

Sermon 8, The Sovereignty of God Explained and Defended, Ephesians 1:11

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Proposition: God's concurring providence is at work in everything that happens in the entire created order, including in the decisions of free creatures.

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul insisted to the Athenians in Acts 17 that "in Him [God] we live and move and have our being" (Act 17:28 NKJ). Doubtless on the hill that day were some Athenians whose philosophical pre-commitments made it difficult for them to focus on Paul's statement long enough to see its truth — and I fear that among Christians like us today there are many with similarly faulty philosophical precommitments. The way to get around those and to understand the truths taught by God's word is often not by way of direct argument, but rather by way of defamiliarization. Take the statement and translate it into a realm where it's not so familiar, and it has a better chance of getting through. This statement of Paul's is one such. I want you to think with me for a moment about what it would have meant for Paul to say "In us He lives and moves and has His being." Is that the same statement as "in Him we live and move and have our being"? Of course not! The new version of the statement teaches a form of pantheism, but Paul's original statement teaches classical theism. Fundamentally, the Apostle's statement is one about us primarily and God secondarily. Our being, our actions, our life is all happening only in connection with God's creating and sustaining power. Yet nonetheless, it is and remains our living, our moving, our possession of being.

Well, our text this morning faces similar philosophical obstacles. I know that none of you are professional philosophers, and that few of you have any kind of profound or deep interest in philosophical subjects. Yet brothers and sisters, that doesn't stop you from holding definite and pronounced philosophical opinions! Hear me carefully: bad philosophy, consciously held or not, will prevent you from understanding the statement in Ephesians 1:11 that God works all things according to the counsel of His own will. That's right. You may have an obstacle to understanding this text correctly lodged comfortably in your mind in the form of some long-settled, long-held philosophical opinion. Just as it is almost impossible for someone committed to a wicked lifestyle to understand Scripture correctly, so it is almost impossible for someone committed to a faulty philosophical view to understand Scripture correctly. Our text this morning is a text which makes a general claim about the nature of reality. The reality of which it speaks is properly a metaphysical reality — that is, something which has gone beyond the merely physical and instead speaks to the nature of reality as reality. Whatever real thing you may be observing, doing, or experiencing, that thing is ultimately worked by God according to the settled decision of His own will. Such is the statement of our passage this morning. Philosophical pre-commitments to libertarian free will, to open theism, to a god who is limited or receptive or potentially subject to outside influence will prevent you from understanding and believing the truth which the apostle authoritatively teaches in this verse. Put simply, that truth is this: God's concurring providence is at work in everything that happens in the entire created

order, including in the decisions of free creatures. We are going to unpack today just a few of the implications of this truth taught so clearly in Ephesians 1:11.

I. What He Does: He Works All Things

Your translation might say that God works all things out, or that God works in all things. But that translation adds something that is simply not in the Greek. Paul literally says that God works all things according to the counsel of His own will. The efficient cause of everything that happens can ultimately be traced back to God in some way, shape, or form. If it's raining, that came from God. If a hurricane is raking Florida, that came from God. If you got up this morning and decided to go to church, that came from God. And if you lost a child to an untimely death, that too came from God. That is simply what the verse says, if we understand that "all" means all and not just some.

God is in some sense the efficient cause of everything that happens. In what sense? That's what we're going to explore today.

Put briefly, He is the efficient cause of the being and the effect, but not of the non-being or the defect. Evil is like a hole in a shirt. It is a defect. There is no such thing as "pure hole."

We as agents are like God. We too have real wills that really originate and efficiently cause events. We and God are the efficient cause of the same event in two different senses, just as the motion of my arm is efficiently caused by both my will and by the energy derived from last night's steak and potato.

A. Objection: So God Works Sin?

But the obvious objection to this understanding is that if God works all things, and sin is a thing, then God works sin. If Eph. 1:11 means what it appears to mean, then it means that God is evil — and that conclusion is totally unacceptable.

