

God and Evil

Why the Ultimate Cause Is Not the Chargeable Cause

Mike Riccardi | Sundays in July | July 1, 2018

The “Problem” of Evil

1. God is all-powerful
2. God is all-good
3. Evil exists

If God is all-powerful, He should be *able* to prevent evil.

If He is all-good, He should *want* to prevent evil.

That evil exists means that God is either (a) not omnipotent or (b) not omnibenevolent.”

The “Problem” of Evil

1. ~~God is all-powerful~~
2. God is all-good
3. Evil exists

Claim: If God is the cause of sin *in any sense*,
He is morally culpable for sin.

Two Main Theses

1. Scripture teaches that God is the **ultimate cause** of all things, even evil.
2. Scripture also teaches that it does not follow that God is rightly to be **blamed** for evil.

In other words, Scripture teaches that God sovereignly **ordains** that evil be, but also that He may not be justly **charged** with blame because of it.

Outline

- I. The Decree of God
- II. An Inadequate Answer: Divine Permission
- III. The Biblical Answer: The Ultimate Cause is Not the Chargeable Cause

I. The Decree of God

- Acts 4:28 – “. . . whatever Your hand and Your **purpose** predestined to occur.”
- Acts 2:23 – “. . . delivered over by the predetermined **plan** and foreknowledge of God . . .”
- Ephesians 1:11 – “. . . having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the **counsel** of His will.”
- Isaiah 46:10 – “I will accomplish all My **good pleasure.**”
- Ephesians 1:5 – “. . . according to the good pleasure of His **will**”

I. The Decree of God

“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 –

The divine decree is that by which God, before the creation of time, determined to bring about all things that were to happen in time.

“He has designed from all eternity, and is infallibly forming, with every event, a magnificent mosaic of redemptive history.”

– John Piper –

A. God's Decree is Eternal

- Psalm 139:16 – “And in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.”
- Ephesians 1:4 – “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (cf. Matt 25:34; 2 Tim 1:9).
- Ephesians 3:11 – “This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

A. God's Decree is Eternal

- 1 Corinthians 2:7 – “. . . wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory.”
- Isaiah 46:10 – “My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.”
- Ephesians 1:11 – “. . . predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

All of God's providential actions in time conform to a fixed purpose which precedes time. And this fixed purpose is His decree.

B. God's Decree is Unconditional

- Psalm 115:3 – “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.”
- Psalm 135:6 – “Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.”
- Isaiah 46:10 – “I will accomplish all My good pleasure.”
- Isaiah 48:14 – “The Lord . . . will carry out His good pleasure . . .”
- Philippians 2:13 – “. . . for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

B. God's Decree is Unconditional

“All the inhabitants of the earth
are accounted as nothing,
but He does according to *His will*
in the host of heaven.”

– Daniel 4:35 –

C. God's Decree is Immutable

- Psalm 33:10–11 – “The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation.”
- Daniel 4:35 – “No one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’”
- Isaiah 14:27 – “For Yahweh of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?”
- Job 42:2 – I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”

D. God's Decree is Exhaustive

- Ephesians 1:11 – “. . . having been predestined according to His purpose who works **all things** after the counsel of His will.”
- Psalms 115:3 – “But our God is in the heavens; He does **whatever** He pleases.”
- Psalms 135:6 – “**Whatever** the Lord pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.”
- Isaiah 46:9–10 – “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish **all** My good pleasure.’”

D. God's Decree is Exhaustive

- God is the cause of various kinds of **weather** (Psalm 148:8; Job 37:10–13).
- God causes the **grass** to grow (Ps 104:14) and the **sun** to shine (Matt 5:45).
- God providentially **feeds** all the animals of the earth (Ps 104:27).
- Not a **single sparrow** dies apart from the will of the Father (Matt 10:29).
- God determines the **boundaries** of nations (Acts 17:26) and He **rules** over the nations (Ps 22:8).

