

Lesson 19, Part 1: Fear and Worry, The Problem of Evil

I. The Problem of Evil: How can an all-powerful and all-good God allow suffering in the world?¹

A. The problem of suffering/evil defined:

Take the following three concepts: (1) God is all-powerful; (2) God is all-good; (3) evil exists. According to some, it is logically impossible for these three concepts to all exist at the same time. Any combination of the two can exist but not three.

1. God is all-powerful but not all-good—thus evil can exist.
2. God is all-good but not all-powerful—thus evil can exist.
3. God is all-powerful and all-good—thus evil cannot exist.

B. Two principles to keep in mind:

1. The Bible must be our primary source, _____.
2. Until we are in glory, all of our questions will not be answered.

Deut 29:29 – The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

C. A biblical response to the problem of evil

1. Evil and suffering are _____ (Rom 5:12).
2. From God's perspective there is no "problem of evil."
3. While humans may contemplate this issue and ask hard questions, putting God on _____ is not an option.
4. God works everything for His _____ (see Eph 1).
5. The Bible tells us that God is just and that He will _____ do what is right (Gen 18:25).
6. _____, not God, are the ones who brought evil and suffering into the world (Rom 5:12).

¹ Adapted from Mike Riccardi, "TH602: Apologetics" (Course Notes, The Master's Seminary).

7. Our universe is the battleground of a _____ battle between God and the forces of evil—thus our world is a dangerous place (Gen 3, Job).
8. For the Christian, God uses suffering and evil (and everything) for his or her _____ (Rom 8:28-29; Jas 1:2-4).
9. God will one day bring judgment and righteousness to this sin-cursed world (Acts 17:30-31; 2 Pet 3:8-13; Rev 21:1-6; 22:1-5).

Back to our options:

1. God is all-powerful but not all-good—thus evil can exist.
2. God is all-good but not all-powerful—thus evil can exist.
3. God is all-powerful and all-good—thus evil cannot exist.
4. ?? God has a morally sufficient reason for the existence of evil. We are not told that reason explicitly, but that does not mean that a good reason does not exist.

“Underneath our frustration [of not knowing *why* God has brought suffering into our lives] is an overwhelming sense of self-assurance, the conviction that, if something is out there to be known by anyone, it will certainly be known by *me*.” – Andrew Wilson, *The Life We Never Expected*.

II. Does God *cause* evil/suffering or does He *allow* it? (ordain vs. permit)²

A. Evaluating divine permission (i.e. “God *allows* it”)

1. Divine permission (aka “allowance”) makes no sense when applied to _____.

Westminster Confession says, “God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”

2. The fundamental meaning of “permission” is “not to hinder what has, or appears to have, a tendency to take place.”

Mark 10:14 – ...[Jesus] said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

3. But God, in eternity past, didn’t have anything/anyone asking Him for allowance to pass through to its own desired end because there was nothing external to Him!

² Adapted from Mike Riccardi, “God Meant it for Good: Evaluating Divine Permission,” *The CrippleGate*, September 11, 2015, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://thecripplegate.com/god-meant-it-for-good-evaluating-divine-permission/>.

The idea of permission is possible only where there is an independent force. . . . But this is not the situation in the case of the God of the universe. Nothing in the universe can be independent of the Omnipotent Creator, for in him we live and move and have our being. Therefore, the idea of permission makes no sense when applied to God. (*Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 205)

B. Evaluating divine ordination (i.e. “God causes it”)

1. A quick look at the Hebrew word *ra’*.
 - a. This word appears 663 times in the OT.
 - b. *Ra’* can be translated as evil, bad, calamity, disaster, harm, ill, etc.
 - c. Scripture clearly says that is God who brings *ra’* in and out of your life.
 - d. *Kha’ta* is the Hebrew word for sin, not *ra’*.
 - e. Scripture is abundantly clear: God does not sin and is not the author of it.

