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Knowing God

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the LORD.

Jeremiah 9:23-24

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- What is predestination?
- Why does God allow random shootings, fatal accidents, and other horrible things to occur?
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Why does God love us so much?

That's one of the most difficult questions to answer if we think of it from God's perspective.

Here we are, his creatures who have been made in his image with the responsibility of mirroring and reflecting his glory and his righteousness to the whole world. We have disobeyed him countless times in every place and in every way. In so doing we have misrepresented his character to the whole universe. The Bible tells us that nature itself groans in travail, waiting for the day of the redemption of mankind, because nature suffers under our unrighteousness (Rom. 8:22).

When we think of how disobedient and hostile we've been toward God, we wonder what it is that would provoke him to love us so much. In Romans 5:7, when Paul is astonished by the love of Christ that was manifested in his death, he says, "Scarcely for a righteous man will one lay down his life, but imagine one who is perfect laying down his life for those who are not perfect and praying for those who are in the very act of killing him." That's the kind of love that transcends anything we have been able to experience in this world. I guess the only thing I can conclude is that it is the nature of God to be loving. This is part of his internal and eternal character.

The New Testament says that God is love. That can be one of the most misunderstood verses in the Scripture. We remember a few years ago when it was fashionable to say that "happiness is a warm puppy." We had these brief definitions of what happiness was, and the same thing was applied to love—"Love means never having to say you're sorry," etc.—and we're all very interested in what is involved in the whole act of loving.

But when the Bible says God is love, that statement is not what we would call an analytical statement whereby we can reverse the subject and predicate, and say that therefore love is God. That's not what the Bible means. Rather, what the Jewish form of expression says here is that God is so loving and his love is so consistent, so profound, so deep, so transcendent, and such an integral part of his character that to express it in the maximum way possible, we say that he is love. That is simply saying that God is the ultimate standard of love.

When we talk about the attributes of God, we're referring to those characteristics that describe God's being. He is one. He is holy. He is omniscient. He's omnipresent. He's omnipotent.

Those are some of the different words that we use to describe the nature and character of God; these are characteristics we attribute to God's being. When we describe someone's attributes, we usually make a distinction between a person and his attributes. For instance, you may say your mother is patient, but you wouldn't say that your mother is *patience*. And you would say that your mother is more than a mere list of traits. In the same way, God is not just a list of attributes. But God is different from your mother in that it was God's being that defined attributes in the first place. By gaining a better understanding of God, we can learn more about what true kindness is, what truth, beauty, patience, strength are. In this sense, God *is* his attributes. It's not that he's a composite being—three pounds of omniscience and three pounds of omnipresence, and three pounds of self-existence, etc.—added together to give us a concept of God. Rather, God in his essence, in his very being, is holy, and that holiness is immutable. All of God is immutable and all of God is holy. These attributes cannot be heaped up like sand in a sandpile to give us a composite portrait of God.

By studying the individual attributes of God, however, we're not dissecting God into composite parts. We're simply focusing our attention for a moment on one dimension or one aspect of his being. This can be very helpful to our understanding of God because the only way we are able to know God is through his attributes. The more we understand them, the more we understand his being and his character, and the more we are motivated to worship and obey him.

For more information on God's attributes, I'd like to suggest a book I've written on that very subject, *The Character of God* (Servant, 1995), in which I discuss the attributes of God for study by the layperson.

I don't know what the majority view of God is in the Christian world. I can only guess from the small universe in which I live and the exposure that I have to various groups of people.

I certainly encounter a view of God that is widespread in the Christian community whereby God is somewhat reduced in scope from the biblical portrait that we have of him. He is seen as a sort of celestial grandfather who is benevolent in every respect and whose chief characteristic—and sometimes

only attribute—is the attribute of love. We know that the Bible certainly puts an emphasis on the love of God and even goes so far as to say that God is love.

