

Cornerstone Systematic Theology: God's Sovereignty over Evil 11/16/25

A. What is the "Problem of Evil"?

1. The objection to the existence of the God of the Bible ("the logical problem of evil")

➤ The objection typically goes like this:

- a. If God were all good, he would want to prevent evil.
- b. If God were all powerful, he would be able to prevent evil.
- c. But evil exists.
- d. Therefore (the argument goes), if God exists, he is either not all good or not all powerful.

2. The attempt to defend the ways of God ("theodicy")

- a. Begins with belief in God
- b. Deals with the question, "How is it that God remains good in light of the fact that there is evil in the world?"

B. What is Evil?

We can't claim to deal with the problem of evil unless we know what we mean by "evil."

- 1. Evil is a perversion of something God has made. Evil is not a thing in itself. Therefore, it is right to say that God did not create evil.***
- 2. Moral evil is a rebellion against God's good design and disobedience of his commands. It is a claim to deity, an attempt to usurp God's sovereignty.***
- 3. Natural evil is the effect of moral evil on the world as a whole, resulting in human suffering for non-moral causes (like the suffering that happens due to natural disasters).***

C. Brief Review of the Sovereignty of God

However we explain the problem of evil, we cannot nullify the biblical teaching on the sovereignty of God. In fact, this will help us approach the question of evil rightly.

- *A sampling of the biblical testimony to God's sovereignty over evil:*

Ecclesiastes 7:14 In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider — God has made the one as well as the other So that man will not discover anything *that will be* after him.

Lamentations 3:37–38 Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded *it*? ³⁸ *Is it* not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?

Job 2:10 But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Isaiah 45:7 The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.

Jeremiah 32:42 “For thus says the LORD, ‘Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them.’”

- The biblical testimony is that God is sovereign over everything, including evil. God is not standing by wishing he could do something, but unable to.

Psalms 135:6 Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.

- However, God is not pleased with evil, nor is he evil himself:

Psalms 5:4–5 For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; No evil dwells with You. ⁵ The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity.

Habakkuk 1:13 *Your* eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness *with favor*.

Ezekiel 18:32 "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."

- We must affirm these biblical teachings even though they may appear to conflict.
- God is God and we are not.
- 1. *God has planned the universe in such a way that he has "rendered certain" everything that will happen in that universe.*
- 2. *God has entered into the universe to participate in the outworking of his own plan.*
- 3. *God exercises control over all the events of the universe as they unfold according to plan.*
- 4. *But God does not DO everything that happens.*
 - a. Example: Last night you ate dinner.
 - b. You ate dinner because God ordained that it would be so (primary cause).
 - c. You ate dinner because wanted to do so (secondary cause).
- 5. *Humans have a modified "free will" in the sense that they do what they want to do. Of course, the human will is in bondage to sin, and it is subject to outside influences, so it is free only in a very specific sense. The idea that human will is free in an absolute sense is radically contrary to our experience.*

D. The problem of evil & theodicy in light of God's sovereignty

It is important to begin by reviewing what we know clearly about God based on Scripture.

- God is self-sufficient and unable to be coerced
 - ...so we can be sure no one or nothing is forcing God to do anything he does.*
- God is incomprehensible and has an infinite perspective

...so we must admit that God is capable of formulating a plan that we can't fully understand.

- God is all-wise and capable of formulating the best plan for the universe

...so we can be sure that God's plan is better than anything we could come up with!

- God is sovereign and has the right to carry out his plan

...so we must be willing to humbly take our rightful place in his universe.

- God is all-powerful and is able to carry out his plan

...so we can rest in the knowledge that nothing can prevent God from carrying out his good plan.

- God is all-knowing and cannot be taken by surprise

...so we can be sure God is always acting according to his purposes and is never improvising.

- God is all-good and has absolutely pure motives and actions

...so we can trust God even when we don't understand what we see in this world.

- God is loving and is committed to personal relationships

...so we can be sure that even as evil brings grief and anguish into human experience, God is doing good for his people.

- Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that God is in complete control of all the events of the universe and is worthy of our trust in view of our inability to comprehend his ways.