D. God's Decree is Exhaustive

- God determines even seemingly random events (Prov 16:33).
- God is sovereign over the details of our personal lives (Phil 4:19), as well as the length of our lives (Ps 139:16).
- God is in absolute control of the entirety of salvation (Rom 9:16, 18).
- God is sovereign over suffering (Job 1:21; 2:10; 12:9).

“For from Him and through Him and to Him are **all things**.”

– Romans 11:36 –

The Ultimate Cause of All Things

“Through the centuries of redemptive history,
everything has come from God.

He has planned and done it all.

He has not merely set boundaries for creaturely action,
but has actually made everything happen.”

– John Frame –

The Ultimate Cause of All Things

“Through the centuries of redemptive history, everything has come from God. He has planned and done it all. He has not merely set boundaries for creaturely action, but has actually made everything happen.”

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But how can God be the cause of actions and events
that are evil and sinful
and yet not be rightly charged
with unrighteousness?

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

- Permission: “Not to hinder what has, or appears to have a tendency to take place.” – Jonathan Edwards
- Mark 10:14 – “Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them.”
- Permit, from Latin *permittere*: *per-*, “through;” + *mit*, “to send, release, let go.” → To allow to pass through.
- “God simply allows these agents to produce what they will. This is true permission, i.e., not efficaciousness but noninterference.” – Arminian Theologian Jack Cottrell

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

- In eternity past, when God was devising His eternal plan, there was no antecedent tendency for anything, no evil agent appealing for permission to be admitted into the divine decree. God is the sole eternal being.

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“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.”

– Gordon Clark –

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

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The distinction between God's so-called permissive will and His decretive will is "desperately artificial when applied to an omniscient and omnipotent being, for if this God 'permits' sin, it cannot be unknowingly and unwillingly, and therefore his 'permission' must be granted knowingly and willingly. Wherein then does this permission differ from decree?"

– D. A. Carson–

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

If we don't intend to communicate what is actually denoted by "permission," yet we do intend to communicate nothing less than sovereign ordination, of what meaningful use is permissive language?

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

B. Scripture Speaks of the Righteous God's Agency in Evil

- Amos 3:6 – “If a calamity occurs in a city has not Yahweh **done** it?”
- Lamentations 3:37–38 – “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has **commanded** it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that **both good and ill** go forth?”
- Lamentations 1:12–15 – “. . . Which the Lord **inflicted** . . . By His hand they are **knit together**. . . The Lord has **given** me into the hands . . . The Lord has **trodden** as in a winepress.”

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

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- Isaiah 45:5-7 – “I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am Yahweh, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and **creating calamity**; I am Yahweh who **does** all these.”

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

B. Scripture Speaks of the Righteous God's Agency in Evil

- Genesis 50:20 – “As for you, you meant evil against me, but **God meant it** for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

B. Scripture Speaks of the Righteous God's Agency in Evil

- Genesis 45:5–8 – Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for **God sent me** before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. **God sent me** before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, **it was not you who sent me here, but God**; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

B. Scripture Speaks of the Righteous God's Agency in Evil

- 1 Samuel 2:25 – “But they would not listen to the voice of their father, **for** Yahweh desired to put them to death.”
- 1 Samuel 16:14 – “Now the Spirit of Yahweh departed from Saul, and **an evil spirit from Yahweh** terrorized him.”
- 2 Samuel 12:11–12 – “Behold, **I will** raise up evil against you from your own household; **I will** even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed you did it secretly, but **I will do this thing** before all Israel, and under the sun.”

