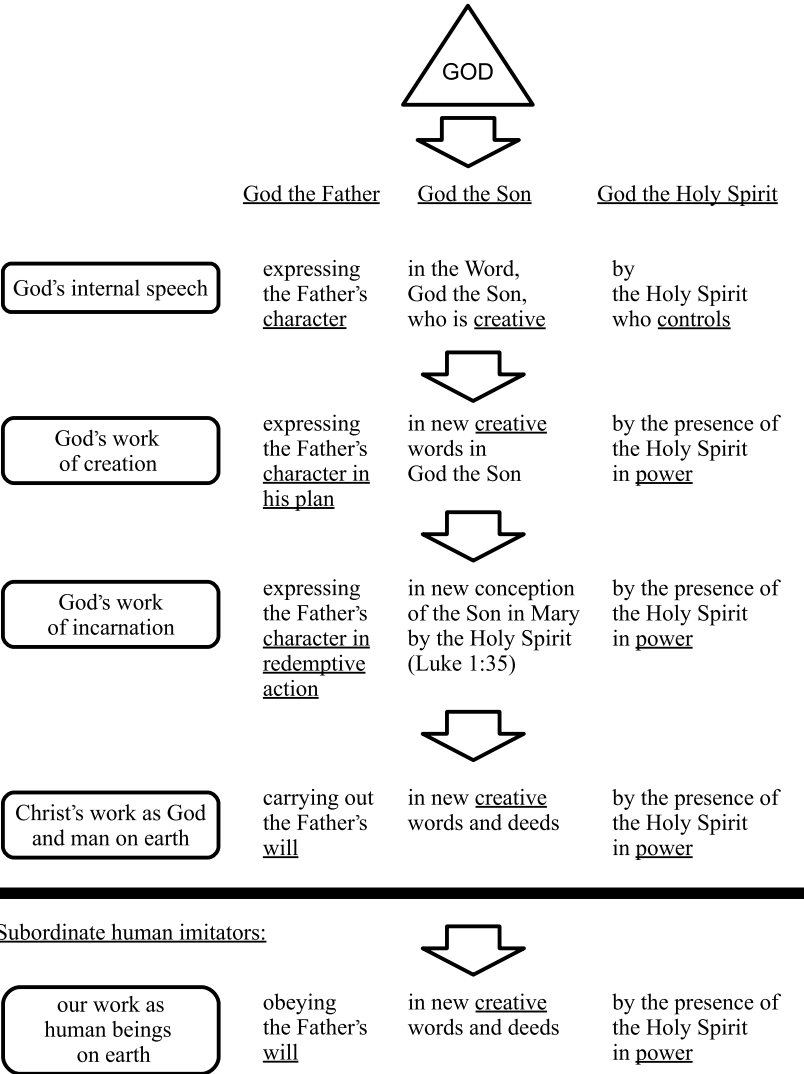
Whatever analogy we use, it does not dissolve mystery. God is God, and his relation to his creation is unique. We cannot understand him fully without being God. We must be content to *believe* what Scripture teaches, even though we do not *master* God or his teaching. We believe that God sovereignly controls events. We believe also that God gives to human beings genuine choices and that he holds them responsible for their choices. We believe both of these clear teachings of Scripture without being able to see for ourselves exactly how his control is compatible with human responsibility and genuine human choice.

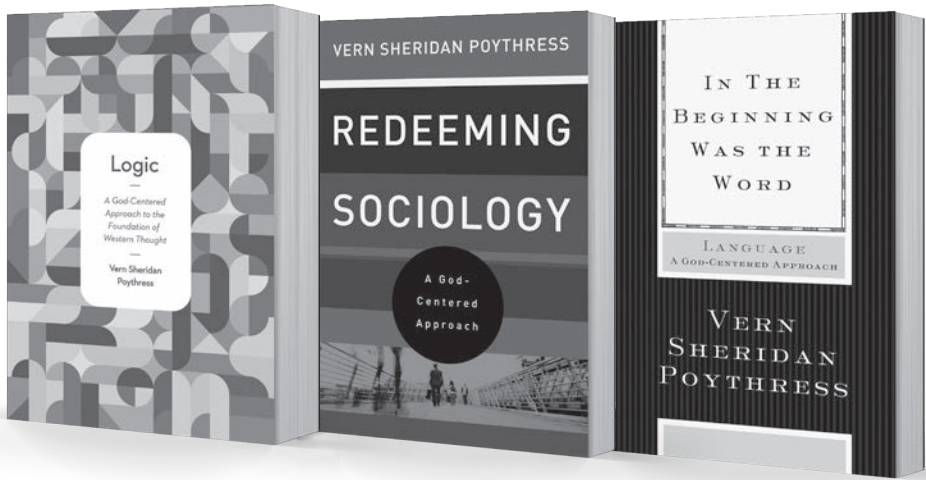
This mystery should stimulate our praise. We praise God and honor him by confessing how great he is, and that “his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3).

⁴See further Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 51–56; Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 42–49, and appendix J.

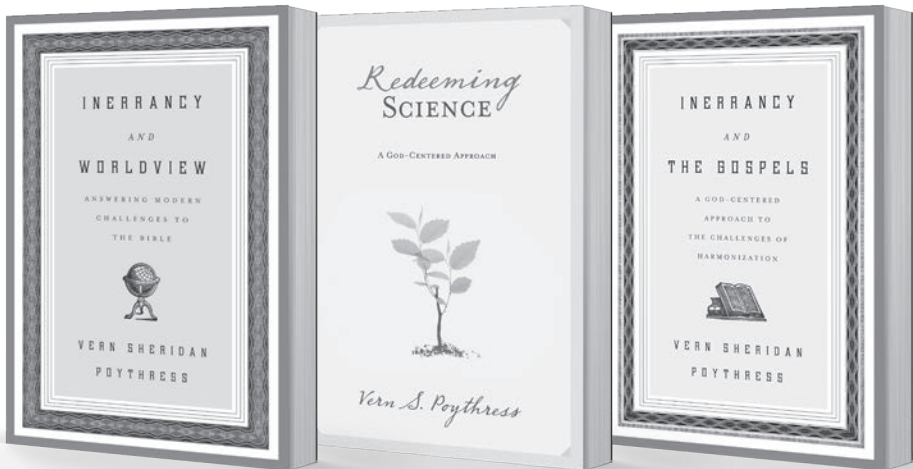
Even human beings enslaved to sin do not escape God’s presence (Acts 17:28). We can see a striking illustration with Caiaphas, whom God used to utter a prophecy, in spite of the wickedness of his heart (John 11:49–53). Caiaphas’s speech was empowered and made creative by the work of God.

Fig. 5.2: Analogy for Creativity





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What if all events—big and small, good and bad—are governed by more than just blind chance? What if they are governed by God?

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Vern S. Poythress (PhD, Harvard University; ThD, Stellenbosch University) is professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, where he has taught for over 30 years. In addition to earning six academic degrees, he is the author of numerous books on biblical interpretation, language, and science, including *Redeeming Science*, *Redeeming Sociology*, and *Logic*.

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