Preliminary Conclusion: This line of thinking leads us toward accepting evil as a part of God's sovereign plan for the universe, even though this may create tension and some difficult questions for us. So, let's look at how God's people in Scripture reacted to evil. This may provide either corroborating or contradicting evidence.

E. Theology in action – biblical responses to the sovereignty of God over evil events

The way faithful people in Scripture respond to evil in their lives follows this line of reasoning.

1. *Having lost everything as a result of evil committed against him and his family by Satan: “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:20-21)*
2. *Having suffered severely as a result of evil committed against him by his brothers, in the end “Joseph said to them, ‘Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Gen 50:19-21)*
3. *Speaking of his “thorn in the flesh,” which was a “messenger of Satan” given “to harass” him and keep him humble, Paul said, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor 12:9).*
4. *To Christians who were suffering evil in the form of persecution, Peter wrote: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 5:6-10).*

F. “But are you saying God WANTS all this horrible stuff to happen??”

Understanding the question of “God’s will” is a key factor in approaching the question of evil.

1. *Yes, in a way – God’s sovereign will has decreed that evil things will happen. Evil has become a part of God’s universe (cf. Gen 50:20, Eccl 7:14, Lam 3:37-38)*

- a. Creation was initially “very good” (Gen 1:31)
 - b. Yet Jesus is the Savior that was foreknown from the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20), who was put to death by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23), and we are chosen in him from the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). So evil – and redemption from it – was integrated into God’s plan for the universe.
 - c. Another angle: for any particular evil event, could God have prevented this occurrence?
2. *...and no – God is still God.*
- a. The evil that creatures do is repulsive to God

“but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight”
(Isa 66:4)

“You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab 1:13)
 - b. God’s holy and righteous character remains the standard for all human conduct (“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy,” Lev 19:2, cf. 1 Pet 1:15-16).
3. *Conclusion: God has ordained that many things that will happen in his universe are contrary to his character. Since his character is unchangeable, and since he is worthy of our trust, it is reasonable to conclude that God has in mind a purpose, a “greater good,” that justifies the existence of evil.*

G. Summary: The “Greater Good” Defense

1. *God has a rationale for including evil in his decree for the universe. This reasoning arises from his holy, loving, and righteous character and is sufficient for the evil that happens.*
2. *Since God works everything “according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:4, 11), we can be sure that God’s allowance of evil in the universe is purposeful.*
3. *Yet “God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one” (James 1:13). Creatures are morally accountable for evil because they commit it. God does not.*

4. *In fact, God is able to direct evil for his own good purposes (for example: Joseph in Gen 50:20, Job in 1:20-21, Paul in 2 Cor 12:9-10; also Saul in 1 Sam 16:14; Ahab in 1 Kings 22:19-23, Israel in Hab 1:5-6, etc.)*
5. *So the evil that happens in the universe is not an “exception” to God's sovereignty, yet God himself is not guilty of evil.*

H. Why did God not just prevent (or eradicate) evil altogether?

1. *As far as we can tell, this would have contradicted his purposes in creating this particular universe.*
2. *We only know certain of God's attributes because of his response to evil (grace, mercy, justice).*
3. *Redemption is central to God's purposes for the universe. In other words, God displays his glory in redemption and judgment, both of which entail the existence of evil.*

Romans 9:17-23 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.” ¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” ²⁰ 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? ²¹ 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? ²² What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ And He *did so* to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory

4. *And so, the problem of evil leads us to the cross, where God displayed his grace and love alongside his righteousness and justice.*
- The crucifixion of Christ is one of the greatest examples of God's sovereignty over evil.
 - Was the cross evil, as far as what humans did? Was God in control?

Acts 2:23 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.

- Did God use the greatest evil to accomplish good?

Conclusion:

- Though evil is displeasing to God, he sovereignly ordains it for good and his glory.
- We may not see how that is so, which requires that we reverently wait on the Lord.
- We humbly bow before our sovereign God, who is inscrutable.

Revelation 15:3-4 And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “**Great** and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! ⁴ “Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED.”

