

CHAPTER 1

LET'S GO BACK TO SQUARE ONE

God is in control and He has my best interest at heart. The first time I heard that statement, I was sitting in a businessmen's Bible study ten years ago. That day my life changed and it has never been the same since. The teacher who made the statement called it "The Twin Pillars of Faith." You can tell how important it is to him by that title. I have given it a different name because of the way it has impacted my life. I call it "My Square One Theology," or simply "Square One" for short, hence the title of this chapter, "Let's Go Back to Square One." I consider the information in this chapter so important, and so foundational to the Christian life, that I urge you to read and carefully consider it as you begin your study of Biblical Economics. God is in control and He has my best interest at heart. I'll be making frequent references to Square One throughout this book.

Square One is not a new truth. It is not a new doctrine. It is the application of an old truth to life, an application I had largely missed during the years I had been a Christian up to that time. It has to do with two of God's attributes, His sovereignty and His goodness. If you enrolled in a seminary as a student, you would sit in a class entitled Theology Proper, which is a study of God Himself, His attributes, His nature, His activities as revealed in the Bible. Let's say that you do this, and you show up for theology class the first day. The professor begins to list God's attributes and explain them to you, sovereignty, goodness, justice, love, eternal life, omnipotence, etc., down through the list. And you leave class that first day with a little better understanding of what God is like.

Two or three days later you encounter an unexpected crisis in your life, a major problem of some kind. And it's the kind of problem you have to share with somebody, someone you trust, someone who might act as a counselor for you. So you get with this person and tell him or her the story, all about this crisis. You come to a pause, and your counselor looks up at you and looks you in the eye and says, "Don't you realize that God is in control and has your best interest at heart?" And like a bolt of lightning you think, "Wow, is that what I learned in theology

class earlier this week?” Actually it was, but it was presented quite differently. In theology class you learned it as a statement of theology, or a statement of faith. But in the visit with the counselor, you heard it as the application of theology to real life. If God is sovereign, then He is in control of everything, not just some things. He’s in control because He created all things. To think of God as having created this world, and not be in control of it, doesn’t make sense. That wouldn’t be the God of the Bible. If God is good, if He’s absolutely righteous, then He’s incapable of doing anything with your life, or letting anything happen in your life that’s not in your best interest. Hence the phrase, “God is in control and He has my best interest at heart.”

I am learning that every issue in life, every relationship in life, every experience in life should be approached from the foundation of Square One. As each day begins, I try to go to Square One and start there. I try to affirm my belief in it and reinvest my faith in it. If I fail to do that on a given day, it’s a different kind of day. The problem is not in my statement of faith, or what I say I believe. The problem is my failure to live consistently with what I say I believe.

PRACTICAL ATHEISM

The great British theologian, Charles Spurgeon, who ministered in the middle and late 1800s in England, taught a concept that he called “Practical Atheism”. He said even though a believer is not an atheist, he can sometimes act like one. He can act as if one or more of God’s attributes were not true. Consider an illustration of this that has been helpful to me. Let’s suppose you learn the attributes of God in Bible class. Some teachers have His attributes divided into ten. Let’s say you go down to the store and buy ten attractive plaques. And you have one of the attributes of God engraved on each of these plaques. Then you hang the plaques up in your house in a conspicuous place where you pass by them every day. Each day as you pass by them on your way to work they remind you of the nature of God.

But suppose that one day you start to go past those plaques, and you just reach up and take one of them down you take down the plaque that has “sovereignty” engraved on it, and you take it to a back room of your house and put it on a shelf in the closet. Then you walk back by those plaques and go to work, but you live that day as if God were

not sovereign. That's practical atheism. And you might encounter a problem in that day, and you reason in your mind that it is of human origin somebody did this, or somebody caused that. Or you might reason that it's happening by chance, that it is an accident. That's practical atheism. That's living as if God were not sovereign.

Let me ask you a question. Search your soul. Are you living today as if God were not in control? as if He does not have your best interest at heart? Are you living today as if God were not omniscient? as if He did not know every thought in your mind and every decision you will ever make? That's practical atheism. I find in my own life that I have to be constantly reminded that God is sovereign, that He is in control, that He is good, that His goodness is absolute. He does or permits nothing in my life but that which is in my best interest.