2. Scriptures indicating that God ordains/causes *ra’*:

- a. God _____ it (*bow’*).

*Jer 6:19 - Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing disaster [*ra’*] upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not paid attention to my words; and as for my law, they have rejected it.*

Cf. Gen 4:4 - and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering.

- b. God _____ it (*asah’*) – also translated *accomplish, make, produce, prepare*.

*Amos 3:6 - Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster (*ra’*) come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?*

*Eccl 7:14 - In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity (*ra’*) consider: God has made the one as well as the other...*

Cf. Gen 1:16 - And God made the two great lights--the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night--and the stars.

- c. God _____ it (*bara’*).

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

Cf. Gen 1:1 - In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

- d. God _____ it (*chashab'*) – also translated *devise, think, count*.

*Mic 2:3 - Therefore thus says the LORD: behold, against this family I am devising disaster (*ra'*), from which you cannot remove your necks, and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster (*ra'*).*

- e. God _____ it (*sava'*).

*Lam 3:37-38 - 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 (*ra'*) come?*

- f. God _____ it (*pa'al*).

*Prov 16:4 - The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble (*ra'*).*

3. Narratives indicating that God _____ with *ra'*, not _____ it.

- a. Joseph (Gen 37:4; 45:1-8; 50:20)

- 1) "You meant it for evil, but God _____ it for good."
- 2) Why did He do that? To _____ a nation in order to fulfill His _____ plan.

- b. Jesus (Acts 2:23)

- 1) Christ was "delivered up to be crucified" _____.
- 2) Why did He do that? For _____, and to _____ from your sins!

What can we conclude from this?

God uses evil (whether it comes through the fallen nature or fallen man) to sanctify His children, lead unbelievers to repentance, and to bring judgment and destruction upon hardened sinners, ensuring that the outcome is always for His glory and for the good of those who love Him. Therefore, the Christian must never be afraid of bad news, for his heart is firm, trusting in the mighty hand of God (Ps 112:7-8; 1 Pet 5:6-7).

Book recommendations:

- *Overcoming Fear, Worry, and Anxiety* by Elyse Fitzpatrick
- *Trusting God* by Jerry Bridges
- *The Attributes of God* by Arthur Pink

Appendix A

Additional Scripture Narratives Showing God's Divine Ordination

1. Exodus 4:21, 9:12, 10:20, 27, 11:10, 14:4,8 –
 - God harden Pharaoh's heart.
 - Why did He do that? (Ex7:3, 9:16) To show that the Lord is supreme over all else.
2. Joshua 11:16-20 –
 - God hardened the hearts of the Canaanites.
 - Why did He do that? So that they would come against Israel in order to be destroyed (for rejecting God), thereby fulfilling His promise to give the land to Israel.
3. Judges 14:1-4; 15:15 –
 - Samson demanded to marry an unbeliever but it was God who orchestrated it.
 - Why did He do that? To bring judgment (death) to 1,000 Philistines.
4. 1 Samuel 16:13-14 –
 - The spirit of the Lord (empowerment) left Saul and an evil spirit from God came upon Saul, terrorizing him.
 - Why did He do that? To establish David on the throne.
5. 2 Samuel 12:9-18 –
 - God raised up evil against David and God used it to show his justice and His grace.
 - Why did He do that? To show His justice and grace.
6. 2 Samuel 24:1, 10, 12-17 (and 1 Chr 21:1) –
 - God used Satan to incite David to sin by taking a census so he could punish Israel.
 - Why did He do that? So He could discipline Israel.
7. Job 1:1-21 –
 - God offered Job to Satan.
 - Why did He do that? To show He is the sovereign giver and taker of life?
8. Jonah 1:1-2:3 –
 - God casts Jonah into the sea.
 - Why did He do that? To show His sovereignty over creation.