But I think we are in grave danger of stripping God of the fullness of his character as it is revealed in Scripture. This becomes a not-so-subtle form of idolatry. For example, if we obscure the holiness of God, or the sovereignty of God, or the wrath of God, or the justice of God, and sort of pick and choose those attributes of God that we like and then deny those that frighten us or make us uncomfortable, we've exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and we are worshiping a god who is in fact an idol. It may be a sophisticated idol—it's not one made of wood or stone or brass—but, nevertheless, the concept of God we worship must be a concept that agrees with the God who is.

I've been on a crusade for years to focus attention on the doctrine of God—the character of God. Three of my books deal with the doctrine of God the Father: *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God* (which focuses on God's sovereignty), and the latest one, *The Character of God* (which deals with the attributes of God). I wrote them intentionally as a trilogy to emphasize the character of God the Father because I think we are in grave danger of his being overlooked or distorted in the contemporary Christian world.

We have some idea of who Jesus is, and the charismatic renewal has brought much more attention to the Holy Spirit in recent years. But we almost systematically ignore God the Father. You also find that many Christians ignore the Old Testament. The whole history of the Old Testament is the revelation chiefly of God the Father. Everything we read of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—so amplified in the New Testament—presupposes the knowledge of God the Father that is given to us in the Old Testament. I think it's a priority for the Christian community to develop a higher understanding of the character of God.

I don't think there's anything that makes living the Christian life more difficult than the fact that the Lord we serve is invisible to us. You know the expression in our culture “Out of sight, out of mind.” It's very, very difficult to live your life dedicated to someone or something you cannot see. Often you hear people say that when they can see it, taste it, touch it, or smell it, they'll believe and embrace it, but not before. This is one of the most difficult problems of the Christian life: God is rarely perceived through our physical senses.

On the other side of the coin, I would say that one of the greatest hopes set before the Christian church is the promise of what we call in theology the beatific vision, or the vision of God. We think of John's letter in which he said, "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). The Latin there means "as he is in himself." That is to say, that which is totally concealed from our eyes right now, namely the very substance and essence of God, we will see in all of his glory and majesty and splendor in heaven.

I've often wondered about the text that says we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Does the Bible teach us that we will be totally cleansed from sin, totally glorified? Is this an experience that will eliminate sin from us altogether? Will it be because we catch a direct glimpse of the majesty of God? For example, if I see him—if he becomes visible to me—is that going to be the cleansing thing that rids all sin from my life; or is my seeing him going to be a result of his first cleansing me? I suspect it's the latter.

Scriptures tell us uniformly that no person shall see God and live; this is because God is holy, and we are not (see Exod. 33:20 and 1 Tim. 6:15). Even Moses, as righteous as he was, pleaded with God on the mountain to let him have an unveiled look at God's glory. God only allowed him to catch a refracted glimpse of God's back parts, but he said to Moses, "My face shall not be seen." Ever since Adam and Eve fell and were driven from the Garden, God has been invisible to human beings, but not because God is intrinsically incapable of being seen. The problem is not with our eyes but with our hearts. In the hymn "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise," there is that wonderful phrase "All praise we would render: O help us to see / 'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made the promise that someday a certain group of people would see God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Those who hunger and thirst shall be filled. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* It's because we're not pure in heart that God remains invisible, and only when we're purified will we see him.

The word *providence* is a simple word made up of a prefix and a root. It means "to see beforehand." We could dismiss the providence of God by saying that God sees everything that happens in this world before it happens; he is

the great celestial observer of human history. But the doctrine of providence involves so much more than God as a divine onlooker.

There are basically only three ways in which we can look at the relationship between God and this world. There is the deistic view, in which God creates the world and winds it up like a watch with built-in secondary causes, and the world works like a machine. God steps out of the picture, simply observes everything that takes place in this world, and he never intervenes, never intrudes. Everything happens according to the built-in secondary causes in the universe. That view has certain advantages to it because then nobody can blame God for anything that goes wrong. We can say that we as creatures are bringing about all of the tragedies and catastrophes in this world and that God is absolved because his hands are tied.

Another viewpoint, which is an overreaction to deism, claims that there are no real secondary causes in this world. Everything that happens is a direct result of God's immediate intervention; God causes my hand to go up and to go down. If there's an automobile accident at the intersection, God directly caused that. Free will is a total illusion, and there are no such things as secondary causes. We think that we're acting as responsible people, but we're not. God does it all. That's what we would call an ethical monism, whereby God determines everything and he actually causes everything that takes place.

