

## **WEEK 11 | SIN & ITS MYSTERY Pt. 2**

I form light and create darkness;  
I make well-being and create calamity;  
I am the Lord, who does all these things.  
– Isaiah 45:7

### **SOMEONE IS RESPONSIBLE**

Last week’s discussion raises as many—if not more—questions than it gives answers. The relationship between God’s absolute sovereignty and the presence and activity of evil in the world is difficult to comprehend. Last week we saw that Scripture, in a somewhat indirect way, addresses the problem of evil by pointing us to the character of God. While He does not owe us any answers, God repeatedly reminds us in His Word that not only is He totally in control, but He is perfectly good. Countless times God uses evil and suffering for a greater—and often surprising—purpose that He has ordained.

While the Greater Good argument helps us grapple with why God would ordain all that He has ordained to come to pass, it also forces us to ask additional problematic questions. One of the biggest questions has to do with the issue of responsibility. If God is in absolute control of all things to the most minute detail, is He not responsible for evil? Is God not, dare we say, guilty? The question itself seems dangerous. Yet, it seems a logical one to ask. Who is responsible for sin and evil?

### **MAKING A DISTINCTION**

Before we advance too far, we need to make some important distinctions. Specifically, when we talk about evil, we need to be clear what we are talking about. We see in the world both moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil, or sin, is evil perpetrated by a volitional actor: someone cursing God, coveting his neighbor’s possessions, lying to his boss, or killing an innocent image-bearer. This the Bible calls sin, the very subject we have studied the past five weeks.

The second—natural evil—would include ways in which the natural, fallen world afflicts mankind. One of the consequences of Adam’s fall was that God cursed the very ground from which Adam had been created (Genesis 3:17-19). The world was meant to be a pleasant and peace-filled environment perfect for human flourishing; now, the world is a dangerous habitat. Technological advances have mitigated the effects of the natural world to a degree, but it remains a place where natural evil can strike at any moment. Hurricanes, car accidents, cancers and colds,

sun burns and bee stings. These are natural evils. They are painful, often destructive, but usually not traceable to an evil actor making an evil choice.<sup>1</sup>

This distinction, though imperfect, enables us to more precisely tackle the question at hand. Our question is now two questions: 1) Who is responsible for natural evil? and 2) Who is responsible for moral evil? We will tackle these in turn.

## IT'S (NOT) A CRUEL WORLD

The rise of the internet and cable news means virtually everyone across the globe is keenly aware of how prevalent natural evil is in this world. Every day we watch as the curse plays itself out on our screens, in our church, and in our lives. It's painful, brutal, upsetting, and to those immediately affected, it can be devastating. How should we think about natural evil? Who do we hold responsible for all the awful things we witness in this world?

### I. SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE

- **Genesis 6:17** – For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.
- **Psalms 48:7** – By the east wind [God] shattered the ships of Tarshish.
- **1 Samuel 5:6-7; 6:8-9** – The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. <sup>7</sup> And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god.”  
“ . . . And take the ark of the Lord and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way <sup>9</sup> and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence.”
- **2 Samuel 24:1-17**

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize this distinction is not black and white. A car accident may be just that—an accident in which neither party is morally culpable. Conversely, many car accidents are caused by negligence or foolishness, in which case one party is certainly guilty of something. Moral and natural evil are not completely disconnected, but the distinction is a helpful one in tackling this question.

- **Isaiah 31:3** – The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they all perish together.
- **Jeremiah 44:2** – “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: You have seen all the disaster that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah. Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them. . .”
- **Joel 2:13** – “. . . rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.
- **Amos 3:6** – Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?
- **Jonah 1:4-6** – But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup> So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”
- **Matthew 24 // Luke 21 // Revelation 6, 8-9**
- **Isaiah 45:7** – I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD who does all things.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Scripture is clear: God is responsible for the natural evil that is present in the universe. Now, we must be careful here. Scripture is also clear that God is not evil and “evil may not dwell with [Him]” (Psalm 5:4). When we say that God is responsible for the natural evil that is present in the universe, we are not saying that He has committed any moral evil. How can this be? We have to ask ourselves is the term “natural evil” is really the best phrase to use.

One of the themes in the verses above is that each natural “evil” is a response to human sin and rebellion. We often view natural disasters as evil because, deep down, we feel that the pain and suffering they cause is unfair and unwarranted. Is it? In fact, every single, sinful human being deserves the full and unmitigated wrath of God. Life in this world, however long it may be and whatever disasters it may include, is actually God’s mercy towards sinners. Natural evil is a consequence of sin, and sinners bear those consequences for their sin. God is not unjust in ordaining these “evil” events because there is a real sense in which they are not evil but entirely

righteous, a means by which God judges sinners. Thus, it is better to say, as Isaiah does, that God creates “calamity,” but not evil.