Appendix B
God and Evil:
Why the Ultimate Cause is not the Chargeable Cause
Mike Riccardi | October 9, 2015

Several weeks ago, I began a series of posts by outlining some foundational biblical teaching about God's decree. We examined numerous passages of Scripture that speak of God's decree as eternal, unconditional, unchangeable, and exhaustive. As a result, we concluded that God is properly said to be the ultimate cause of all things. As the Westminster Confession states, "God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain *whatsoever* comes to pass" (WCF, 3.1).

Whenever you say something like that in a theological discussion, immediately the question is raised: How can God be the ultimate cause of *whatsoever* comes to pass—even actions and events that are evil and sinful, things which God Himself prescribes against—and yet not be rightly charged with unrighteousness. Perhaps the most common answer to that question is an appeal to the notion of divine "permission." In other words, though God is ultimately in control, He doesn't *ordain* evil; He merely allows it. In a second post, I demonstrated why such a solution is unsatisfactory, both theologically and biblically. After considering a number of passages that don't shy away from attributing to God a very active role in the bringing about of evil events, we concluded with John Frame: "God does bring about sinful human actions. To deny this, or to charge God with wickedness on account of it, is not open to a Bible-believing Christian. Somehow, we must confess both that God has a role in bringing evil about, and that in doing so he is holy and blameless" (*Doctrine of God*). That post demonstrated that Scripture plainly teaches *both* (a) that God is unquestionably righteous and (b) that He indeed ordains sinful events and actions. And if that's what Scripture teaches (and it is), it is not our place to sit in judgment upon and question the consistency of those declarations. That only breeds the worst of biblical and theological mischief. To argue that God is unrighteous for ordaining evil is to sit in judgment upon both the Word of God and the Judge of all the world. Instead, it falls to us to receive *both* propositions as true on the authority of God's infallible and inerrant Word.

But is there any way to understand *how* it can be that God is not the chargeable cause of sin, even though He ordains that it be? There is a way for the worshiper of God to ask that question submissively, not because we demand that God give an account of His understanding of justice that satisfies our sensibilities, but simply because we desire to know Him and worship Him for what He has revealed of Himself. And there is a way to answer that question that remains faithful to sound biblical interpretation and theological reflection.

The answer that Scripture seems to give can be boiled down to two propositions. First, though God is the *ultimate* cause of all things—even evil—He is never the *proximate*, or *efficient*, cause of evil. Second, Scripture regards only the efficient cause of evil as the chargeable or blameworthy party. Let's look to a sample of texts that bears this out.

Assyria, the Rod of My Anger

In Isaiah 10, God pronounces woe upon His people for their idolatry and injustice (Isa 10:1–2). He threatens that He is about to bring about a “day of punishment” and “devastation which will come from afar” (Isa 10:3). “Nothing remains but to crouch among the captives or fall among the slain” (Isa. 10:4). In verse 6, we learn that God will carry out this punishment against wicked Israel by sending the nation of Assyria to destroy her. He says, “I send it [i.e., Assyria] against a godless nation and commission it against the people of My fury to capture booty and to seize plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets” (Isa 10:6). God will send Assyria to level devastation upon Israel to punish her for her idolatry.

And yet, in verse 5, God *also* pronounces woe upon Assyria! He says, “Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hands is My indignation” (Isa 10:5). He even goes so far as to liken Assyria to an inanimate object—the rod of Yahweh’s anger in His hand which He Himself wields. We might naturally ask, “How can it be just for God to *send* Assyria to destroy Israel—indeed, to describe their involvement as so inactive as to liken them to an inanimate object in Yahweh’s hand—and then punish *them* for the evil of destroying Israel?” It simply won’t do to say that Yahweh merely “allowed” Assyria to punish Israel; the text is far too active for that: “*I send it* against a godless nation” (Isa 10:6). The answer seems to lie in the concept of ultimate versus efficient causation. Even though Yahweh is clearly the *ultimate* cause of Israel’s destruction and the Assyrians are merely the rod of anger in His hand, yet the Assyrians are the *efficient* cause of the evil.

