

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C1119 – June 8, 2011

Readings On The Problem Of Evil - Part 2

From Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Boston, Cornelius Van Til and John Frame

Like two weeks ago we're going to do some more readings on the problem of evil. I had prepared this for last Wed night but due to me breaking my son's arm in an accident on the trampoline I had you listen to a lecture on the problem of evil by Ronald Nash. He covered the "greater good argument" which is one element in the answer to the problem of evil and I thought he added some good points from Rom 8:28 so far as all things working together for the good for believers, not necessarily for unbelievers and that's an important distinction to make.

Tonight I want there to be some discussion. Let me explain what we're going to do. This study was stimulated by some discussion at the end of our last class regarding volition and the freedom of the human will. One of the most popular answers to the problem of evil is that man has free will and that free will is the freedom to choose to the contrary and that inability to choose to the contrary would not be free will and that's why we have evil. We have evil because man has free will. However, in the new heaven and new earth man does not have the ability to choose to the contrary. There's no possible fall from the new heaven and new earth, there's no power to choose to the contrary. Does that mean man doesn't have free will? Or that man is a robot? Usually people can only think in terms of one or the other. Either I have free will or I am a robot. I'm going to show you those are not the only options, those are the only options for paganism, but for the Christian neither of those is a viable option.

The actual issue, when you think this through, is what is freedom? How do I define freedom? And what is responsibility? What is required for man to be

held responsible? Most people assume that to be held responsible I must have free will; I must have the power of contrary choice. They assume that without any biblical argument. It's these kinds of questions that I want to address tonight as they relate to the problem of evil. I think it will be beneficial if we get some things out in the open. It's not to say you won't leave being uncomfortable, but it is to say that we want to see the biblical answers or at the very least the direction the Scriptures are pointing.

One thing I tried to clarify last time was that freedom, true freedom is not freedom to sin but freedom from sin. Sin, biblically speaking, enslaves us, it does not set us free. He who is enslaved to sin is free to sin but not free to righteousness. So Luther said, yeah, you're free, free from righteousness and freed to sin, but you are not freed to righteousness. You can't do anything righteous, you're a slave and that was his argument against the humanist Erasmus in the early 1500's in his book *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther was arguing that the will is in bondage to your nature, so if your nature is sinful then you're will will choose in accordance with your nature. So the greatest thing that can be done for us is to be set free from sin, to be set free from the ability to sin and this only occurs through Jesus Christ. That's when we get our first taste of freedom, when we have been freed from the penalty of sin and freed from the power of sin in our lives. Now, by the grace of God through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we are freed to righteousness. Then, and only then, are we enjoying true freedom, freedom to worship and serve God.

To elaborate some on this there is a book by a Puritan author named Thomas Boston, called the Human Nature in its Fourfold State. It was published a few years ago in 1720. The background of Boston's book is in Augustine. Augustine had a debate with Pelagius in the early 5th century AD over this exact issue and Boston was clarifying what Augustine was saying. And he said that human nature had four states or conditions. The first state was as God originally created it, man's nature was one of unconfirmed holiness or unconfirmed perfection, and his will in relation to his nature had the capability of choosing to obey or to disobey His Creator. Keep in mind there's an Authority behind this condition. Then man sinned and entered into the second state where his nature was sinful and man's will is enslaved to His nature so that he could only choose sin, free to sin, free from doing righteousness. This necessitated that God enable a man to believe, incline his

will. And once God did this man entered the third state, he was given a new nature and his will was set free from the power of the sinful nature. He no longer had to obey his sinful nature; he was free to walk by faith in response to the word of God and the Spirit produce righteousness. And finally when man is resurrected in the fourth state he would be set free from the presence of sin altogether and free only to do righteousness. So the point Augustine and Boston were making was that the will is enslaved to the nature and cannot choose contrary. The will chooses in conformity with the nature. A sinful nature means sinful choices. A righteous nature means righteous choices. This was contra Pelagius that said man could choose contrary to his nature, that a man was able to do righteousness. A view that necessitated that the will was an autonomous entity, disconnected from man's nature as we'll see more clearly later.