B. Response

1. God Does Not Work Sin

In response, we with the apostle Paul answer that God does not work sin. He cannot lie, Paul tells us elsewhere. God cannot be tempted with evil, nor does He tempt anyone to sin. The witness of the Bible is clear — God does not sin. God cannot do something that stops Him from loving Himself with all His heart, mind, soul, and strength. So we can emphatically say that God does not murder people, steal property, or condemn the innocent.

2. God Works All Things

But having said that, where do all those things come from? Where does an unambiguous example of moral evil such as the Holocaust come from if God works all things? Can't we lay the Holocaust at His door and say, "God, you're a bad God! You concurred with the genocidal efforts of the Nazi party!"?

In order to dissipate the force of this charge, we need to get into a more subtle account of what it means to do and not to do something. The key distinction here is between primary and secondary causality.

Let's say I am a manufacturer of automobiles. I make a chunk of metal that weighs 5000 pounds and can propel itself at 120 mph. One of the cars I make goes out and gets used in a terrorist attack, killing 87 as the vehicle attacks in Nice two years ago did. Did I kill those people? Well, it's obvious that without that vehicle or one like it, those 87 people would probably be alive today. In a sense, as a truck manufacturer I am the ultimate cause of their death. But the second cause — the proximate cause — was the homicidal rage of the terrorist driving the truck.

a) As First Cause

Brothers and sisters, God works all things as first cause. He creates us. He gives us the power to work and accomplish actions in this world. He gives us the power of agency and His divine providence works in and alongside our agency to produce whatever it is we're producing. Without Him, there would be no guns, no murder weapons, no murders and no homicidal people. He is the first cause of the existence of these things because He is the first cause of the existence of the whole world, and He works all things after the counsel of His own will.

b) Not as Second Cause

But He does not work all thing as second cause. If I murder, steal, lie, etc., then that is my fault, my action, my sin and my problem. God is not guilty of doing what I did, even though He created me and allowed me to do it.

How? You might ask. I can't answer that question. Scripture never answers that question. It only tells us that we really work as second causes and that God really works as first cause — that He really chose to create this world and no other world.

C. Objection: So I Am a Puppet, eh?

But a second objection to the truth that God works all things after the counsel of His own will is that such working vitiates free will, or, more colorfully, "makes me a puppet dancing on wires pulled by God."

D. Response

1. No, You Are a Free Agent

But to respond to this, go back to Acts 17. Paul doesn't say that in us God lives and moves and has His being. He says that in God we live, move, and have being. Our life, our motion, our being is surrounded and sustained by the life and being of God, yet without ceasing to be truly ours. To say that God works all things all after the counsel of His own will is not to say that He works us like puppets. To do so would be for Him to destroy what He created. He made us responsible human agents, with the ability to live, move, and have being. The correct way to think about the concurrence of God's actions with yours is not by looking at a puppet show and saying "Oh, I move just like that puppet!" Rather, a better analogy is to ask "What moves you arm: the energy from last night's steak and potato or the effective choice of your will?"

That's a false dichotomy. Both move my arm! In the same way, to say "So who moves me, me or God?" is a false dichotomy.

2. God Can Move Your Will without Violating It

God can and does move in your will and make it willing without violating its nature. Just as sleepiness can make you reluctant to move and excitement can make you reluctant to sit still without thereby making you a puppet, so God can make you willing to do what He wants you to do without thereby making you a puppet. This is the teaching of the Bible. In one sense, on one level of causation, God works and moves all things after the counsel of His own will. But in another sense, on another level of causation, we work and move ourselves according to the counsels of our own wills. These two truths are no more incompatible than the truth that I move my arm and that energy from my food moves my arm.

E. Objection: If God Moves My Will, then I Need Not Move It

But this response tends to evoke another, even more ridiculous idea: that if God moves my will then I need not move it. If you have not actually thought this in a bad moment, then you certainly know someone who has.

