

How the Existence of Evil Relates to God's Sovereignty: Part 1

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The Problem of Evil

- *The Problem:* (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."
- "How can God be righteous with evil in the world?"
→ Some claim that if God is the cause of sin *in any sense*, He is morally culpable for sin.

Four Aspects of God's Sovereignty in Relation to Evil

I. Consider the nature of God's decree

- **Isaiah 46:10** – "I will accomplish all My good pleasure."
- **Ephesians 1:5** – "... according to the good pleasure of His will."
- **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** – "... predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will."
- **The Westminster Confession** – "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)
→ *In other words, God's decree is eternal, unconditional, immutable, and exhaustive.*

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."
- **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 (i.e. His decree).
→ Since God's decree is *eternal*, it cannot have been influenced by anything external to God since there was nothing but God.

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 Yahweh 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** – "Yahweh... 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."
- **Daniel 4:35** – "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven."
→ Since God's decree is *unconditional*, it cannot be based on anything outside of His own will.

C. God's decree is immutable

- **Psalm 33:10-11** – "Yahweh nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of Yahweh 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."
- **1 Samuel 15:29** – "The Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind."
→ Since God's decree is *unchangeable*, it cannot be frustrated.

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."
- **Psalm 115:3** – "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."
- **Psalm 135:6** – "Whatever Yahweh pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps."
- **Isaiah 46:9-10** – "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure."
- God determines the boundaries of nations (Acts 17:26) and rules over the nations (Ps 22:8).
- God removes and establishes kings (Dan 2:21), and even turns their hearts wherever He wishes (Prov 21:1).
- 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 is the cause of various kinds of weather (Ps 148:8; Job 37:10–13).
- God determines even seemingly random events (Prov 16:33).
- God is sovereign over the details of our personal lives (Phil 4:19), the length of our lives (Ps 139:16), and He even directs our individual steps (Prov 16:9; Jer 10:23).
- God is in absolute control of the entirety of salvation (Rom 8:29–30; 9:16, 18; Eph 2:8–9; Php 2:12–13).
- God is sovereign over suffering (Job 1:21; 2:10; 12:9; Gen 45:5–8; 50:20).
- **Romans 11:36** – “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.”
- ➔ Since God’s decree is *exhaustive*, it includes absolutely everything that occurs in time and space and beyond.

Conclusion: God is the ultimate cause of all things.

- ➔ Question: But how can God be the cause of all actions that are evil and sinful and yet not be rightly charged with unrighteousness?

II. Consider God’s role in relation to evil

A. God does not passively permit evil

- Some people answer this question by appealing to the notion of “*divine permission*.” In other words, though God is ultimately in control in some general sense, He doesn’t ordain evil the same way He ordains good. He merely *allows* evil.
- **Mark 10:14** – “Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”
 - “*To permit*” is “*to not hinder*.”
- The idea of noninterference—of not hindering someone else’s plans or intentions—makes no sense in light of the Bible’s teaching of God’s eternal and unconditional decree, because in eternity past at the moment of God’s decree there was nothing external to Him—He was alone. He is the only eternal being. There was no one else to grant permission to.
- So the concept of divine permission is inconsistent with the biblical teaching of God’s eternal, unconditional, immutable, and exhaustive decree.
- If we don’t intend to communicate what is actually denoted by “permission,” why not simply speak of God’s “ordaining” or “decreeing” or “bringing about” all things?

B. God actively brings about 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 Yahweh inflicted . . . By His hand they are knit together. . . The Lord has given me into the hands . . . The Lord has trodden as in a winepress.”
- **Isaiah 45:5–7** – “I am Yahweh . . . the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating evil; I am Yahweh who does all these.”
- **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.”
- **Exodus 4:21** – “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘. . . I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.’”
- **Joshua 11:20** – “For it was of Yahweh to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as Yahweh had commanded Moses.”
- **2 Samuel 12:11–12** – “Thus says Yahweh ‘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.’”
- **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.”
- **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.”
- **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. . . . 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.”
- ➔ “*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.*” – John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 175.