

God's Sovereignty and the Problem of Evil

If God is sovereign over history, how can evil exist without making Him the author of sin? This study examines the difficult relationship between divine decrees, human responsibility, and the goodness of God.

A Christian wrote and asked, "How can God limit sin and control the circumstances of its manifestation without being guilty of being the cause of sin?"

—David

He used the example of Absalom, who committed incest with the wives of David, and showed that it was God himself who raised up Absalom against David as judgment. Yet Absalom was considered guilty, even though his sins were decreed by God. How can God be exempt from the charge of being the cause of evil?

Dear David,

Your question brings up an entire branch of theology called theodicy, which deals with the goodness of God and the presence of evil. This topic is a difficult aspect of theology and philosophy because it involves free will, justice, and God's sovereignty. To what degree is the will free? Does a divine decree involve the application of force? Is the presence of evil a good thing?

Partial answers exist, but they are only partial and may not satisfy inquisitive minds such as yours. After considering some of the answers, you will reach a point where you must decide whether you will be satisfied with partial answers.

Remember, we are dealing with an infinite mind that sees the end from the beginning and has not revealed everything about his eternal purposes. God is gracious to give us partial answers because the mere existence of the partial suggests that final answers must exist somewhere or at some time, though we are not yet equipped to see them. At some point, we must decide whether to trust him or not.

God's strategy in history

Let's take a look at the supreme example of the interplay between good and evil and the outcome of it—the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ as described in the apostle's prayer in 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, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

As we look at the entire prayer starting from verse 24, we note these particulars:

- In the beginning of the prayer, the apostles addressed God as *sovereign Lord*. No question existed in their minds as to God's control over the circumstances.
- They expressed God's authority over his creation.
- They quoted from Psalm 2, which is a declaration of God's ultimate triumph over the forces of evil and the establishment of justice in the earth.

None of that is particularly controversial. Then comes one of the most remarkable statements in the study of theodicy:

The apostles state that the enemies of Christ gathered together to do what God predestined them to do, yet those people acted freely. Everything was done by his plan.

Notice that the apostles had no philosophical problems with any of this. Why not?

Here is where partial answers come in.

They saw clearly the results of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus—the salvation of all believers throughout all the ages. They saw an infinitely greater good come out of the evil than the evil's significance itself at the time. It was such a good that it made the evil recede into insignificance.

We can deduce from the tone of the apostles that they believed an omniscient holy mind could use evil as a tool to produce grace, glory, and holiness for his people. It cannot be intrinsically wrong to decree that evil people should be allowed to do as they please if the outcome is good.

What an incredible paradox! What military general would deliberately arrange his own defeat as the main tool for victory? No human thinks like this, which shows that the entire plan was not human.

Because the crucifixion is in the past, we observe this pattern accurately. Hindsight is accurate. But what about the present? Or the future? Is it possible that God is now working out the same kind of strategic pattern, of which the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus were the supreme example?

If we can perceive the righteousness of God in the past, in the way he used evil to produce a greater good, then can we trust him with the future?

Striking examples

Is such a divine strategy exceptional? Let's look at some examples:

Was the apostasy of Israel in the Old Testament a good thing or a bad thing? Clearly, apostasy is a bad thing, and Israel got what it deserved. However, is it a negative thing that we have the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets, with all their exhortations, pleas for holiness, and predictions of a coming messiah with the glories to follow? Would we be pleased that those books be removed because apostasy is a bad thing?

And what about the fall of Adam? Was Adam's disobedience a good thing? Certainly not. It was not only wrong, but it also brought four consequences on his descendants: sin, death, judgment, and condemnation. (Romans 5:12-19) That's a heavy load to carry.

In contrast, the Second Adam, Christ, provided four things as well: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. (1 Corinthians 1:30) These four things would have been unnecessary without the fall of Adam. We will have all eternity to unpack each one of these, enjoy their contents, and appreciate their infinite value.

The free will dilemma

We have looked at God's will and long-term strategy. Now let's look at the will of the people involved.

Did God force Pontius Pilate, Herod, and the Jews to do anything against their will? Not. Nothing indicates they were acting under compulsion. They acted freely.

Could they have done otherwise with better knowledge? Yes. Paul said so. 1 Corinthians 2:7, 8 says,

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

This is a remarkable statement! If the rulers mentioned in this verse had known the hidden wisdom of God, they would not have crucified Christ. Why did God hide it from them? Because it is wisdom intended for our glory, not theirs.

Your original question was expressed using the incident with Absalom. God decreed judgment on David, and this judgment would be carried out by allowing Absalom to commit incest with David's wives. A decree is not the same as the act that fulfills the decree. Saying that a thing must be done is not the same as doing it yourself.

That may not answer our questions as we would like. God's boldness in doing this sort of thing generates emotions along with questions. It could be doubts with fears or trust with awe. The choice is ours.

As we look back on the events surrounding Jesus, we see the divine strategy is not fundamentally different from that involving judgment on David. Hindsight is easy. Foresight is challenging. During the three years the apostles were with Jesus, they

understood little about God's plan. The little they grasped was distorted. Even after the resurrection, during the days before his ascension, they supposed Jesus might be a military leader and restore Israel. (Acts 1:6)

The crucifixion as the supreme example

This brings up the question: Was the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus the best possible display of God's holiness for the purpose of bringing about salvation? Yes! In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, asking the Father to remove this cup of suffering from him if it were possible. (Matthew 26:39)

Apparently, nothing else was possible. Why? Because God is infinitely holy. Therefore, whatever he does must reflect that attribute in the greatest possible way.

At this point, we are in the same posture as the disciples before the crucifixion. We don't have the complete view yet. In fact, we may see about as much of our picture now as the disciples did in their time.

We can, however, reason it through. The first coming of Christ involved a divine strategy that displayed the holiness of God against the backdrop of human depravity in a manner that could not happen otherwise.

At the second coming of Christ, will we discover ourselves in the same posture as the disciples were when they prayed that prayer in Acts Chapter 4? Will we look back and see that of all the ways God could have displayed his holiness, this world was the greatest possibility?

Trusting God with partial answers

I warned you at the beginning that the answers to your questions would only be partial. This causes us to face a moral choice. Either be satisfied with the partial and therefore trust God with the rest or demand full answers before we trusting him.

We have been given enough clues to see that God's decree to permit evil actions throughout history is holy because we have seen some of the outcomes. Therefore, our faith in him is not blind. Shortsighted indeed, but not blind.

It appears that for the time being, we must be satisfied with that.

Yours in His bonds,
Roger

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