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

A. Inconsistent with God's Decree

B. Scripture Speaks of the Righteous God's Agency in Evil

- 1 Samuel 2:25; 1 Samuel 16:14; 2 Samuel 12:11–12
- 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12 – For this reason **God will send** upon them a deluding influence **so that** they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

- A. Inconsistent with God's Decree
- B. Scripture Speaks of the Righteous God's Agency in Evil

“The modesty of those who are thus alarmed at the appearance of absurdity might perhaps be excused, did they not endeavour to vindicate the justice of God from every semblance of stigma by defending an untruth. . . . Recourse is had to the evasion that [evil] is done only by the permission, and not also by the will of God. He himself, however, openly declaring that he **does** this, repudiates the evasion.”

(Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1)

II. Evaluating Divine Permission

- A. Inconsistent with God's Decree
- B. Scripture Speaks of the Righteous God's Agency in Evil

“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.”

(Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 175)

III. The Biblical Answer

Is there a way to understand how it can be that God is not the chargeable cause of sin, even though He ordains that it be?

1. Although God is the ultimate cause of all things, He is never the proximate, or efficient, cause of evil. Scripture regards only the proximate or efficient causes of evil as the chargeable or blameworthy party.
2. God never ordains evil for evil purposes. He ordains evil for good, and Scripture does not assign blame to God for this.

III. The Biblical Answer

A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”

- God **ordains** the evil of the destruction of Israel by Assyria.
- Yet while Assyria meant it for **evil**—to satisfy their 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 they are accountable for their sin. God is the **ultimate cause**, but He ordained the evil for goodness’ sake—He is not the **chargeable cause** of sin.

III. The Biblical Answer

A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”

B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David

- 2 Samuel 24:1 – “Now again **the anger of Yahweh** burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’”
- 1 Chronicles 21:1 – “Then **Satan** stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.”

III. The Biblical Answer

A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”

B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David

1. God is the **ultimate cause** of this act, ultimately decreeing that it should be.
2. Satan is a **proximate cause**, the instrument Yahweh uses to stir up this evil in the heart of David, and is culpable.
3. David is the **efficient cause**, having carried it out according to his own sinful inclination, and thus is culpable.

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
 - 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.”

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
 - 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.**”

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
 1. God is the **ultimate cause** of the crucifixion, predestining all of the events that led to it, guaranteeing that it would occur.
 2. The Jews were a **proximate cause** of the crucifixion, having incited the Romans to crucify Christ.
 3. Herod, Pilate, and the Roman soldiers were the **efficient cause**, because the crucifixion was carried out by Roman military authority.

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
 - 1. God is the ultimate cause of all things, even evil.
 - 2. God is never the efficient cause of evil.
 - 3. God always ordains evil for good.

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur

“[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**. . . .

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur

“. . . 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.”

– Jonathan Edwards

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
- D. Unto Our Highest Happiness

What is the good for which God ordains evil?

Answer: For His Glory.

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
- D. Unto Our Highest Happiness
 - Romans 9:18–19 – “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’”

III. The Biblical Answer

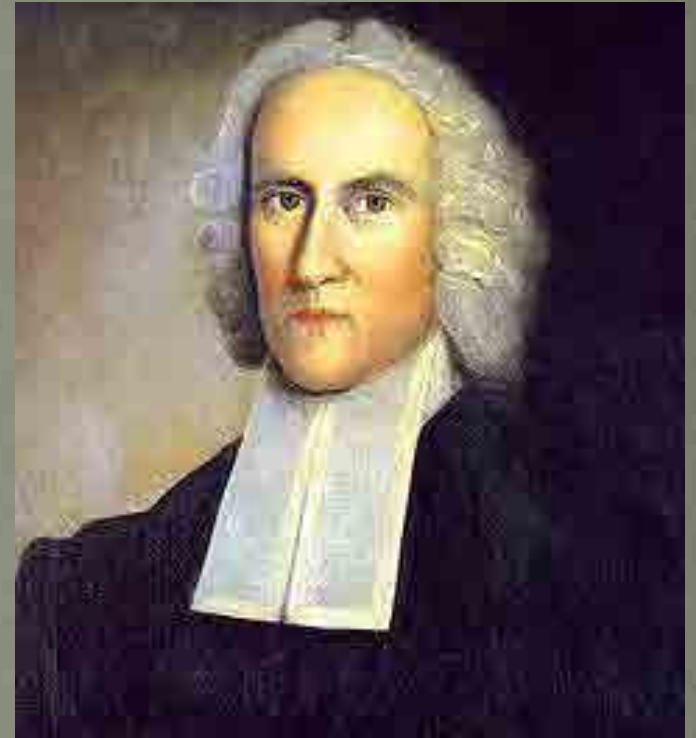
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- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
- D. Unto Our Highest Happiness
 - Romans 9:20–21 – “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will 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?”