F. Response

1. You Are Mistaken About

But this objection is radically mistaken.

a) The Nature of the Will

You see, your will is and remains yours. The fact that God can and does make it willing in no way gets you off the hook to behave as a responsible human being. God makes your will willing so that *you* will do what it is that He wants you to do. He doesn't make it willing so that He will do what He wants; He makes it willing so that you will do the thing He desires. You are an integral part of this process. *Even God cannot make you do something that you do not do.* The will is yours and directs your actions, and every action that is truly and properly your action can only be done by your will. So if you're going to do *anything*, then it's you who has to do it. That's what your faculty of will means.

b) The Nature of God's Concurring Providence

Further, God's concurring providence works with and in your will, but not (insofar as it's changing your actions) outside and without it. So if you think that you can sit around and wait for God to move you, you don't understand how God works. He works not only in the end, but also in the means to the end. And the primary means that He has ordained for reaching His ends in the realm of salvation is the work of His people. That's right: Though God truly is omnipotent and could in one sense do it all Himself, He has called you to cooperate and participate with Him in His work of sanctifying you and saving the world.

So you need to work.

2. God's Motion Empowers and Motivates Your Will to Move

Ultimately, remember, your greatest privilege is to be an imitator of God. He works all things after the counsel of His will, and that means that you need to be working after the counsel of your will. You need to be making settled decisions as to what to do, and then following up on them. You need to be at work, because God works in your working. Yes, He also works without your working, but the Christian life is not a spectator sport. You weren't called to believe for the

sake of sitting on the couch with a bowl of popcorn until Jesus comes back. Brothers and sisters, we must do our earthly work and work out our salvation with fear and trembling precisely because it is God's working which motivates and empowers our wills to move. Without Him, not only as Creator but as Providential sustainer, we would neither live nor move nor have any being whatsoever.

G. Attempts to Neuter Eph. 1:11

It is only appropriate to tell you that that other interpretations of this verse have been proposed by those who call themselves Christians.

1. The Pelagian

A 5th-century British monk named Pelagius, for instance, proposed a teaching that would require Ephesians 1:11 to mean that God works only some things — that He withdraws from the rest of existence and lets creatures do as they please. Ultimately, according to Pelagius, we and God live, move, and have our being independently of one another; God changes in response to what we do, and He most certainly does not work all things (but at most only some things) after the counsel of His own will. In short, the Pelagian God is like us, but more powerful.

2. The Arminian

Arminians take the same basic approach as Pelagians, but they would say that God works *almost all* things after the counsel of His own will. Only sins are outside His working in every sense. The rest of reality is subject to His control. Yet nonetheless, this approach differs only in degree from the Pelagian approach.

3. The Open Theist

The open theist approach, too, differs only in degree from the Pelagian approach as I have described it — yet it differs by being more Pelagian than Pelagius! According to the Open Theist, God works *almost nothing* after the counsel of His own will. God is a being coordinate to us, no more powerful than Zeus or even Athena, bound by time, subject to change, able to be deceived and able to discover the future only as it happens.

As you can see, all three of these approaches try to protect God from the charge of being accessory to sin or working sin in any sense — yet the price they pay for this attempt is too high. Their God is no longer the God of Scripture who works all things after the counsel of His own will. Their God has been neutered.

H. The Fertile Classical Theist/Reformed Account of Eph. 1:11

So what does the passage mean, positively speaking? Instead of refuting wrong views, preacher, tell me what the right interpretation is! So here it is.

1. God Works All Things Providentially

First, God works all things providentially.

a) As Creator

He chose to create and He chose to create this particular world with these particular conditions. He knew what would happen — even granting Open Theism, He knew pretty soon what kinds of things would and do happen in this world — and yet He presses on with His project. Human

beings who do a study, only to find that huge percentages of the people receiving a certain drug, etc., are dying, quickly terminate the study. But God hasn't terminated this creation. So even if you embrace one of the heretical reinterpretations mentioned above, you can't absolve God from creating not just a world, but this world in particular with all its gruesome suffering, sinfulness, and catastrophes.

b) As Sustainer

Yet God works providentially not just at the beginning, but from moment to moment upholding all things by the Word of His power. God is the one who kept Adolf Hitler living and moving. God is the one who grants to the abortion doctor the ability to rip babies limb from limb. Even the weakest Open Theist God would, like Zeus, have the power to kill. Yet He so often sustains the wicked in their wickedness from moment to moment and from year to year. He upholds the properties of matter so that the wicked can use material objects to hurt other people and animals.