We must also guard against viewing God as mean and malicious. God often uses calamity to judge guilty sinners, but not every instance of calamity is a judgment against a particular sin. This is especially true of believers, for whom there is no judgment because “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Believers are afflicted by calamity. Part of this is simply the consequence of living in a fallen world. Sometimes, God as a loving Father is disciplining His children (Hebrews 12:5-8); a bout with the flu can be a stark reminder of our weakness and frailty and push us back towards reliance on God.

While we may not understand why God ordains these kinds of events in the lives of believers, we do know that we should not view them as evil. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:17 that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” In other words, “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28). The “all things” certainly includes events and circumstances that we would label “natural evil.” As before, we are reminded that God is accomplishing a greater good we cannot always see.

## **ACTORS, AGENCY, AND *ADONAI***

Scripture seems to address and explain the problem of natural evil fairly clearly. The more difficult question we have asked is, who is responsible for moral evil? When a person sins, who is to blame? Is it them? The people around them? Their environment? Is God responsible? Previous discussions in this course have shown how complex this question is. The best way to tackle it is to begin with what Scripture is explicit about:

### 1) GOD IS NEVER RESPONSIBLE FOR SIN

- **Psalm 5:4** – For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.
- **James 1:13** – Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.
- **1 John 1:5** – This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

### 2) PERSONS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR SIN

- **Numbers 32:23** – But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the LORD, and be sure your sin will find you out.

- **Isaiah 3:10-11** – Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have dealt out shall be done to him.
- **Jeremiah 17:10** – I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.
- **Ezekiel 3:18-19** – If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.
- **Ezekiel 18:4** – Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.
- **Ezekiel 18:20** – The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.
- **Luke 6:45** – The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.
- **Romans 1:20** – For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.
- **Romans 14:12** – So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.
- **1 Corinthians 4:5** – Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.
- **2 Corinthians 5:10** – For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.
- **Galatians 6:7** – Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

- **Revelation 20:11-13** – Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.
- Revelation 22:12 – “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done.

### 3) GOD ORDAINS ALL THINGS

- **Isaiah 41:4** – “Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, Yahweh, the first, and with the last; I am he.”
- **Isaiah 42:9** – “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.”
- **Isaiah 45:23** – “By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’”
- **Isaiah 46:8-10** – “Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’”

The three items above are clearly affirmed in Scripture. Reconciling the three is difficult. J. Gresham Machen articulates the difficulty well when he writes, “We have said that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. The sinful actions of sinful men are things that come to pass. Yet we deny that God is the author of them and we put the responsibility for them upon man.

How can we possibly do that? Are we not involving ourselves in hopeless contradiction?”<sup>2</sup> His answer is worth quoting at length:

The answer is found in the fact that although God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, he causes the bringing of those things to pass in widely different ways. He

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<sup>2</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “Did God Ordain Sin?”, published 1.8.18, accessed 11.15.22, <https://faculty.wts.edu/posts/did-god-ordain-sin/>

does not cause the bringing to pass of the actions of personal beings in the same way as the way in which he causes the bringing to pass of events in the physical world. That is true even of the good actions of men who are his children. Even when God causes those men to do certain things by the gracious influence of his Holy Spirit, he does not deal with them as with sticks or stones, but he deals with them as with men. He does not cause them to do those things against their will, but he determines their will, and their freedom as persons is fully preserved when they perform those acts. The acts remain their acts, even though they are led to do them by the Spirit of God.

When God causes the bringing to pass of the *evil* actions of men, he does that in still a different way. He does not tempt the men to sin; he does not influence them to sin. But he causes the bringing to pass of those deeds by the free and responsible choices of personal beings. He has created those beings with the awful gift of freedom of choice. The things that they do in exercise of that gift are their acts. They do not, indeed, surprise God by the doing of them; their doing of them is part of his eternal plan; yet in the doing of them they, and not the holy God, are responsible.<sup>3</sup>

Machen recognizes that this question turns on the issue of agency. In other words, do human beings have free will, or are we simply carrying out a preprogrammed sequence of actions like robots? If God is sovereign, is not our volition an illusion? If we are robots, how can God hold us accountable? For the teaching of Scripture to hold together, we must find a way to reconcile God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

In the Christian sphere, two views dominate the discussion over free will: libertarianism and compatibilism, which we will look at in turn. For a bird's-eye-view, Scott Christensen gives helpful summaries of both:

### **Libertarianism**

. . . hold that divine sovereignty is exercised so that God does not *causally determine* human actions. Libertarian freedom of choice comes about when we have the ability to choose contrary to any prior factors that influence our choices, including external circumstances, our motives, desires, character, and nature, and, of course, God himself. If these prior influences decisively determine choices, then freedom and responsibility of those choices is hindered. . . Libertarian free will is often called the *freedom of contrary choice*.<sup>4</sup>

### **Compatibilism**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Machen, "Did God Ordain Sin?"

. . . what people actually choose, whether hindered or not, is determined by a matrix of decisive causes both within and without. Biblical compatibilism says that our choices proceed from the most compelling motives and desires we have, which in turn is conditioned on our base nature, whether good or evil. The more voluntarily and unconstrained our choices are made, the more freedom and responsibility we have in making them. Sometimes this is called the *freedom of inclination* because a person is always inclined to make particular choices.<sup>5</sup>

## I. LIBERTARIANISM

For those with who hold to a libertarian view for free will, the *freedom of contrary choice* means human beings “are fully capable of making choices contrary to the choices they actually make.”<sup>6</sup> Further, this choice is self-determined, meaning it cannot be caused by anything external to the subject. Roger Olsen states that self-determination is “belief in an uncaused effect—the free choice of the self to be or do something without antecedent.”<sup>7</sup> This language is familiar. It’s the same sort of language we use when we speak of God’s self-existence and self-determination. God alone is the unmoved Mover, the uncaused Cause who causes everything else to be.

Importantly, proponents of libertarianism do not deny that there are external and internal factors that influence our choices, they just deny that any of those factors are determinative. Jacob Arminius wrote that humanity enjoys “a freedom from necessity, whether this proceeds from an external cause compelling, or from a nature inwardly determining absolutely to one thing.”<sup>8</sup> As Christensen summarizes, libertarianism holds that “our strength of will has an unequalled power to overrule all our inner dispositions.”<sup>9</sup> We may have reasons for making the choices we make, but these reasons are *not* causes.

Where does God’s sovereignty fit into all this? Roger Olsen writes that, while God exercises sovereign control through strong influence and persuasion, “Free and rational creatures have the power to resist the influence of God. This power was given to them by God himself.”<sup>10</sup> The issue is not that God is unable to control our choices; rather, He chooses not to, having instead given us the gift of self-determination. True freedom, from the libertarian viewpoint, is the absence of coercion. For Biblical evidence, proponents of this view would point to passages that demand

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<sup>5</sup> Scott Christensen, *What About Free Will? Reconciling Our Choices with God’s Sovereignty* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Roger E. Olsen, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 71.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Arminius, quoted by Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace: A Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 226.

<sup>9</sup> Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Olsen, *Arminian Theology*, 131.

obedience to God's commands or passages that promise blessings or curses based on the choice made:

- **Joshua 24:15** – “And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”
- **Acts 7:51** – “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”
- **2 Corinthians 9:7** – Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

In all three passages, there seems to be implied the freedom of contrary choice, i.e. the subject has the freedom to choose otherwise. The power of determination resides in the subject alone.

The weakness of the libertarian free will position is it fails to address the *why* behind a person's choices. Though it acknowledges that both external and internal factors influence decisions, ultimately the *why*, the determinative factor, resides in the individual's will. Each person is “the irreducible cause of their actions.”<sup>11</sup> This does not answer the question of why; in fact, without any sort of prior causes, it would seem that ‘choice’ is entirely random and unpredictable. As Christensen notes, “it is hard to see that choices somehow spring whole cloth out of the person's choosing without having other prior causes that become part of the necessary<sup>12</sup> and sufficient<sup>13</sup> causal nexus if those choices are to be made. If no other decisive reasons exists for the choices we make, what distinguishes them from being random acts?”<sup>14</sup>

## II. COMPATIBILISM

Aside from the above discussion, a number of theological and philosophical problems plague the libertarian free will perspective.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the compatibilist view accords with the full teaching of Scripture on this topic and guards both man's volition and responsibility as well as God's sovereignty. In fact, it is God's absolute, unadulterated sovereignty that undergirds this

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Keim Campbell, *Free Will* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 74.

<sup>12</sup> A prior condition that is necessary for something to come about. For example, gas is necessary for a car to run, but not sufficient, for many other factors are necessary as well.

<sup>13</sup> A prior condition that is sufficient for something to come about. For example, rain is sufficient to water your lawn but not necessary. Water from sprinklers can also water your lawn. According to the libertarian view, the only sufficient cause for a free choice to be made is the will of the subject.