Let's turn to Romans 9. And to do so I want to quote from Cornelius Van Til. Van Til was a great apologist of the 20th century, people either love him or hate him; it's a love/ hate relationship. I tend to love him and think he was one of the greatest teachers God gave the church in the 20th century. He was a very clear thinker but he's difficult to read. In his unpublished manuscript *God and Evil* he says, "We have...two main theories of evil and two kinds of theodicy. The one is the product of a system of thought that bows before the authority of supernatural revelation and studies the phenomena of experience in the light of the Scriptures. The other is the product of the philosopher who also views the phenomena of experience but feels that it devolves upon him as a rational creature to give an account of things to himself, and that he is able to do so."¹ That is to say that we can start with divine revelation or with human reason. There are no other starting points. He goes on, "If we speak of our reason as the impartial bar of judgment we have already taken sides. We have chosen ourselves as an absolute and final standard."² "Equally on the other hand, if we choose to accept special revelation we have used our reason." In other words here he's saying that the choice to accept revelation requires the use of reason. How have we used our reason? By declaring "itself bankrupt." But it is exactly here that the

¹ Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til* (Electronic ed.). Labels Army Company: New York.

² Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til* (Electronic ed.). Labels Army Company: New York.

difference between the two roads becomes clear because he who accepts special revelation posits the working of the Holy Spirit upon his essence and consciousness to bring him to the realization of his own impotence.” That is, we came to the realization that our reason was bankrupt only because of the work of the Holy Spirit. So it’s not reason or revelation in the way that most people think, its reason as autonomous and independent vs reason as submissive to divine revelation. As Van Til says, “It is of prime importance to grasp the nature of the antithesis of which we have spoken [i.e. between reason and revelation]. It is not, on the one hand, an abrogation of the faculties of the human mind in favor of supernatural revelation, and on the other an acceptance of these.”³ Does everybody see that? The biblical position is not that we discard reason in favor of revelation; it’s that we submit reason to revelation, that’s the antithesis. Both involve reason, but one views it as master, the other as servant.

So we can start to solve the problem of evil in either of the two places. Of course if we choose reason as master we make ourselves an absolute and final standard and logically the consequences of this are that we have no basis for absolute and final judgments. Our judgments are nothing more than our feelings about the matter, personal opinions, subjective moorings. That is to say, we have removed the basis of evaluating anything in an objective manner. Good and evil, right and wrong, should and should *not* become all one and the same.

However, if we choose reason as servant to revelation then God is the absolute and final standard and the basis for absolute and final judgments is Him. In Van Til’s own words then the proper procedure is this, “God must be His own theodicy. The moment we try to justify Him by any of our own devices we have again given up our *principium speciale* (i.e. the indispensableness of the Scripture). We must rest secure in its final dictum, not rebel against it because we cannot comprehend it.” That is, we must go with the Scriptures whatever they may say, whether or not we fully comprehend it. God is incomprehensible and His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. “God, then, is His own theodicy. He is all sufficient to Himself. He seeks the manifestation of His own glory. He has

³ Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til* (Electronic ed.). Labels Army Company: New York.

seen fit to enhance His glory by the creation of man and the universe. How the creation of the universe could add to the glory of an all-sufficient God we cannot explain. In his inscrutable will he has also planned the reality of sin for the revelation of his glory. To say that God only permitted evil and has not planned it is only a fruitless attempt to justify Him by our own logic, because further thought cannot rest in the idea of a permission of evil by one who could prevent it. God does not need our little fences for his protection; nor do they do us much subjective good, rather harm. We need not be afraid to take the consequences of scriptures statements. We find then that creation, sin, redemption, election, and rejection are all willed by God for the glorification of His name.”⁴ But someone will say, well then man is not responsible. This is the same argument Paul is addressing in Rom 9:13, if this is so how can man be held responsible for his actions. Verse 13, “Just as it is written, “JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.” ¹⁴What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!” Whatever God does is not unjust. God would have remained perfectly just in condemning every single person to eternal hell. It brings us back to the question we started with last time. You’ve heard it said, “Why do bad things happen to good people.” The answer to that is there aren’t any good people.” So the real question is “Why do good things happen to bad people?” And the answer is in verse 15, “For He says to Moses, “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.” ¹⁶So then it *does* not *depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. ¹⁷For 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.” If you say that’s not fair then you are standing in judgment over God, you have chosen human reason as an impartial bar of judgment and made yourself the absolute and final standard. Paul says you don’t have any right to that judgment. Verse 18, “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. ¹⁹You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” ²⁰On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” What’s the argument here? What is Paul getting at? You are the creature - He is the Creator. What do you mean He doesn’t have a basis for finding fault? He’s the Creator and He decides the basis for judging whether there’s fault or not.

⁴ Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til* (Electronic ed.). Labels Army Company: New York.