I believe that the biblical view, which in my judgment is the classical historical Christian view, is a rejection of both of those positions. We believe that God created the universe and gave the power of secondary causality to things and people within it so that we actually can do things by our own volition, through our decisions, our minds, our wills and activities. But at every single point of our actions and of the secondary causes that are at work, God remains sovereign. There are times he works through secondary causes to bring about his will, and there are times he works without those secondary causes. Sometimes he just intrudes into the scene as he did in the blaze of Jesus' miracles in the New Testament; other times he makes use of our decisions and our activities to bring about his sovereign will. The providence of God means that God is sovereign over everything that happens in this world.

One of the most well-known statements of the Christian faith is the Lord's Prayer, which begins with the words "Our Father which art in heaven." This is part of the universal treasury of Christendom. When I hear Christians in a private gathering praying individually, almost every single person begins their

prayer by addressing God as Father. There's nothing more common among us than to address God as our Father. So central is this to our Christian experience that in the nineteenth century, there were some who said the basic essence of the whole Christian religion can be reduced to two points: the universal brotherhood of man and the universal fatherhood of God. In that context I am afraid we have missed one of the most radical teachings of Jesus.

A few years ago, a German scholar was doing research in New Testament literature and discovered that in the entire history of Judaism—in all existing books of the Old Testament and all existing books of extrabiblical Jewish writings dating from the beginning of Judaism until the tenth century A.D. in Italy—there is not a single reference of a Jewish person addressing God directly in the first person as Father. There were appropriate forms of address that were used by Jewish people in the Old Testament, and the children were trained to address God in proper phrases of respect. All these titles were memorized, and the term *Father* was not among them.

The first Jewish rabbi to call God “Father” directly was Jesus of Nazareth. It was a radical departure from tradition, and in fact, in every recorded prayer we have from the lips of Jesus save one, he calls God “Father.” It was for that reason that many of Jesus’ enemies sought to destroy him; he assumed to have this intimate, personal relationship with the sovereign God of heaven and the creator of all things, and he dared to speak in such intimate terms with God. What’s even more radical is that Jesus says to his people, “When you pray, you say, ‘Our Father.’” He has given to us the right and privilege to come into the presence of the majesty of God and address him as Father because indeed he is our Father. He has adopted us into his family and made us coheirs with his only begotten Son (Rom. 8:17).

Perhaps the most unique characteristic of the Christian God is that he exists. The other ones don't. Of course, that is a matter of profound debate, as we all know.

I would say the chief and most critical differences have to do, ultimately, with the Christian God's character of holiness. You're going to get an argument on this from other people who will say that their gods are holy, too. What is unique about Christianity among all the world religions is its central doctrine of a once-for-all atonement that is offered to people to grant them salvation. Old Testament Judaism had a provision for the atonement of sin, but most

religions have no provision for an atonement, basically because they do not consider it to be a prerequisite for redemption.

My question is, Why would a world religion not consider an atonement necessary for redemption unless, in their view, God is less than holy? If God is perfectly just and people are not perfectly just, yet those people are trying to be in a vital relationship with God, you have a basic, overwhelming problem. How would a God who is holy and just accept in his presence unjust creatures? That's what Judaism and Christianity understand as the vital problem. Human beings who are unjust must be justified somehow to enter the presence of a holy God. That's why the whole focus of Judeo-Christianity is at the point of atonement, which brings about reconciliation. But if you don't believe that God is all that holy, there's no need for any concept of reconciliation. We can live however we want because this kind of god is a cosmic bellhop who will overlook all of our sins and do whatever we want him to do for us. I would say the holiness of God is the vital difference.

There are no other religions that have a concept of God's holiness identical to the Christian concept. However, some other religions maintain a kind of parallel and approximate view of the matter, and certainly they have a concept of the holiness of God.

