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Second Kings 20:1-6

Which of these two illustrations do you think best describes the world we inhabit as it is presented in the Bible:

- We are players acting out the scenes written by the divine screen writer; or,
- We are soldiers living in a chaotic, war-torn world.

Before you answer, let me put it a different way by asking two questions that are more penetrating:

- Is everything that happens already strictly predetermined, with God exercising meticulous control? Or,
- Has God limited Himself to some extent by giving men free will to choose contrary to His will?

Truth is, and if we are honest, I think that we sometimes believe one way, and sometimes, the other.

It can be a great comfort to suppose that God has predetermined everything, and that He exercises meticulous control over His creation, and in the lives of His creatures.

This view of life is sometimes called the blueprint, meaning that everything is proceeding according to God's divine blueprint, with no room for even slight alterations.

A popular proponent of this view puts it like this: "There is no maverick molecule if God is sovereign. If He cannot control the tiniest bits of the universe, then we cannot trust Him to keep His word" (R.C. Sproul).

The blueprint model may sound like it is honoring the sovereignty of almighty God, but really it is afraid that He cannot remain in charge of a universe in which He has chosen to give mankind free will.

God is still sovereign if He gives us free will. It's not an either/or situation.

I think there is an even bigger problem with the blueprint model. Do we really believe that the Bible teaches that when a child is abducted, sexually abused, then brutally murdered, that it was meticulously predetermined by God? Did God write that scene?

I hope we would all say, "No." I hope none of us would try to comfort the parents of that child by telling them that God planned from before the foundation of the earth to have their child victimized as His perfect will.

We like to think that everything happens for a reason, and that we can discover that reason. The childless couple who eventually adopt thereby give the glory to God.

In Romans we do read that, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

However, just because God works for the good, it doesn't mean that He was the source of the bad. Not at all.

Have you heard of a condition called Munchausen syndrome by proxy? It is when a caregiver or parent or spouse causes you to be ill only to appear to have saved you from it by their care.

When we say that God determined something evil in order to work for the good, we are describing Him as having a sort of divine Munchausen syndrome by proxy.

If there are no 'maverick-molecules,' then God is a monster. If you did the things that we sometimes ascribe to God, you'd be held criminally liable. To simply excuse tragedies by saying, "God is sovereign," doesn't make monstrous acts somehow holy.

The God of the Bible is not a monster; He is revealed in Jesus Christ as anything but.

We can't argue from our own logic, or our own feelings. If the Bible teaches God's deterministic, meticulous control, so there are no 'maverick-molecules,' then that is what we must believe.

The Bible **doesn't** teach that; at least, I don't think so. I would cite the spiritual discipline of prayer as perhaps the best biblical evidence against the deterministic blueprint.

I know people like to say that prayer changes me, and aligns me with the will of God.

Does that mean God's will is always done? No; it doesn't, otherwise Jesus would not have taught us to pray, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven."

Jesus wasn't telling us to thank God because His will IS always done. He was teaching us to pray that it might be done, more-and-more, in our lives, and in the lives of others, for the betterment of all.

Prayer can affect God, and thereby alter the course of history.

Hezekiah was one of the top three kings of Judah. His first act was to purge, repair, and reopen, with splendid sacrifices and perfect ceremony, the Temple.

When the northern kingdom of Israel fell, Hezekiah invited the scattered inhabitants to celebrate a Passover, which was continued for the unprecedented period of fourteen days.

We find him sick and sending for Isaiah, who prophesies death as the outcome. Here is the story:

2Ki 20:1 In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.' "

Historians put this scene around the time Judah was besieged by Assyria, around 701BC. Hezekiah was only 39 years old.

Today doctors sometimes give terminal patients a time frame, based on their experience. God didn't specify a time, but it's clear that Hezekiah's death was imminent.

2Ki 20:2 Then he turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying,

2Ki 20:3 "Remember now, O LORD, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what was good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

2Ki 20:4 And it happened, before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying,

2Ki 20:5 "Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD.

2Ki 20:6 And I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of My servant David."""

Notice that God said, "I will heal you." He was sick, unto death; God healed him; Hezekiah would die fifteen years later of something else.

That seems obvious, but I have to point it out to establish that God very definitely answered Hezekiah's prayer. You're to understand that, if he hadn't prayed, he would not have lived.