“The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? ²¹Or 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?” So we discover that we are clay, the lump of humanity is one big ball of clay. What’s that a picture of? Fallen humanity in Adam. We are all fallen people, sinners, rebels. So does not God, the potter, have a right over the clay to make out of this one sinful lump of clay whatever He wants? Of course He does. Verse 22, Paul under divine inspiration brings us to the rightful evaluation of the matter, “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?” And that’s a middle voice, vessels of wrath that prepared themselves for destruction. How did they prepare themselves for destruction? In the fall of Adam. We’ll talk about our responsibility in Adam for the fall a bit later. Most people don’t want to be responsible for that. But the Bible says we are. We prepared ourselves for destruction in Adam. But verse 23, “And *He did so* to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,” notice that, *He* prepared the vessels of mercy, they didn’t prepare themselves, we don’t bring good works to God and fix ourselves all up before God, God does that, God makes us vessels of mercy. And for what end? For His glory. Then verse 24, “*even* us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” So God prepares vessels of mercy from both branches of the human race, Jew and Gentile. God actively prepares some for glory and He leaves the rest for destruction. Does He have the right to do that? Absolutely. He is the Potter, we are the clay, He is the Creator, we are the creature. And the fact that He prepares any of it into vessels of mercy is a function of His mercy. He has no requirement pressing upon Him to do that. He could have left the whole lump and said phooey, the hell with you.

So what is freedom, what is responsibility, what is volition? What we’ve shown is that there are two ways of answering the question, you can start with human reason as master and answer from experience or you can start with human reason as servant and answer from revelation. And this is where I think a lot of Christians go wrong. They assume on the basis of their own experience what freedom must be to preserve human responsibility and their assumption is man has what we call libertarian freedom. So now I’m going to introduce and cover three views of freedom. And the first one I am introducing is called libertarianism. This is the most common view. Simply

put it is the freedom to choose contrary to our nature and all influences. R. K. McGregor Wright defines this view as "the belief that the human will has inherent power to choose with equal ease between alternatives. This is commonly called "the power of contrary choice" or "the liberty of indifference." This belief does not claim that there are no influences that might affect the will, but it does insist that normally the will can overcome these factors and choose in spite of them. Ultimately, the will is free from any necessary causation. In other words, it is autonomous from outside determination." This is the dominant view in Christianity today of the freedom of the will.

"Libertarians emphasize that our choices are not determined in advance by God. On their view, God may be the first cause of the universe in general, but in the spirit of human decisions, we are the first cause of our actions. We have a godlike independence when we make free choices... In libertarianism our decisions must also be independent of ourselves in a certain sense, paradoxical as that may sound. On the libertarian view, our character may influence our decisions, as may our immediate desires. But we always have the freedom to choose contrary to our character and our desires, however strong. This position assumes that there is a part of human nature we might call the will, which is independent of every other aspect of our being, and which can, therefore, make a decision contrary to every motivation.

Libertarians maintain that only if we have this kind of radical freedom can we be held responsible for our actions. Their principle is simple enough: if our decisions are caused by anything or anyone (including our own desires), they are not properly our decisions, and we cannot be held responsible for them. To be responsible, we must be able to do otherwise. And if our actions are caused by anything other than our free will, we are not able to do otherwise, we are therefore not responsible." Both Calvin and Luther rejected this idea of freedom and the Socinians, who were liberal, and later the Arminians vigorously defended libertarianism. Today most evangelical Christian philosophers are libertarian. Theologically it is defended by traditional Arminians, open theism, process thinkers and many others. Few theologians oppose it today, in the main because it is simply assumed to be true. However libertarianism is subject to severe biblical criticism. There are about 18 or 19 criticisms. I'll just mention those easiest to see.

1. Scripture makes clear that our choices are governed by God's eternal plan, even though we are fully responsible for them, and yet the Bible never suggests there is any conflict between these two teachings. Let me give

several examples so that you can see that the Scriptures clearly teach this. For example, Genesis 50:20 rebukes the wicked intent of Joseph's brothers, but mentions the good intentions of God in bringing about Joseph's ministry in Egypt. In Isaiah 10:5 – 15, God uses the Assyrian King as his tool to punish Israel, nevertheless, the Assyrian is wicked, and he must take responsibility for his punishment of Israel. In Proverbs 16:4 – 5, the Lord works out everything for his own ends even the wicked for a day of disaster, but this does not mean that the wicked are not responsible for their wickedness. In 1 Kings 8:58, Solomon prays that God will turn the hearts of Israel toward him, but then he exhorts Israel to turn toward the Lord. Jesus also teaches us both sides of sovereignty and God's involvement in all things, including our choices and yet holds us completely responsible for them. John 1:12 – 13, But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” It is God who gives us new birth, but it is we who are responsible to believe in His name. In Acts 2:23 the crucifixion of Christ is said to be a part of the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, but the responsibility for crucifying Christ fell on the hands of godless men who put him to death. The fact that it was a part of the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God did not remove therefore responsibility for putting him to death. Again in Acts 4:27 it says that Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the people of Israel are responsible for crucifying Jesus, and in the very next verse it says they did what God’s hand and God's purpose predestined to occur. And this does not remove their full responsibility for crucifying Jesus, even though it was written before hand that they would crucify Jesus. I hope that these passages make you realize that the question of what is human freedom/responsibility is not as straightforward as you might assume. God himself is the one who defines human freedom/responsibility, not our experience of having choices or alternatives in life. We could give many other examples, Jesus and Judas. So, reason one that libertarianism is not biblical is the fact that Scripture make clear that our choices are governed by God's eternal plan, even though we are fully responsible for them.