Insofar as Judaism in its various forms embraces the Old Testament, it would certainly embrace the concept of holiness we find there. We know that though there's an expansion of revelation as to the nature of God's holiness in the New Testament, it's certainly not an esoteric idea in the Old Testament. In fact, some of the most vivid displays of God's majesty and holiness are found in the Old Testament.

There are two ways in which the Bible speaks of God's holiness. The most commonly understood meaning of holiness in our culture is with respect to God's purity or his moral virtue—his righteousness. Certainly the Bible does use *holy* at times to describe the righteous, moral, pure character of God, but that's the secondary meaning of holiness. The primary meaning of holiness refers to God's apartness—otherness, transcendence—that sense in which he is much more majestic in all of his being than is any creaturely being. The transcendence of God is a dominant motif in the Old Testament and is certainly a part of the creeds of classical Judaism and Islam, insofar as Islamic religion builds upon much that was taken from the Old Testament.

They see Muhammad as a descendant of Ishmael. They give certain allegiance to the patriarchs, and they deal with that concept of holiness.

The great difference between Christianity and other world religions regarding God's holiness is found in the concept of atonement. Judaism's view of atonement in the Old Testament was the sacrificial system that was part of their worship. The Christian view sees atonement as the once-for-all sacrifice made by a Savior, a suffering Savior, who died for the sins of the people. That concept is absent in other world religions, and it has always distressed me. I don't see how the other world religions could be comfortable with the fact of human sinfulness and the fact of the holiness of God *without* a mediator, without a Savior. It seems that they would have to negotiate either the sinfulness of man or the holiness of God to be comfortable where they are.

We need to make some important distinctions about the biblical meaning of "fearing" God. These distinctions can be helpful, but they can also be a little dangerous.

When Luther struggled with that, he made this distinction, which has since become somewhat famous: He distinguished between what he called a servile fear and a filial fear. The servile fear is a kind of fear that a prisoner in a torture chamber has for his tormentor, the jailer, or the executioner. It's that kind of dreadful anxiety in which someone is frightened by the clear and present danger that is represented by another person. Or it's the kind of fear that a slave would have at the hands of a malicious master who would come with the whip and torment the slave. Servile refers to a posture of servitude toward a malevolent owner.

Luther distinguished between that and what he called filial fear, drawing from the Latin concept from which we get the idea of family. It refers to the fear that a child has for his father. In this regard, Luther is thinking of a child who has tremendous respect and love for his father or mother and who dearly wants to please them. He has a fear or an anxiety of offending the one he loves, not because he's afraid of torture or even of punishment, but rather because he's afraid of displeasing the one who is, in that child's world, the source of security and love.

I think this distinction is helpful because the basic meaning of fearing the Lord that we read about in Deuteronomy is also in the Wisdom Literature, where we're told that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The focus here is on a sense of awe and respect for the majesty of God. That's

often lacking in contemporary evangelical Christianity. We get very flippant and cavalier with God, as if we had a casual relationship with the Father. We are invited to call him Abba, Father, and to have the personal intimacy promised to us, but still we're not to be flippant with God. We're always to maintain a healthy respect and adoration for him.

One last point: If we really have a healthy adoration for God, we still should have an element of the knowledge that God can be frightening. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). As sinful people, we have every reason to fear God's judgment; it is part of our motivation to be reconciled with God.

Romans 1 speaks plainly of this universal revelation that God makes to the world even as it's hinted at in other places, such as the psalm that tells us, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork." In writing to the Romans, Paul says that ever since the creation of the world, the existence of God is not only revealed but is clearly perceived through the things that are made. He speaks of the invisible qualities of God being understood or known through the visible things of creation. In light of this revelation, the whole world is without excuse if they reject God. No one can claim ignorance of God as an excuse for refusing to honor him or to be grateful to him. That's the burden of the first chapter of Romans.

Now, how would the average person see this? I recall a conversation I heard once on a talk show in which three very sophisticated theologians debated the question of the existence of God. One was Jewish, one was Roman Catholic, and one was Protestant. They were arguing whether or not you could prove the existence of God. It was a very technical level of debate, and then they opened up the telephone lines and allowed the "average person" to get involved. A woman called in whose poor grammar indicated she wasn't very highly educated. She said, "I don't know what's wrong with you guys. Why don't you just open your eyes and look out the window?" She set these trained theologians on their ears with a very direct and straightforward appeal to nature itself as proof of the existence of God.