Let's look at a few passages which teach us about God's sovereignty and His goodness, and I suggest that you be especially on the lookout for the word "all."

One of the most remarkable verses in the entire Bible is Psalm 139:16. Here's what it says (David speaking to God), "Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were in your book before one of them came to be." I admit that I do not understand how the sovereignty of God interacts with the responsible choice of man, but the Scripture teaches both. God created us in His image. Part of that image is the ability to reason and choose. I would certainly admit that our choice is not the same as God's. He's the Creator and we are the creatures. Our choice is limited. It has boundaries on it. But within those boundaries, we're free. And what is important for us to understand in connection with this study is that we are free to sin, or free to obey.

God in His foreknowledge knew every decision that we would ever make in our lives. And God knew every decision of every person that would touch our lives. He wove all of it together into a detailed plan, spoken of in this verse. And then He ordained that plan for us before we were ever born. And how much of our life was ordained before we were born? Well, the verse says "all." "All the days ordained for me were in your book before one of them came to be." Do I understand

that? No, I don't. But I believe it. And if I am interpreting correctly, it has profound application for our daily lives.

A FAVORITE TEXT

One of my favorite passages as a text for this truth is Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (NASB). Notice how sovereignty and goodness are coupled together in this verse.

There are three things that Romans 8:28 does not say that we should understand if we're going to interpret the verse correctly. First, Romans 8:28 does not say that all things **are** good. It says that God **causes** all things to work together for good, which is quite different. There are bad things that come into our lives. But God works them along with all other things for our ultimate good.

Second, Romans 8:28 does not say or imply that God causes sin. Scripture is clear. God is not the cause of sin. We are the cause of sin by our own choices. But God is the cause of the **effects** of sin in any life and in any situation. In other words the sins, though they are bad, are part of the "all things" that He causes to work together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. On a number of occasions, I have heard my pastor say from the pulpit, "God manipulates evil". In my opinion, this is a good way to put it.

And third, Romans 8:28 does not say God causes all things to work together to bring about His (God's) best. When we sin, we get something less than God's best. But even when we sin, the promise that God causes all things to work together for good stands. By our sins we can damage our lives and reduce our reward in eternity, but for the elect God will cause things to work out the best they can given the level of sins and disobedience of which we are guilty. Only God could be the cause of such an outcome! What a bold statement is Romans 8:28.

Notice in Romans 8:28 the word "all." We must decide what "all" means in this verse. Of course we know the definition of the word "all." But we don't always act as if "all" means "all" in Romans 8:28, do we? And if "all" means "all" in Romans 8:28, then there is no such thing as

chance, or an accident. To the world, things sometimes look like an accident or chance. And I would admit that the idea of an accident might be a useful concept for the world. It's useful in insurance, in determining liability, and in other ways. But for a believer in Christ it's not a valid concept. When I was young, I can remember seeing the phrase "acts of God" in secular documents such as insurance policies. Even the world, at least to some degree, accepted the biblical view. I don't remember seeing this phrase much in recent years.

One of the great application verses for what we're discussing here is 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in **all** circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." This study has given new meaning to that passage to me. If Square One is not true, then this passage makes no sense whatever. It's a cruel joke for God to command us to give thanks in all circumstances, if the premise is not true. But if God is in control and has our best interest at heart, then not only does this passage make sense, but it's a sin not to obey it. I believe that "all" means "all" in this verse. Give thanks in **ALL** circumstances. And let us remind ourselves that thankfulness is not only spoken, it is a disposition that others sense as they touch our lives, with or without a word being spoken.

SQUARE ONE AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Up to this point in this discussion we have looked at verses that emphasize our relationship to God. But the Christian life involves interpersonal relationships as well. And the question is, how do God's sovereignty and goodness apply to interpersonal relationships? I'm going to make a statement that may shock some of you. It did me the first time I heard it. Some of you will accept it as truth. Some of you will dismiss it out of hand. You will reject it immediately. And some of you will take it in and put it on probation and meditate on it for the next few hours or days, and come to your own conclusion. That's what I hope you will do if you have trouble accepting it now.