2. Scripture does not explicitly teach anywhere the existence of libertarian freedom. Libertarians don't even try to establish their position by exegesis. Rather they try to deduce it from other biblical concepts, such as the fact that God commands us to do something, must imply that we are able to do it. As

Pelagius taught it, "If we ought, we can." However, the Scriptures certainly teach us to come to Christ, but the Scriptures also teach that no one can come to Christ unless the Father draw him. So just because we ought to do certain things, does not imply that we can or have the ability to do the things we ought to do.

3. Scripture never grounds human responsibility in libertarian freedom. It grounds our responsibility in the fact that God has made us, owns us and has authority over us.

4. Scripture does not teach that libertarian freedom is the best possible good. This is very significant because the free will defense against the problem of evil claims that libertarian freedom, freedom to choose evil, is the greatest world one can imagine. But the Scriptures clearly teach the contrary. Scripture teaches that in the new heavens and new Earth, we will not be free to choose evil. We will be free from evil. Therefore the final state of human existence will not contain libertarian freedom.

5. If libertarian freedom were necessary for moral responsibility, then God would not be morally responsible for his actions, since he does not have the freedom to act against his holy nature. What we mean here is that if libertarian freedom is necessary to be held morally responsible, then God is not morally responsible, because he can only act in terms of his nature. God cannot do anything. The Bible explicitly states that God cannot lie. To claim that God can do anything is to commit the error of voluntarism, namely that God is capricious or arbitrary. And that is not who God is. God has a character and God always acts in terms of his character. So the biblical way to express this is to say that God can do anything compatible with his character. Further, when we go to heaven and the new heaven and new Earth, if libertarian freedom is required to be held morally responsible, then there would have to be the ability to fall into sin. This simply is not an ability that we will have. Yet those who hold to libertarian freedom have speculated that we will be able to fall from the new heaven and new Earth, i.e. Origen.

6. Libertarianism is inconsistent with God's knowledge of future events. If God knew in 1845 that I would be wearing a blue shirt and khaki pants on June 8, 2011, then I am not free to avoid wearing a blue shirt and khaki pants on that date. Now Libertarians claim that God can know future events

without causing them. But if God knew in 1845 the events of June 8, 2011, then on what basis did he know that? I think the only valid answer is that he wrote it into the plan. Does this bother me that he would do that? Not at all. I did not sit in front of my closet and get bothered by the fact that God planned what I'm going to wear tonight. I simply look through the closet and chose the clothes I liked, and that's what I wore. Libertarian freedom would claim that I could have chosen a red shirt with blue jeans.

So there are many reasons and we could cite many more for the anti-biblical nature of libertarianism. But if libertarian freedom is not the biblical picture of freedom what is?

Another view of freedom is called moral freedom. Simply put moral freedom means that we have the freedom to do good. However, Scripture teaches that when Adam fell we no longer had the freedom to do good, and if we did we would be able to please God. That we do not have this kind of freedom is manifest in that Christ died for us. If we could please God it would have been unnecessary for Christ to die for us. So whereas Adam may have been able to do this, as a hypothetical, since he did not then no man, other than Jesus Christ, had moral freedom. However, now that we have come to believe in Christ those who have believed have moral freedom. However it is not a condition of moral responsibility. It is not necessary to have moral freedom to be held responsible for your decisions. Those who are unbelievers are still held morally responsible, just like those of us who are believers.