In theology there's a historical question of whether or not this revelation that God makes in nature is what we call *immediate* or *mediate*. In this sense, these terms don't refer to time, but to whether God reveals himself directly to you and me or makes himself known through some intermediate person or thing, respectively. For example, we see a clock, and that suggests that a clockmaker

made it. This clock is an example of mediate revelation. We don't have to have a Ph.D. to recognize that a clock didn't create itself. It was produced by somebody in an intelligent way with some kind of design. I think the Bible teaches that we have both an immediate and a mediate knowledge of the existence of God.

What Paul talks about in Romans 1 is what we would call mediate. He says that we know God through the things that are made. That does require some thinking. I see something out there that has order and harmony and organization to it, and I have to reason that there's some cause for this, and I assign this cause for all that exists out there to the great Author of creation. I think this is how the average person would make the connection.

When the Lord was talking to Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah, he said, "I will go down and see if they have done entirely as it has been told to Me." Why does God say he needs to go down to see these cities? Wouldn't he know these things already?

God would know it without having to go down and check it out personally because God is omniscient. He knows all things; the hairs on the heads of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were numbered. He knew everything they had ever done, every idle word they had ever spoken. He didn't need to canvass them with a new census to see how wicked they were.

There are two ways of approaching this difficult verse (Gen. 18:20). Often these conversations with God were really conversations with angelic messengers who were representing God. The angelic messengers themselves do not have the omniscience that we attribute to God. It may be in this case that the angelic visitor who was going to check out the situation was speaking for himself.

Even in Abraham's test at Mount Moriah, where he was told to offer Isaac on the altar and at the very last minute as he stretched out his arm to plunge the knife into the chest of his son, the voice of the Angel of God stopped him and said, "Lay not thy hand now upon your son, Abraham, because now I know that you love me." The suggestion is that God didn't know of Abraham's love before this happened. It's as if God were a celestial spectator pacing back and forth, wringing his hands, hoping that Abraham would make the right decision and do the right thing, but he was helpless to do anything about it until the outcome.

A lot of people think of God in those terms, as if he is just a cosmic spectator of what's going on and he doesn't know the end before the beginning. They make God finite, dependent, derived, everything less than the God who is revealed in Scripture.

The second approach to this passage takes into account that every time the Bible describes anything about God, whether it's in a narrative or a didactic passage, whether it's abstract or concrete, the only language available to the biblical writers was human language. We can't talk as fish, we can't talk as snails, because we're not snails and we're not fish. Nor can we talk as God. When God speaks to us and reveals himself to us, the only language we can understand is human language. When the Bible uses what we call phenomenological language, or the language of appearances, the Bible speaks of God's learning. It describes very crude images, such as God having his feet on the couch. At the same time, the Bible tells us that even though it uses human language, God is not a human who can be contained or fully described by these figures of speech.

I think that in the situation of Sodom and Gomorrah, either the angel was speaking for himself—he did have to go see what the cities were like—or this was God's way of explaining the situation to Abraham, letting Abraham know what would happen and that God was in charge.

There is a tremendous difference between the popular definition of a miracle in our culture and the narrow technical definition of a miracle that theologians work with in their science. We can often have serious communication problems when people ask me whether I believe that God is doing miracles today.

If by a miracle we mean that God is alive and well and running his world by his providence, affecting the course of human events, then by all means God is doing those things. If the question is asking whether or not God is answering prayers, then I would say emphatically, yes, God is answering prayers. If people are asking whether the providence of God is bringing extraordinary things to pass today, I would say absolutely. Does God heal people in response to prayer? I would say yes to all of those questions because I'm convinced that God is alive and well and doing all of those things.