Besides this, God’s sovereign ordination of Assyria’s destruction of Israel in no way *coerced* Assyria or forced them to do what they did not otherwise want to do. Assyria wasn’t sitting around minding its own business when God came and twisted their arms to mercilessly destroy a nation. No, they still acted according to their freedom of inclination; they were doing what they wanted to do. And yet, the *reason* they desired to destroy Israel was *not* the reason for which Yahweh wanted to. Yahweh wanted to righteously punish Israel for her idolatry and injustice. But Assyria had other intentions. Verse 7 says, “Yet it does not so intend, nor does it plan so in its heart.” In other words, Assyria does not intend to destroy Israel for the sake of punishing unrighteousness. No, “but rather it is its purpose to destroy and to cut off many nations. For it says, ‘Are not my princes all kings?’” (Isa 10:7–8). Assyria’s intention in destroying Israel was to arrogantly flex its military muscle and pridefully make a name for itself among the nations.

God ordains the evil of the destruction of Israel by Assyria. Yet while Assyria meant it for evil—to satisfy its own pride and bloodlust—God meant it for good: to punish unrighteousness and bring about repentance in His people. Assyria is the efficient cause, and because their desires were sinful, they are accountable for their sin. God is the ultimate cause, but because His desires and purposes for ordaining that evil were not evil but righteous—in other words, because He ordained the evil *for goodness’ sake*—He is not the chargeable cause of sin.

The Anger of the Lord Incited David

Something similar takes place in 2 Sam 24. This chapter details David’s sin of taking a census among the people. We know it was sinful for a couple of reasons. First, David himself confesses it as such. He says, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Yahweh, please take away the iniquity of Your

servant, for I have acted very foolishly” (2 Sam 24:10). Apparently, numbering the people was a display of David’s pride. He was basking in the glory of the nation over which *he* was king. It was as if he was saying, “Look at how numerous is my people!” Second, we also know it was sinful because God responded by sending *pestilence* upon the nation, with the result that 70,000 men died (2 Sam 24:15)! If David was going to exalt himself and take pride in a nation of great numbers, God was pleased to humble the great king by taking 70,000 of that great number to the grave!

What makes this a surprising scene is the opening verse of the narrative. In 2 Sam 24:1, the text says, “Now again the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’” David confesses such an act as sin (2 Sam 24:10), and God punishes it as sin (2 Sam 24:15), and yet from the outset we’re told that it was *Yahweh’s anger* that incited David to take this census! More than that, in the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 21:1, the inspired text says, “Then *Satan* stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.” God and Satan are used entirely in parallel! The author of Samuel says *God* incited David to take the census, and the Chronicler says *Satan* incited David to take the census!

Now, unless one is ready to admit a contradiction in Scripture, we must understand that (a) God is the *ultimate* cause of this act, ultimately decreeing that it should be; (b) Satan is a *proximate* cause, the instrument Yahweh uses to stir up this evil in the heart of David; and (c) David is the *efficient* cause, having carried it out according to his own sinful inclination, and thus is culpable for the action.

And although God is clearly the ultimate cause for this evil (He does not merely “allow” Satan to do it; 2 Sam 24:1 will not allow that understanding), Scripture does not at all imply that God is to blame or that Satan and David are any less responsible. God’s motives in this action must be presumed entirely righteous even though we are not explicitly told what good God intended by ordaining this evil. After all, shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly (Gen 18:25)? There can be no unrighteousness with God, can there? May it never be (Rom 3:5–6)! And yet because Satan always desires to ruin God’s people, and because David’s motive was to pridefully exalt himself, they are the chargeable cause(s) of this evil.

Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur

The final illustration of these principles may be found in the greatest moral evil in history: the murder of the innocent Son of God. Two passages help us here:

Acts 2:22–23 – Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

Acts 4:27–28 – 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 purpose predestined to occur.