So we come to the third view of freedom which is called compatibilism. Simply put compatibilism means that we have the freedom to do what we want to do. A man always does, in the final analysis what the man wants to do. It claims that freedom means that even if every act we perform is caused by something outside of ourselves (such as other people forcing us to do something, or natural causes, or God), we are still free, for we can still act according to our nature and desires. There are some difficulties in understanding this concept. Let me give an example from outside of Scripture. I've already given a whole series of verses from inside of Scripture that prove this point of view. Let us say that someone puts a gun to your head and forces you to steal a car. Are you doing what you want to do? In one sense, obviously not. Someone is forcing you to do what you don't want to do. Given the threat that you might be shot, you are faced with two alternatives,

neither of which you want to do. You don't want to steal the car and you don't want to be shot. But, between those two alternatives you choose the one you want to do the most. So, in one sense you do what you want to do, and in another sense you did not do what you want to do. So then, we can say that in one sense we always do what we most want to do, and in another sense we do not, given a narrow set of alternatives in a situation. In other words, we do not always get a large set of alternatives. But whether the set of alternatives is large or small we always do that which we most want to do, given the situation. And whatever we do we are held responsible for it, even though Scripture makes clear that God governs our choices by His plan. We showed, for example, that God ordained Assyria to act wickedly toward Israel, yet Assyria was held responsible for her wickedness. That God's predetermined plan was that Jesus Christ would be crucified, but that Pontius Pilate and Herod and the Gentiles and Israel were fully responsible for crucifying Him. They were doing what they wanted to do, they did not feel forced or compelled but felt as if they were acting freely. The same is true with every person that believes and rejects Christ, it is written before what we would do yet we are held responsible for what we do, whether believe or reject and we all do what we want to do, nobody twisted your arm to believe in Christ.

Clearly freedom in the Scriptures must be defined in a non-libertarian and non-moral freedom sense if it is to make sense of what the Bible teaches. Neither non-libertarian nor non-moral freedom are required for moral responsibility. What is required for responsibility is this: an outside Supreme Authority. All responsibility is built on a prior authority. He is the Creator and we are His creatures. The Scriptures teach that God is sovereign and man is fully responsible for his actions. What are we responsible to do? We are responsible to do everything to the glory of God. "This conclusion is highly distasteful to many, especially to those attracted to libertarianism. They sense that this view dishonors man and reduces human significance. They think that a compatible view of freedom is saying that human beings are robots, treated as mechanical things rather than as persons. Even worse, they claim that view portrays God as judging and punishing man for things that He Himself is actually responsible for. However, we cannot distort the Bible's teaching in order to make it more palatable to people today. Is God in full control of the universe, including human beings that he made in his own image? Yes. Is man completely responsible as a creature made in God's image? Yes. Do you do what you want to do? Yes, given a set of alternatives,

whether they be narrow or broad, you always choose that which you most want to do. In some situations you may not want to do either one. But in the final analysis you will choose to do the one that you would most want to given that you must do one of them. Did you want to believe in Christ? Yes. Otherwise you would not have believed in Christ. Why did you want to believe in Christ? Because God the Father drew you to Himself through the convicting ministry of God the Holy Spirit. Did you come to Him willingly? Yes, you did. No one can twist anyone's arm to genuinely want to come to Him. Would you have come to Him apart from his drawing you through the convicting ministry? No, you would not. He must do this or else you will remain a vessel of his wrath. Had He not, you never would have become a vessel of His mercy. Do you get the glory for coming to Him willingly and being made a vessel of His mercy? No, you do not. Only on a compatibilist view of freedom does salvation and all of the Bible and indeed all of life make sense.

One final note on the freedom may be mentioned since it particularly applies to those of us in the West who because of our individualistic culture tend to think of responsibility in terms of the individual. We might remember that the Bible emphasizes that we do not only think and acts as individuals but also as collective groups. What one does affects another. I have in view here the sin of Adam. By his one conscious act we who were in Adam also sinned, albeit not in the same sense. Yet even so, we stand condemned if God does not shed upon us his saving grace. We are responsible for what we are in Adam even though we did not individually choose to eat of the tree. We are nevertheless held responsible for that choice. This point alone greatly diminishes the view that we are responsible only for what we freely choose.

Having said all of this, I do not think for one moment that I have come to a full and completely satisfying answer to these difficult questions. All I have sought to do is turn to the Bible as the special revelation of God and using my reason in submission to it and give an answer which seeks to do deference to what God himself says about human freedom and not what human reason as autonomous might give. In the final analysis the interests of Scripture is the glory of God and it is our responsibility to glorify him, a responsibility that we will be held accountable for.

As Cornelius Van Til stated years ago, "Our minds are baffled and we can rest only in the concept of an all-wise God with a logic higher than ours...it is too marvelous for our ears...go as far as we may, for such is the requisite of our nature, but leave the rest to a logic that is higher than ours."⁵ Ultimately what he's saying here is God is incomprehensible, His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts, the secret things belong to our God but the things revealed to us and our children.

⁵Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til* (Electronic ed.). Labels Army Company: New York.

[Back To The Top](#)

Copyright (c) Fredericksburg Bible Church 2011

⁵ Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til* (Electronic ed.). Labels Army Company: New York.