If we define a miracle as a supernatural work of God, then I would say that God certainly does supernatural works today. The rebirth of a human soul cannot be done by natural means; only God can do it through his power, and God is certainly doing that every day. If that's what people mean by a

miracle, then God is doing miracles today. Some people define a miracle so broadly as to say that even the birth of a child is a miracle because it's a marvelous thing that couldn't happen apart from the power of God. So they would define a miracle as any wonderful thing that happens by the power of God. If that's the definition of miracle, then again I would say that, absolutely, God is performing them today.

However, we may be speaking of miracle in the technical sense of an action performed against the laws of nature—God circumventing the very laws he put into motion—for example, bringing life out of death or something out of nothing, such as Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead when his body was in a state of decomposition after four days in the tomb. No, I don't think that God is doing that kind of miracle today.

I certainly believe God could raise every human being in every cemetery in this world today if he wanted to. But I don't think he is performing those kinds of miracles today. The chief reason he did those things in biblical days was to certify revelation as divine—to back up what he spoke with evidence of his authority. Since we now have the Bible, other, miraculous sources of revelation are no longer necessary.

I don't know for sure whether God has or not. Certainly there are abundant cases in church history where people claim to have heard voices that were the audible voice of God. Joan of Arc would be Exhibit A. That testimony has come more than once from people whom we generally recognize as being reputable saints, and so I hesitate to cast aspersions on their testimony.

On the other hand, we find that even in sacred Scripture, during a time when God was giving direct communication of divine revelation, the occurrences of an audible voice of God were extremely rare. I can only think of three times in the New Testament that there's a record of God speaking audibly, and all three of them were occasions where the Father made a public declaration about his Son, who incidentally is no longer with us on this planet in the flesh. There's no other record of anyone being talked to by God audibly, with the exception of Saul (Paul) on the road to Damascus.

Even in the Old Testament, though it happens with those who are agents of revelation, those occurrences are very rare indeed. In biblical times, even at the height of divine revelation, audible revelation direct from heaven was rare.

I don't think we are in a period of redemptive history in which we're getting special revelation from God. It would seem to me it would be even less likely that you would get that kind of audible expression from God today. Add to that a factor that many Christians don't like to consider: Hearing voices when there's no discernible source can be a manifestation of a psychosis. I'm not saying it is, but it can be. There are people who do suffer from hallucinatory experiences in which they hear voices as a result of chemical imbalances and so on. I can't think of anyone who has ever told me they actually heard the audible voice of God, but if they did, I would be concerned about their mental state. I wouldn't conclude immediately that they were crazy, but I don't think it's normal or expected in the devout Christian life to be hearing the audible voice of God.

I have a close friend who came to this country from England. His name is John Guest. He is an Episcopalian priest in Pittsburgh. When he first came to the United States, he visited an antiquarian in Philadelphia, and there he saw some slogans and mementoes and poster boards that actually date back to the eighteenth century, during the American Revolution. He saw signs like "Don't tread on me" and "No taxation without representation," but the one that caught his eye was the one that said in bold letters, "We serve no sovereign here." When John looked at that, as an Englishman, he said, "How can I possibly communicate the idea of the kingdom of God in a nation that has a built-in allergy to sovereignty?"

As Americans we're used to a democratic process of rule. When you're talking about sovereignty, you're talking about government and about authority. From a biblical perspective, when the Scriptures speak of God's sovereignty, they reveal God's governmental authority and power over his entire universe.

In my classes in the seminary, I raise questions like, "Is God in control of every single molecule in the universe?" When I raise that question, I say, "The answer to that question will not determine whether you are a Christian or a Muslim, a Calvinist or an Arminian, but it will determine whether you are a theist or an atheist." Sometimes the students can't see the connection. And I say to them, "Don't you realize that if there is one molecule in this universe running around loose outside the scope or the sphere of God's divine control and authority and power, then that single maverick molecule may be the grain of sand that changes the entire course of human history, that blocks God from keeping the promises he has made to his people?" It may be that one maverick

molecule that will prevent Christ from the consummation of his kingdom. For if there is one maverick molecule, it would mean that God is not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, then God is not God. If there is any element of the universe that is outside of his authority, then he no longer is God over all. In other words, sovereignty belongs to deity. Sovereignty is a natural attribute of the Creator. God owns what he makes, and he rules what he owns.