III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
- D. Unto Our Highest Happiness
 - Romans 9:22–23 – “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?”

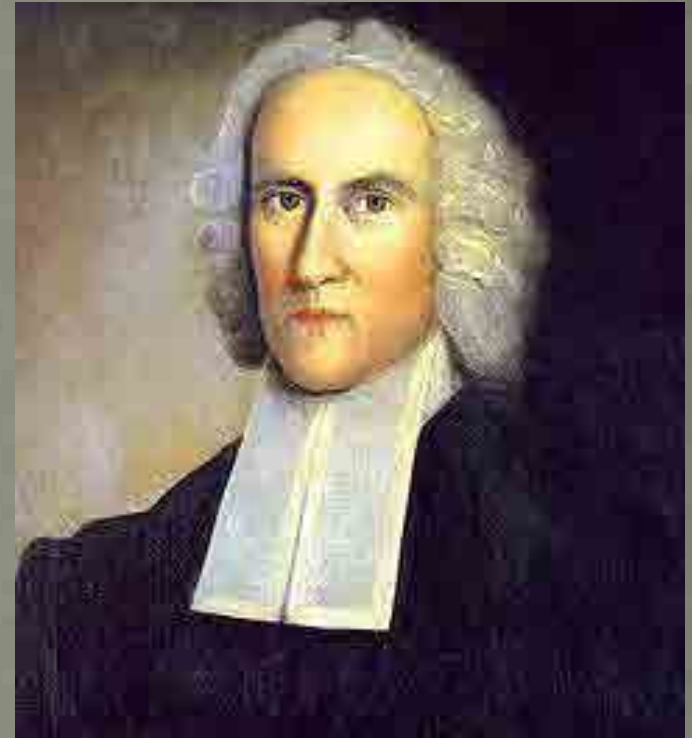
III. The Biblical Answer

“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. . . .



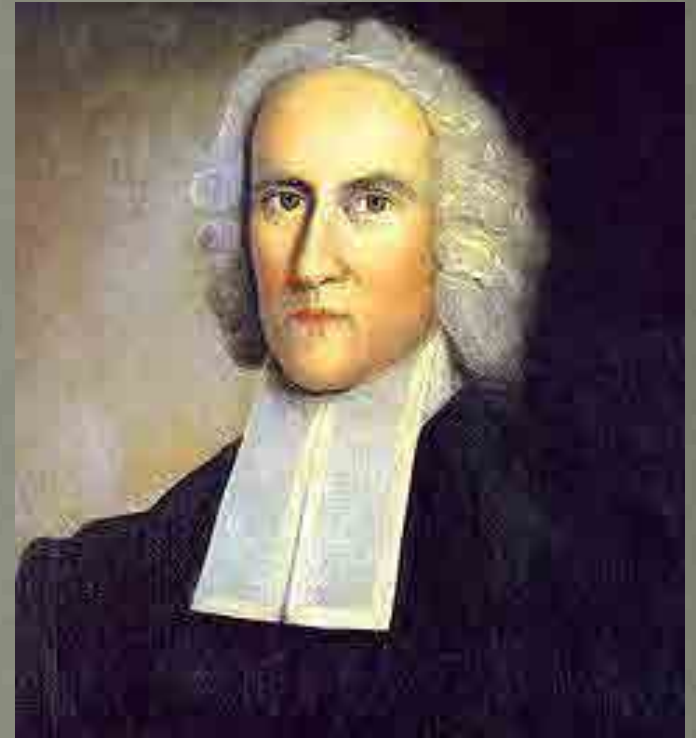
III. The Biblical Answer

“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. . . .