This is part of God working all things after the counsel of His own will. To say that He only permits evil but does not will it is absurd. After all, does He permit it willingly or unwillingly? If unwillingly, then something is forcing Him to do what He would rather not. But what could force God? Only Himself. But if He is the one who is making Himself do something, then He is in some sense doing it willingly. That is, He is willingly permitting the evil to take place for the sake of some greater purpose of His own.

c) As First Cause

Finally, God works all things as the First Cause — the unmoved mover who sets everything else in motion. We know that the amount of energy in a closed system is finite, and that energy is constantly dissipated into less and less usable forms. The power to work that everything in this universe possesses was originally put into the system by God. An object at rest remains at rest unless something comes along and puts it in motion. So as first cause, God didn't just wind up the universe and walk away. He supervises and directs everything that happens, right down to the way a pair of dice fall.

2. Creatures Really Decide and Really Work

Yet in this world, creatures really decide and really work.

a) As Second Causes

We do so as second causes — that is, causes whose ability to cause has been given to us from outside ourselves. Just as the motion in the player's arms is transferred to the bat and then in turn to the baseball, so God's activity activates us and empowers us to move things, to really decide and to really work in this world. We didn't infuse the energy into the system in the first place, but we are the recipients of God's divine energies that power the whole universe.

b) As Created Agents

We really work as created agents — that is, as persons with the abilities to make decisions and start new chains of causation in the world. Our wills are moved by reasons, not by causes. We are, in other words, not puppets on wires but rather humans who love, move, think, and have being precisely because we are empowered by God to do those things.

c) As Beings Sustained and Empowered by God

We are beings sustained and empowered by God. He works all things, but some things we work right along with Him.

II. How He Decides What to Do: He Consults His Own Will

Well, Paul not only says that God works all things, but that He works them according to the counsel of His own will. This means that whatever God does, He does based on the settled decision (the “counsel”) of His own will.

A. Caveat: Divine Simplicity

Now, Paul does not say this to assert that God’s mind may think one thing, His heart desire another, but that it’s His will which ultimately wins the day by its sheer willfulness. Not at all. God is a simple being, which means that all that is in God is God. So when He does something according to His will, that will is what He is. God is not balancing the claims of His will against the claims of His other “parts,” because He has no parts. He is completely and totally everything that He is.

B. Review: God’s Will Is His Faculty of Choice, Gal. 1:4

His will is His faculty of choice, as we would understand it. So when we say that He works all things after the counsel of His will, we mean simply that He is always doing everything that He does exactly as He has chosen to do it.

C. Point: What God Does Reflects Who God Is

This, in turn, reflects His identity. All God’s works reveal Him. All the decisions of His will show what He is. His decisions are made according to His will, which is just Himself willing.

So no matter what happens, no matter what the headlines are and no matter what crazy patterns the kaleidoscope of history reveals, because God works all things we know that He is behind the patterns. He is behind the headlines. His providence is at work at every moment, in every event from the fall of a hair or of a sparrow to the rise of an empire and the explosion of a supernova. Look for His eternal power and divine nature. Look for His goodness, His purity, His love and wisdom and all His other attributes. They are there in natural revelation.

Can you bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who works all things, even sinful things, in accordance with the counsel of His own will? Can you trust you in the events of your life? Can you know that He really does have a plan in what He’s doing, and that that plan is for His glory and your eternal good? If you can’t, then study this passage on your knees until it makes sense. Study until you are ready to submit to the one who works all things after the counsel of His own will! Amen.