How do we reconcile the fact that God is sovereign with the fact that he has given us free will as persons?

I don't see any problem in reconciling the sovereignty of God with man's free will as long as we understand the biblical concept of freedom. With respect to mankind, human beings are given the ability to make free choices, but our freedom is a limited freedom. We are not absolutely free. Remember, God said to Adam and Eve, "You may eat of all of the trees in the Garden." But then he added a restriction: "Of this tree you may not eat. If you do, you will surely die."

Now, God is a being who has the ability to make free choices, and I am a being who has the ability to make free choices. The difference, however, is that I am not sovereign. God is sovereign. God has more authority than I do. God has the right and the power and the authority to do whatsoever he pleases. I have the power and the ability and the freedom to do those things that I can do, but my freedom can never override the power or the authority of God. My freedom is always limited by the higher freedom of God. What is a contradiction is *God's sovereignty* and *human autonomy*. *Autonomy* means that man can do whatever he wants without being worried about judgment from on high. Obviously those two are incompatible, and we do not believe that man is autonomous. We say that he is free, but his freedom is within limits, and those limits are defined by the sovereignty of God. This is a simple analogy: In my house I have more freedom than my son. We both have freedom, but mine is greater.

That passage, of course, is very controversial. In an older translation of it, Jesus says, "No man can come to me unless the Father draws him." The dispute about that passage has to do with the meaning of the word translated "to draw." What does it mean? There are those biblical scholars and Christians who believe that it means to entice, to woo, or to seek to persuade. For them, then, what Jesus is saying is, "People, if left to themselves, are not going to seek me out; there has to be something added to their normal inclinations before they would be moved to come in my direction." Jesus is saying that God has to do something. And the old translation is that he has to draw them just as the Siren voices drew Ulysses to the sea. They tried to entice

him, persuade him, and woo him to come by being as attractive as possible in granting the invitation. Some people hold the strong opinion that wooing is the very opposite of compulsion, that God doesn't compel people to come to Jesus but he does entice them and encourage them and try to woo them and show them how attractive Jesus is so that they will incline themselves to respond to Jesus.

I once had a debate on this subject with a professor of New Testament studies who was an expert in the biblical languages. I was taking the position that God does more than invite and entice and woo. I think the word here is very strong because it is the same word that is used in the book of Acts when Paul and Silas are dragged into prison. It's not like the jailer went inside the bars and tried to woo Paul and Silas, saying, "Come on, fellows, please come on in here." He compelled them to go inside that jail. I think the word there is strong, and I pointed that out to the New Testament professor. Then he surprised me somewhat because he quoted the use of the same verb that he found in some other Greek literature where the verb was used to describe the human activity of drawing water from a well. And the professor went on to say, "Now, you don't compel water to come up out of a well." And I said, "But I have to say you don't woo it either. You don't stand up there and say, 'Here, water, water, water,' and expect the water on its own power to jump up out of the well into your bucket. You have to go down with your bucket and take that water." I think the force of that verb is to say that we are in desperate need of the assistance of God to come to Christ, and we will not come to Christ unless the Father brings us to him.

What is predestination?

When the Bible speaks of predestination, it speaks of God's sovereign involvement in certain things before they happen. He chooses in advance certain things to take place. For example, he predestined creation. Before God created the world, he decided to do it.

Usually when people think of predestination, they think about whether or not somebody was hit by an automobile on a given day because God had decided ahead of time that that should happen on that day.

Theologically, the principal issue of predestination in the Bible has to do with God selecting people for salvation beforehand. The Bible clearly does teach that somehow God chooses people for salvation before they're even born. Virtually

every Christian church believes that, because this concept is so clearly taught in Scripture.

Paul refers to Jacob and Esau. Before they were even born, before they had done any good or evil, God decreed in advance that the elder would serve the younger: “Jacob have I loved; Esau have I hated.” The point there is that God had chosen certain benefits for one of those two before they were even born.