III. The Biblical Answer

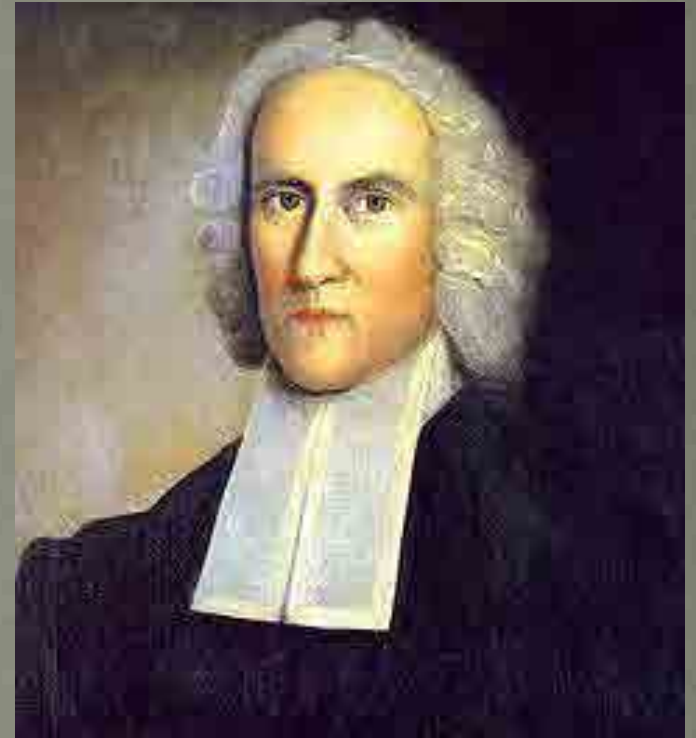
“If it were not right that God should decree . . . and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God’s **holiness** in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of **godliness** before it. There would be no manifestation of God’s **grace** or true **goodness**, if there was 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**. . . .



III. The Biblical Answer

“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.”

(Jonathan Edwards, “The ‘Miscellanies,’ no. 348”)



III. The Biblical Answer

- A. Isaiah 10: “Assyria, the Rod of My Anger”
- B. 2 Samuel 24: The Anger of the Lord Incited David
- C. Acts 2 & 4: Whatever Your Hand Predestined to Occur
- D. Unto Our Highest Happiness

“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.”

– Romans 11:33–36 –

The Foundation of Our Comfort



“Heav’nly peace, divinest comfort
Here by faith in Him to dwell,
For I know, whate’er befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.”

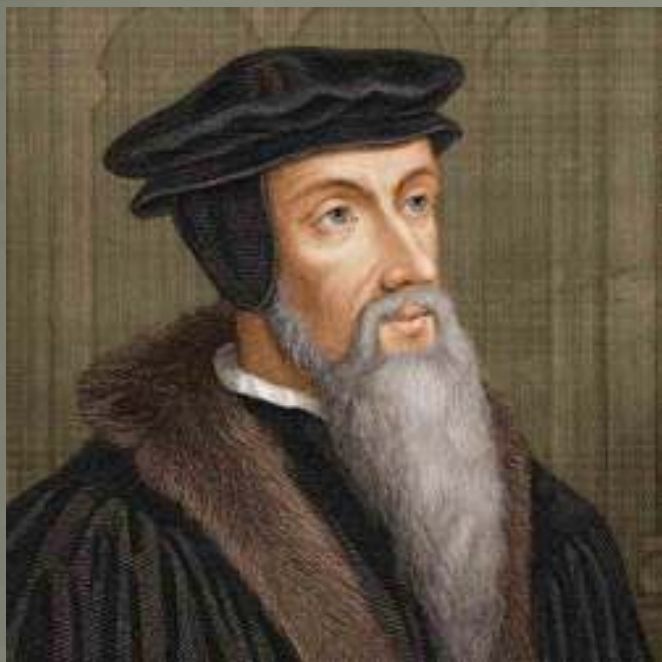
Fanny Crosby
“All the Way My Savior Leads Me”