So there can be no question that Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the peoples of Israel were to blame for the crucifixion of Christ (Acts 4:27). Peter openly indicts the men of Israel for their crime: “This Man . . . *you* nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23; cf. 2:36). And yet, Peter also explicitly says that such evil was accomplished “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). Indeed, Herod, Pilate, the Jews, and the Gentiles were those whom God “*anointed . . . to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur*” (Acts 4:27–28).

Here again we see that (a) God is the *ultimate* cause of the crucifixion, predestining all of the events that led to the crucifixion, guaranteeing that it would occur; (b) the Jews were a *proximate* cause, seeing as how they incited Rome to crucify Christ; and (c) Herod, Pilate, and other godless men were the *efficient* cause, because the crucifixion was carried out by Roman authority. The Jews are held accountable as a proximate cause, as Peter says “*you* nailed [Jesus] to a cross *by the hands of* godless men.” That the Romans *actually* nailed Jesus to a cross made the Jews no less culpable for that crime. And yet God, by whose hand *all* of these things ultimately came about, is not the chargeable cause of any evil. Why? Because they meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Herod, Pilate, Judas, and the Jews conspired the crucifixion because they wanted to be rid of this Man who indicted them for their sin. But God ordained the evil of the cross *for the good* that it would bring; namely, the salvation of His people from their sin.

So the point is: God may be the ultimate cause of all that happens—even evil—and yet not incur the guilt that rightly belongs to the proximate and/or efficient cause(s), because: (1) He is never the *efficient* cause of evil, and (2) He always ordains evil for good. God does not will sin *as sin*, but for the good which He desires to bring from it. Edwards explains:

*“[It is consistent to say] that God has decreed every action of men, yea, every action that is sinful, and every circumstance of those actions; that he predetermines that they shall be in every respect as they afterwards are; that he determines that there shall be such actions, and just so sinful as they are; and yet that God does not decree the actions that are sinful, as sin, but decrees them as good. . . . By decreeing an action **as sinful**, I mean decreeing it for the sake of the sinfulness of the action. God decrees that they shall be sinful, for the sake of the good that he causes to arise from the sinfulness thereof; whereas man decrees them for the sake of the evil that is in them.” (Concerning the Divine Decrees, Works, 2:527)*

Unto Our Highest Happiness

And what is that good for which God ordains evil? Ultimately, we know the answer is always for His glory.

To those who would reproach God for holding accountable those who don’t have the ability to resist His decree (cf. Rom 9:19), God answers by reminding mere mortals that they’re above their pay grade: “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” (Rom 9:20–21).

But to the submissive, inquiring worshiper for whom the furthest thing from his mind is to find fault with God, who simply wants to know his God and worship Him for how He's revealed Himself, God gives another answer. In Rom 9:22–23, Paul says,

*What if God, willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And [what if] He did so **to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy**, which He prepared beforehand for glory?*

God ordains sin and evil—He even ordains the eternal punishment of the wicked—to *make known to His elect the riches of His glory*. You can't do better than Edwards here:

"It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . .

"Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all. If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from.

*"How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . . So evil is necessary, **in order to the highest happiness of the creature**, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; **because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God**, and the sense of his love. And **if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect.**" (Concerning the Divine Decrees, Works, 2:528)*

God ordains whatsoever comes to pass in order that His glory might ultimately displayed to the utmost. And far from a megalomaniacal narcissism, God's pursuit of His own glory is "in order to the highest happiness of the creature . . . because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God." And our knowledge of God would be imperfect if we didn't see the full expression of His attributes: grace, mercy, forgiveness, justice, righteousness, and so on. And yet none of those attributes could be fully expressed if there was not sin to punish and to forgive, or sinners to whom to be gracious and merciful. God is not *less* glorious, but *more* glorious, because He ordains evil. And the more He magnifies His glory, the greater is His love to us. Surely God cannot be charged with unrighteousness for doing that which amounts to the greatest benefit for us who are His.

*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!
For 'Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?'
Or 'Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again?'
For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*