Don't accept it. Don't reject it. Take it in. Meditate on it.

All right, are you ready for the statement? Here it is as it came to me ten years ago, "If you truly believe that God is in control and has your best interest at heart, then biblically **there is no such thing as a**

problem with another person.”

Think about that for a moment. I admit that it’s a shocking statement, and I want to tell you how I reacted to it. There was an initial shock and rejection from my heart, but within 30 seconds after I heard it, I knew it was true. And the Holy Spirit bore witness with my spirit that I had heard the truth, an application of the truth that I had largely missed during most of my Christian life. And my life changed at that instant, and has never been the same since. And I have spent many hours over this past 10 years meditating on this truth, and searching the Scripture, and my conviction grows stronger by the day that it is in fact the truth.

WHAT CAN MAN DO TO ME?

Here is a verse that I think teaches the truth contained in the statement, “There is no such thing as a problem with another person.” Hebrews 13:6, “So we say with confidence, the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” The last phrase of that verse is a rhetorical question that solicits a negative answer by implication, something like, “What can man do to me?” Implied answer, “Nothing without God’s permission.” I think that’s the essence of it. Every believer in Christ must face this question, “To what extent can another person influence my life without God’s permission?” You must answer that for yourself. And I believe that Scripture teaches that the answer is, “To no extent can another person influence my life without God’s permission.”

That being true, then our problem is never with another person, our problem is with God, and the other person is God’s agent placed in our life for God’s purposes, to participate in His plan for our life. Now to be sure, other people can and will sin against us, but when they do, they are simply participating negatively in God’s plan for our life, **but they do not alter our destiny.** People who sin against us will face the consequences of those sins, but God will use them in our life for our good, and they will not alter our destiny. We must realize that every financial difficulty is ultimately from God, and He causes it for our good. When somebody else’s irresponsibility affects my wallet, I have to remember that God is in control, and I should not let my anger affect my relationship with the irresponsible person.

I close this chapter with nine conclusions that I believe are supported by Scripture relating to the application of Square One to our relationship to God and man. Some will be difficult to accept, and even more difficult to apply to daily life. Please understand that I am not trying to convince you that they are true. I ask only that you face the issues involved, meditate on them, pray and search the Scriptures for yourself.

- If you feel that you have a problem with another person, it is a sign that you do not understand God, because other people who impact your life are God's agents in your life for God's purposes to mold you into the life plan that God ordained for you in eternity past.
- Other people can and will sin against you, but when they do they merely participate negatively in God's plan for your life. They will face the consequences of their sins, but they will not alter your destiny. God will not delegate your destiny to another person.
- If God can act only in our best interest, and if He will not let anyone else act contrary to our best interest, then we are forced to the conclusion that we alone can hurt or destroy our life, and we do that by sin and disobedience.
- Since our problem is not with other people, we should always take our complaint to God, not to people. If we complain to God without rebelling against or threatening Him, He will hear us with an understanding, loving ear.
- For a believer in Christ, there is no such thing as being a victim. If I am harboring a victim mentality, then I am engaging in practical atheism. There is nothing happening to me that God has not ordained.
- Understanding Square One, and applying it to daily life, is the path to peace with all people.
- When we enter eternity, and faith becomes sight, we will look back over our lives on earth and not regret a single circumstance

God ordained. Our only regret will be our own lack of faith, and disobedience.

- Discontentment with my circumstances is practical atheism, living as if God were not in control with my best interest in His heart.
- Unless we understand and believe in Square One, we will have great difficulty navigating the storms of life, and great difficulty obeying all the commandments.

ADDITIONAL PASSAGES FOR STUDY AND MEDITATION

I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps [Jeremiah 10:23].

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight [Proverbs 3:5-6].

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed [Proverbs 16:3].

In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps [Proverbs 16:9].

A man's steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand his own way? [Proverbs. 20:24].

Consider what God has done. Who can straighten what He has made crooked? When times are good, be happy. But when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future [Ecclesiastes 7:13-14].

... I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please [Isaiah 46:9-10].