The Foundation of Our Comfort



“This, I say, is [the believer’s] comfort, that his heavenly Father so embraces all things under his power—so governs them at will by his nod—so regulates them by his wisdom, that nothing takes place save according to his appointment; that received into his favor, and entrusted to the care of his angels, neither fire, nor water, nor sword, can do him harm, except in so far as God their master is pleased to [bring upon him]. . . .

The Foundation of Our Comfort



“ . . . Give heed, and you will at once perceive that ignorance of Providence is the greatest of all miseries, and the knowledge of it the highest happiness.”

(Calvin, Institutes, 1.17.11)

The Foundation of Our Comfort

“The sovereignty of God is the **pillow** upon which the Christian rests his head.”

– Charles Spurgeon –



The Foundation of Our Comfort



“If I had not felt certain that every trial was **ordered** by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings.”

– Adoniram Judson –

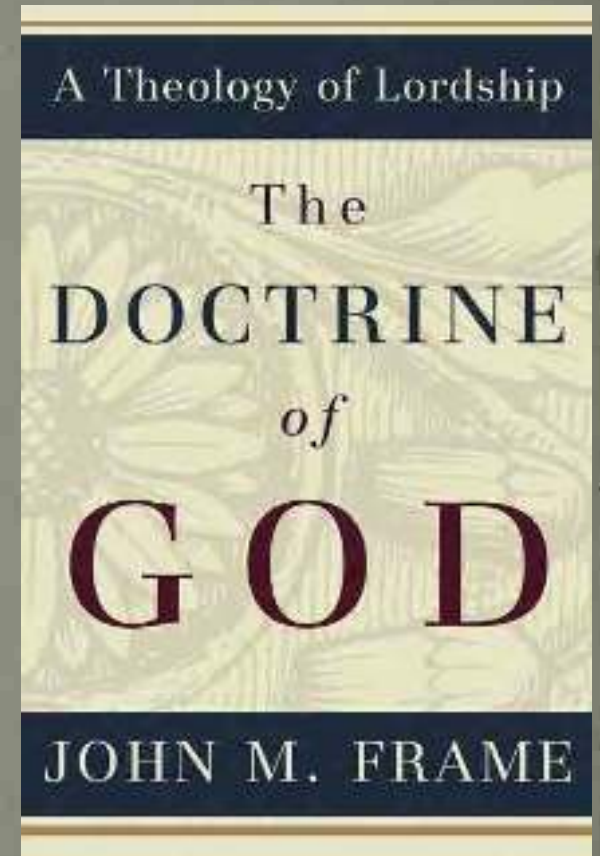
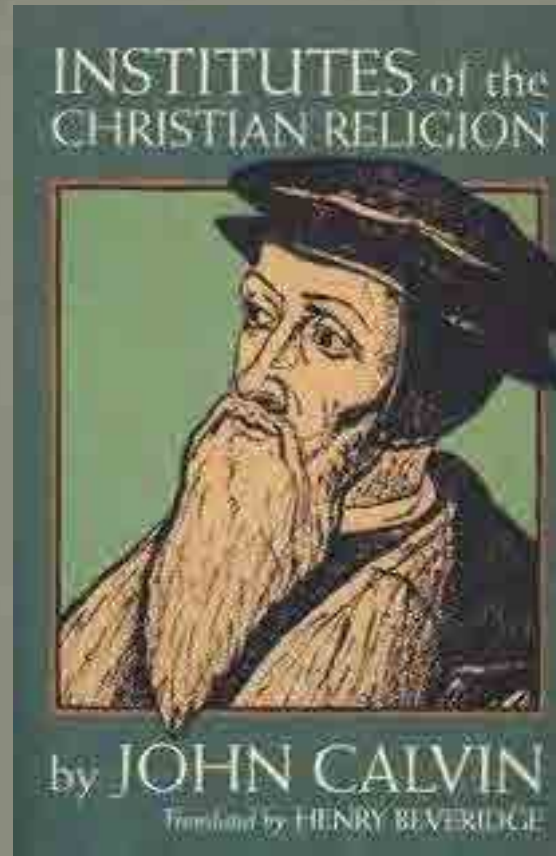
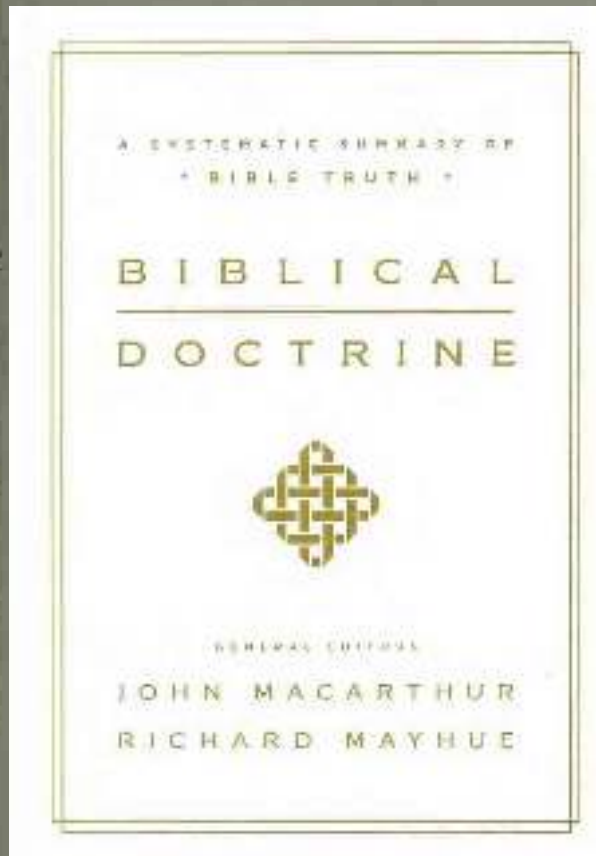
The Foundation of Our Comfort

“My very dear child, What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands upon our mouths! **The Lord has done it.** He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; **and there I am; and love to be.**”