<sup>14</sup> Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> For a full discussion of its shortcomings, see Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 30-52.

viewpoint. A. W. Pink describes God's sovereignty thus: "To say God is sovereign is to declare that he is Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat his counsels, thwart his purpose, or resist his will."<sup>16</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the type of sovereignty described in Arminian/Libertarian position, a sovereignty which is self-limited and gives creatures a great deal of independence from their Creator. Scripture describes God's sovereignty as meticulous, exhaustive, irresistible:

- Psalm 115:3 – Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.
- Proverbs 16:33 – The lot is cast in the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.
- Isaiah 49:9-11 – Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.
- Daniel 2:21-22 – He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.
- Daniel 4:34-35 – for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"
- Ephesians 1:11 – In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will
- Matthew 10:29 – Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.
- Acts 1:7 – He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

The Biblical record is clear: God moves along all of human history according to His good plan and purpose, and our choices and actions are a part of that plan. At the same time, we are not puppets on the end of a string, or robots carrying out a pre-programmed set of actions.

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<sup>16</sup> A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 19.

Compatibilism says that “our freedom of choice is not incompatible with antecedent causes that determine our choices.”<sup>17</sup> James Spiegel’s memorable illustration demonstrates this:

Consider the choice someone might give you to eat either apple pie or grub worm pie. Which would you choose? Presumably, you would select the former. Was your choice determined? Of course, this is apparent from the predictability of your choice. And what determined your choice was such causal influences as your desire to eat something you like and your natural aversion to eating worms. But, now, was your choice free? Again, the answer is yes. You were free because you were not externally compelled to give a pro-apple-pie response. However, had something so compelled you, such as threat of violence or manipulation of your vocal cords, then you would not have acted freely.<sup>18</sup>

This illustration shows that, while our choices are uncoerced, they are not unconstrained. Our nature—our will, desires, emotions—constrain and so determine our choices. In other words, we act and choose according to our nature. When Paul says that the unregenerate person, the person who lives “according to the flesh” and whose mind “is set on the flesh” (Romans 8:5, 6), cannot submit to God’s law (Romans 8:8), the issue is not that they lack the freedom to do so. The problem is that they freely choose to rebel against God’s law because they choose according to their nature which “is hostile to God” (Romans 8:7). This recalls our discussion on the inability of man to choose God. We are constrained by our nature, and a fallen human being will never choose the God they are hostile towards.

The doctrine of total inability might lead us to question the fairness of God holding fallen human beings accountable for their choices. Is it fair if they are unable to choose otherwise? We must recognize that our ability to meet the demands placed on us does not affect our culpability. If a person takes out a loan but does not have the means to repay it, are they excused from their obligation? No.

Likewise, God is not obligated to dismiss our debt to him simply because we cannot repay it. God demands our moral perfection (Matthew 5:48), and yet we are morally unable to do that which pleases him (Romans 8:7-8). Humans are by nature in rebellion against God not just because we are under a curse (Romans 5:17) and can do no other, but also because we heartily approve of our rebellious actions (Psalm 2:2-3; Romans 1:32). One’s inability to act contrary to his sinful nature does not abrogate his culpability, since he also acts voluntarily (intentionally).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> James Spiegel, *The Benefits of Providence: A New Look at Divine Sovereignty* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 42.

Now, at this point two questions arise: 1) Why would God create a world that includes the fall and fallen human beings who will not choose Him and suffer His just wrath for it and 2) How does God's good and perfect will synthesize with our less-than-good and less-than-perfect will? We must acknowledge that there remains an element of mystery surrounding both of these questions. As Christensen writes,

The mechanics of how this [God intending for good what man intended for evil] is carried out remain a mystery that Scripture doesn't explain. D. A. Carson observes that God's causal relationship to good and evil is not identical or *symmetrical* as though he were amoral (i.e., neither good nor evil). Since God's fundamental nature is good, not evil, his relationship to good and evil must be *asymmetrical*. God stands behind what is good in such a way that it is always directly attributed to him. He stands behind evil only in a distant, secondary way so that it cannot be directly attributed to him, only to secondary agents or causes. God wills good simply for the sake of good. But when he wills evil, he never does so for the sake of evil, but because it is necessary to achieve some good purpose.<sup>20</sup>

- God directly stirs spirits to do good – Haggai 1:14
- God indirectly stirs spirits to do evil – 2 Samuel 24:1 // 1 Chronicles 21:1; Job 1:12 & 2:6