The real debate is, On what basis does God predestine? We know that he predestines, but why does he predestine, and what is the basis for his choices? Many Christians believe that God knows in advance what people are going to do, what choices they’re going to make, and what activities they’re going to be involved in. As he looks through the corridor of time and knows what choices you will make, for example, he knows that you will hear the gospel. He knows whether you will say yes or no. If he knows that you are going to say yes, then he chooses you for salvation on the basis of his prior knowledge. I don’t hold that position. I think that God does this sovereignly, not arbitrarily, not whimsically. The only basis I see for predestination in the Bible is the good pleasure of his own will. The only other reason is to honor his only begotten Son. The reason for his selection is not in me and not in you and not in some foreseen good or evil, but in his own sovereignty.

Why does God let random shootings, fatal accidents, and other horrible things occur?

Since we believe that God is the author of this planet and is sovereign over it, it’s inevitable that we ask where he is when these terrible things take place.

I think the Bible answers that over and over again from different angles and in different ways. We find our first answer, of course, in the book of Genesis, in which we’re told of the fall of humanity. God’s immediate response to the transgression of the human race against his rule and authority was to curse the earth and human life. Death and suffering entered the world as a direct result of sin. We see the concrete manifestation of this in the realm of nature, where thorns become part of the garden and human life is now characterized by the sweat of the brow and the pain that attends even the birth of a baby. This illustrates the fact that the world in which we live is a place that is full of sorrows and tragedy.

But we must never conclude that there’s a one-to-one correlation in this life between suffering and the guilt of the people on whom tragedies fall. If there were no sin in the world, there would be no suffering. There would be no fatal accidents,

no random shootings. Because sin is present in the world, suffering is present in the world, but it doesn't always work out that if you have five pounds of guilt, you're going to get five pounds of suffering. That's the perception that the book of Job labors to dispel, as does Jesus' answer to the question about the man born blind (John 9:1-11).

On the other hand, the Bible makes it clear that God lets these things happen and in a certain sense ordains that they come to pass as part of the present situation that is under judgment. He has not removed death from this world. Whether it's what we would consider an untimely death or a violent death, death is part of the nature of things. The only promise is that there will come a day when suffering will cease altogether.

The disciples asked Jesus about similar instances—for example, the Galileans' blood that was mingled with the sacrifices by Pilate or the eighteen people who were killed when a temple collapsed. The disciples asked how this could be. Jesus' response was almost severe. He said, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish," again bringing the question back to the fact that moral wickedness makes it feasible for God to allow these kinds of dreadful things to take place in a fallen world.

Is God still God? Is God still the Lord of history? The difference is this: When God used a catastrophe as an arm of judgment in the Old Testament, we know that his judgment was behind the catastrophic event because we have the benefit of the written revelation telling us that this was God's hand in history. As we live out our lives and see nations suffer catastrophes and calamity strike people, we don't know exactly what the relationship is between those catastrophes and the judgment of God.

Let me construct a biblical parallel here. In the ninth chapter of John's Gospel, the Pharisees raised this question about a man born blind: Was this man born blind because he was a sinner or because his parents were sinners? Jesus' answer: It was neither one of them. He was born blind for another reason altogether. It wasn't done as a matter of course, as an expression of divine judgment. That text and the whole book of Job should restrain us in the case of individuals from ever assuming that a person's tragedy or catastrophe or calamity is a direct act of divine judgment. Now, it may be. We see countless cases in Holy Scripture where God does, in fact, bring calamity upon the house of a person who has been flagrant in disobedience toward God. The Bible is saying that if we are guilty, God may withhold judgment

until later, or we may receive temporal judgment in this world right now at his hands. We never know for sure whether the calamity we experience as individuals is a direct act of judgment or not. What is true of individuals is also true of nations.

I remember hearing Billy Graham say in a sermon a few years ago, “If God does not bring judgment upon the United States of America, he’s going to have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.” Remember, Jesus warned the cities that heard his message, Chorazin and Bethsaida, that the Day of Judgment would be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than it would be for them. While we no longer have prophetic interpretation of God’s reasoning for bringing judgment, we do know that no nation is ever exempt from the judgment of God.