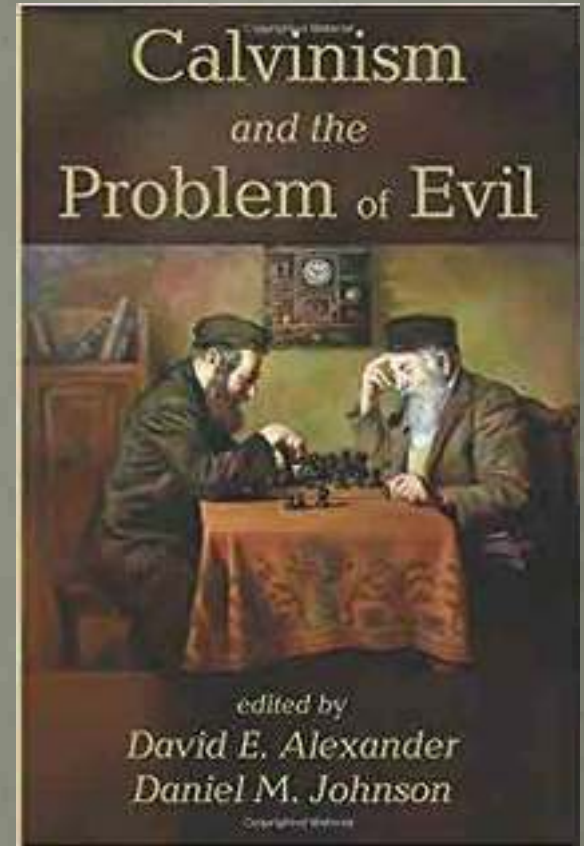
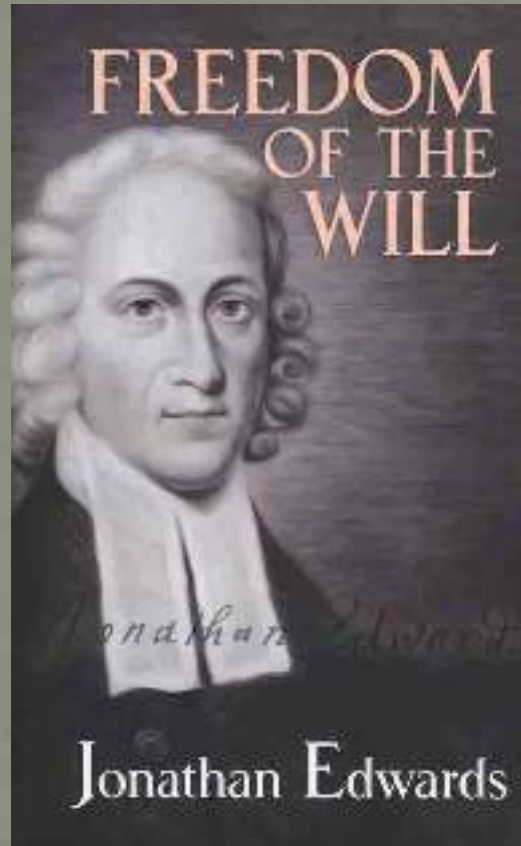
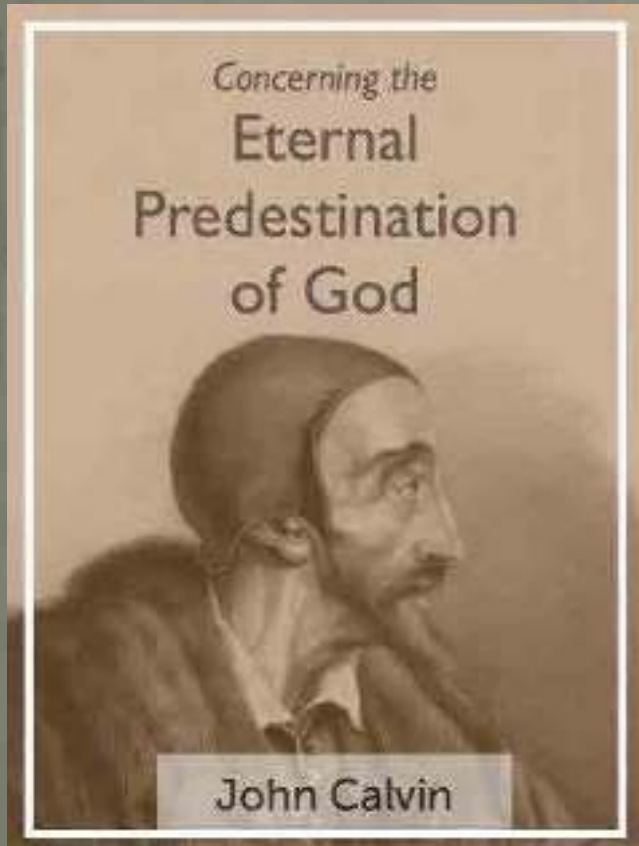


– Sarah Edwards –

For More



For More



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Why the Ultimate Cause Is Not the Chargeable Cause

Mike Riccardi | Sundays in July | July 1, 2018