We have already sought to answer the first question in addressing the problem of evil. Biblical compatibilism helps us answer the second question. Biblical compatibilism teaches us that every human action has a dual explanation—one human, one divine. Theologians call this “double agency,” the idea that we freely choose our actions while God simultaneously decrees what we will do. This is expressed in Proverbs 16:9 where Solomon writes, “The heart of a man plans his ways, but the LORD establishes his steps” (cf. 19:21; 20:24). God directs the steps of man in a way that does not undermine human freedom and responsibility, a Biblical reality that our finite minds fail to comprehend. D. A. Carson has articulated compatibilism with the following propositions:

- 1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility [and freedom] is curtailed, minimized, or maligned.
- 2) Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent [dependent on human action].<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006),

These are both taught by Scripture. At the same time, there is an inherent tension between the two statements, what J. I. Packer labeled an antimony: a paradox that cannot be resolved until we get to heaven.<sup>22</sup> While Packer is right that there is mystery here, I do believe Scripture provides some clarity. God, the divine cause, is *ultimate* though *remote*, while the human cause is *secondary* though *proximate*.<sup>23</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith describes this concurrence thus:

God, from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

As human beings we make real, genuine choices, but these choices “are also dependent on God. Our actions are always a response to God’s secret initiation, whether He acts remotely and indirectly or in some cases with direct proximate causal energy. Yet from our perspective, it is not always clear how God operates, nor does the Bible always tell us.”<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, in wrestling with these same questions, wrote:

. . . the Lord had declared that "everything that he had made . . . was exceedingly good" (Genesis 1:31). Whence, then comes this wickedness to man, that he should fall away from his God? Lest we should think it comes from creation, God had put His stamp of approval on what had come forth from himself. By his own evil intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord; and by his fall drew all his posterity with him into destruction. Accordingly, we should contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity—which is closer to us—rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God's predestination.<sup>25</sup>

Calvin is drawing the same philosophical distinction between proximate and ultimate causes. While God is the ultimate cause of all things, working through secondary causes to accomplish His ultimate purposes, sinful actors are the proximate—and, thus, responsible—causes of sinful actions. They alone bear the guilt for what they have done.

People often try to avoid personal responsibility, usually through blame-shifting. Adam tried to blame Eve for his sin (Genesis 3:12). Cain tried to dodge responsibility (Genesis 4:9). Pilate attempted to absolve his guilt in the matter of the crucifixion of Christ: “I am innocent of this

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<sup>22</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991), 18-25.

<sup>23</sup> For an explanation of these terms, see Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 79.

<sup>24</sup> Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:23:8.

man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'" (Matthew 27:24). Ultimately, attempts to pass the buck are futile. "You may be sure that your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23).<sup>26</sup>

Scott Christensen provides a helpful summary of what compatibilism seeks to describe. He writes,

God's decree and man's freely exercised will to choose are both necessary and sufficient causes of any human action. From the human side of the equation, the confluence of various external influences (people, circumstances, etc.) and internal influences (beliefs, desires, etc.) that produce the most compelling motive is what serves as the sufficient cause for any choice to be made. While no single factor is necessary, the creation of the most compelling motive, no matter how that comes about, is both necessary and sufficient for a choice to occur along the human plane. When the human plane is linked to the divine plane, we have an adequate explanation for human freedom and responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

Is this explanation adequate? Yes. Is it bewildering? Also yes. Though logical cohesive and Biblically sound, compatibilism is still hard to get our heads around. We need to recognize this is an indication not of Scripture's lack of clarity but our own limits and finitude. The problem is with us, not with God. Thankfully, the story of Joseph gives us a helpful illustration of this dynamic at play.

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." <sup>16</sup> So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people<sup>[b]</sup> should be kept alive, as they are today. <sup>21</sup> So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

– Genesis 50:15-21

Here we see that Joseph's brothers acted freely, according to their desires and intentions. They "meant" their actions for evil against Joseph. God, who is not the author of sin, did not force or coerce them to act sinfully. At the same time, God "meant it for good." Their actions, though a violation of God's preceptive will, were according to His decretive will—His eternal counsel and purpose—to accomplish a greater good that the brothers themselves could never have foreseen.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/personal-responsibility.html>

<sup>27</sup> Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, 81.

This is God's providence at work through human actions to accomplish His will, even as human beings make genuinely free choices.

There remains mystery, but this need not alarm or discourage us. We serve an infinite God, so we should expect our understanding to fall short. However, as He grows larger in our eyes, the difficulties begin to diminish. Perhaps the best way to end this discussion—and this course—is to remember Paul's words in Romans 11:33-36.

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

*“For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”*

*“Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”*

*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.  
Amen.*