EXCURSUS¹

John Owen on *Why Did God Decree the Fall?*

God is sovereign. He is sovereign over it all. And “sovereign” means more than mere permission. God is not the author of sin, but neither is “allow” the best explanation for it all. “In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one as well as the other so that man will not discover anything that will be after him” (Eccl 7:14). That tree, that serpent; the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life culminating in taking the scrumptious fruit – it was all decreed.

Why would God do such a thing?

¹ <https://thecripplegate.com/john-owen-on-why-god-decreed-the-fall/>

Though brief, one of the better explanations I've come across is from John Owen in his book, *Communion With God*. In it, he expounds the glory of God in the Fall. His section on the topic could be partitioned into four sections: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation:

1. Creation

Owen begins with the wisdom and glory of God displayed in creation:

God in the beginning made all things good, glorious, and beautiful. When all things had an innocence and beauty, the clear impress of his wisdom and goodness upon them, they were very glorious; especially man, who was made for his special glory.

2. Fall

However, all things are swiftly plunged into ruin:

Now, all this beauty was defaced by sin, and the whole creation rolled up in darkness, wrath, curses, confusion, and the great praise of God buried in the heaps of it. Man especially, was utterly lost, and came short of the glory of God, for which he was created.

So God curses his creation such that the Fall has an incalculable ripple effect. As Derek Kidner wrote, "so simple the act, so hard its undoing" (*Genesis*, 68). But, in the decree of all things, we're not left there. Owen writes:

Here, now, does the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God open itself. A design in Christ shines out from the bosom, that was lodged there from eternity...

Owen recognizes both the ordination of the Fall by declaring it as "design" and recognizing it as [God's] "wisdom." So what is that design?

3. Redemption

Through the finished work of Christ, submitting to his Father's will and taking the wrath due his people, Owen writes that God's design is:

...to recover things to such an estate as shall be exceedingly to the advantage of his glory, infinitely above what at first appeared, and for the putting of sinners into inconceivably a better condition than they were in before the entrance of sin.

Notice that surprising truth: as much as we may dream about having Eden again, as great as we might imagine our pre-fall conditions to have been, Owen observes that

through God's decree in the Fall, we, though sinners, will be put "into an inconceivably better condition" through the Person and work of Christ.

He continues on about God's plan:

He appears now glorious; he is known to be a God pardoning iniquity and sin, and advances the riches of his grace: which was his design (Eph 1:6).

How does God appear so glorious in decreeing such a devastating fallen world? And how is our condition better than pre-fall?

4. Consummation

He has infinitely vindicated his justice also, in the face of men, angels, and devils, in setting forth his Son for a propitiation. It is also to our advantage; we are more fully established in his favour, and are carried on towards a more exceeding weight of glory than formerly was revealed...

The Fall, then, and all the consequences, was actually to "our advantage," since, through Christ and his substitutionary work, we are more "fully established in [God's] favour."

We receive 'grace for grace' – for that grace lost in Adam, better grace in Christ. Confessedly, this is a depth of wisdom indeed. And of the love of Christ to his church, and his union with it, to carry on this business, 'This is a great mystery' (Eph 5:32), says the apostle; great wisdom lies in this.

Notice the consummate reasons Owen observes for God's decree: the glory of God in upholding his justice and recreating humanity to a superior glory than Eden. He continues cataloguing the consummation achieved in God's plan through Christ:

So, then, this also is hid in Christ – the great and unspeakable riches of the wisdom of God, in pardoning sin, saving sinners, satisfying justice, fulfilling the law, repairing his own honour, and providing for us a more exceeding weight of glory; and all this out of such a condition as wherein it was impossible that it should enter into the hearts of angels or men how ever the glory of God should be repaired, and one sinning creature delivered from everlasting ruin.

This great veil of tears, the atrocities committed, our grievous besetting sins, global suffering, and the thorns and thistles – its all been ordained by God and being moved by God through Christ to a very good end:

Hence it is said, that at the last day God 'shall be glorified in his saints, and admired in all them that believe' (2 Thess. 1:10). It shall be an admirable thing, and God shall be for ever glorious in

it, even in the bringing of believers to himself. To save sinners through believing, shall be found to be a far more admirable work than to create the world of nothing.

Thus, it's fittingly said, "To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Eph 3:21).