I've heard it said that God intended Hezekiah to pray as he did, because He had already determined to add fifteen years to his life.

Do you get that from these words? You don't - unless you are afraid God might really answer prayer, and thereby alter the course of history.

2Ki 20:7 Then Isaiah said, "Take a lump of figs." So they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.

I found this personal testimony on a health forum:

Never in my wildest dreams did I EVER think I would place a slice of a raw fig over my boil. But I was desperate and can honestly tell you it works! It did take more than 3 days because I could only use the fig at night time. But today - the boil is just a small raised dot that causes me no pain and if it wasn't for the fact that I am OCD about keeping it covered and clean I wouldn't even know it was there.

I'm guessing that the physicians attending Hezekiah thought the lump of figs suggested by Isaiah was stupid; and that he would have thought so too, if it hadn't been the Lord telling him to do it.

This isn't about discovering new methods to treat boils; it's about God doing a miracle against all natural hope, in response to prayer.

Hezekiah's prayer altered the outcome. The biblical instances where God responds to prayer prove that there is some wiggle-room in the events of our lives. It argues against the blueprint.

We're not out of the theological woods, however. If we are not careful, we can end up embracing an extreme view of open theism that says God is **not** omniscient.

Of course He is. But how can He know a future that can be altered by our praying?

Let me be clear: **I don't know!**

What I do know is that we have free will, and that means we can choose things that are not the will of God.

There are those who say that free will exists, but only to do what God has already predetermined. C.S. Lewis pointed out how ridiculous that argument is, in his book, *The Problem of Pain*:

If you choose to say, "God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it," you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words, "God can."

In other words, if we are free to act only when our actions bring about God's will, then we are not really free. If we are free to choose between A and B, so long as we choose A, that is determinism, not freedom.

When I first got saved, there was a popular saying, and it went like this: "God is on His throne, and Prayer changes things."

I didn't realize, at the time, what deep theology was captured by that simple summary.

"God is on His throne." Creation is moving inevitably toward the end that God has determined in His Word. We have the general, and in some cases, the specific, future history of the world. By His divine providence, God will accomplish what He has promised.

"Prayer changes things." Within the framework of history, where God remains in charge, events and lives *can* be altered. God can compensate for the free will He has granted human beings to exercise.

Meticulous determinism isn't biblical, but we don't want to end up as open theists. What's a believer to believe?

I honestly don't think we can ever fully come to a final answer that takes into account all the biblical teaching on this subject. I'm content with a little unrevealed mystery.

What we must do is pick a worldview that makes the most biblical sense. Why must we? Because we are called upon to minister the grace of God to those who are suffering and to those who are perishing.

For me, the Christian as a soldier in a spiritual war **is** that worldview, especially in this church age we find ourselves between the first and second comings of Jesus to establish His kingdom.

Warfare was the worldview of Jesus in His first coming. In the wilderness, when He was tempted by the devil, Jesus acknowledged that the devil had a malevolent spiritual kingdom, and that he had much to do with the earthly kingdoms on our planet.

Jesus spoke of the devil as an adversary who needed to be bound, calling him "the strong man."

In a scene that screams invasion, Jesus lands on shore, and is confronted by a legion of demons possessing one demoniac. He defeats the demons, and went on defeating them wherever they possessed or oppressed people.

We've argued, in our studies in the Gospel of Mark, that demonic possession was rampant when Jesus was on the earth as a strategy of Satan in his spiritual war against God.

When Jesus returns in His Second Coming, He is in battle mode, riding a white horse, followed by the armies of Heaven.

How does this warfare worldview help us? One commentator I read put it this way:

... we can begin to see our world as a war zone... a condition resulting from creation's rebellion against a loving God... In this model, those who lost their lives in the Holocaust, those who are born with deformities and disabilities, and those who suffer

disease and illness, are casualties of a terrible cosmic war, not victims of some divine scheme.

The warfare worldview helps us minister to people. We can share with them a loving God Who, in Christ, displays boundless compassion for them.

We can tell them that God is not the source of their pain; He is the solution.

And the warfare worldview is an encouragement to pray fervently. Like Hezekiah, we should turn our face to the wall, cry passionate tears, and ask God to hear us, knowing that He does, and that prayer changes things.