

GOD'S
SOVEREIGNTY

OVER
GOOD
AND
EVIL

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God's Sovereignty over Good and Evil

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The One in Charge

We see a lot of evil in the world today and may wonder why God allows the suffering that evil brings, but Scripture is clear on God's role and purpose and His sovereignty over both good and evil.

First, we must understand that we are living in a fallen world, a world that is populated by sinful people, and that includes each of us, "for all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23) and "there is none righteous" (Rom. 3:10). However, in His great love for us, God provided salvation through the death of His Son so we could be cleansed from the defilement of sin, from the penalty of sin, and be brought into a right relationship with Him. John 3:16 expresses this perfectly: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

The world is largely populated by people under the control of their sin and under the leadership of the devil. But that does not mean things are out of control. It's important to know that God is sovereign over all things and that nothing happens outside of His will. That includes the evil that goes on in the world. Some of it is moral; and some of it is non-moral, like sickness and disease.

Two Truths

As we consider the sovereignty of God we will see two important truths. The first is that God is totally sovereign and the second is that man is fully responsible.

God is totally sovereign. Not only is He sovereignly in control, but

He determines what will happen in every detail of every life.

Man is fully responsible. Every individual is responsible for his own decisions. He is accountable to God and will be judged by Him.

Tension exists between God's total sovereignty and man's full responsibility. If total sovereignty means that nothing happens that is not under God's sovereign control, how can man be held responsible? On the other hand, if man is responsible in making his own decisions, how can God be in control of what a person will decide to do?

The Scripture addresses this tension, this seeming contradiction, but may not answer every question we have.

Consider a recent situation where an evil man with a large truck drove through a crowd of people killing many, including several children. How does that fit within the sovereign plan of God? We are hesitant to say, "God determined that would happen." And yet, that's what Scripture says. Even the evil that happens in the world occurs under the direction of God, although God is not responsible for the evil that takes place. Evil is controlled by God's sovereign purposes.

God's Sovereignty over Evil

God's Word provides us with examples of this. The lives of Joseph, Moses, Hannah, and Job reveal how great difficulty or evil were used by God to achieve His desired purposes.

Joseph

First, consider Joseph, a godly man who experienced extremely difficult circumstances, yet was used mightily by God.

Joseph was raised in a large family with brothers who were jealous of him and sold him into slavery. He was taken to Egypt where he was falsely accused, spent years in prison, and was forgotten and neglected. In the end, God established him as the ruler in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Years later, he saw his brothers when they came to buy grain.

Joseph said to his brothers, "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5). Joseph's life experiences illustrate the balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

The brothers were responsible for their actions. They committed a sinful act against their brother and then lied to their father by saying Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. They brought Joseph's outer cloak, covered with blood, that they had dipped in animal blood to deceive their father. They went on with their lives, knowing that their brother would live in miserable circumstances as a slave.

Yet, behind their sinful act was the sovereign hand of God. God didn't cause these brothers to do what they didn't want to do. He used their sinful desires and actions to accomplish His purposes. In their sin, they determined to sell their brother as a slave. Yet, even in the exercising of their sinful action, they were carrying out the purpose of God. Don't get confused, God is not responsible for their sinful action, but their sinful action could not frustrate God's plan for Joseph.

Joseph talked to his brothers again after their father died. The brothers thought Joseph would mete out vengeance for what they did to him. Joseph said, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?" (Gen. 50:19). Joseph knew he was where God purposed him to be and reminded them, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

Joseph was a godly man and recognized God's sovereignty. That's why he was not bitter or resentful. He understood that he could not resent God for accomplishing His purposes. That didn't excuse the brothers' sin. God took the sinful actions of men (Joseph's brothers) and used them to accomplish His good purposes. Each man is fully responsible for the sin in his life. He exercises his will to make a decision, and if his decision is sinful he is responsible for that choice. But, it's the very decision God ordained to accomplish His purpose.

Moses

Next, consider how God used Moses to carry out His sovereign plans.

Moses was raised in Pharaoh's house, but left Egypt to escape Pharaoh's wrath and plan to kill him. He lived in the wilderness 40 years. God called Moses to bring the Hebrew nation out of slavery. God told Moses to go back to Egypt, and tell Pharaoh to let God's people go

into the wilderness and worship God. “Then Moses said to the Lord, ‘Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue’” (Ex. 4:10). We gather that Moses thought he had to fill the Lord in on what He didn’t know or had forgotten.

Note how God answers Moses. “The Lord said to him, ‘Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?’” (Ex. 4:11). God reminded Moses that He is sovereign over his physical condition. The Almighty God created Moses’ tongue and his ability to speak. He made Moses slow of speech. God didn’t argue and say, “Moses when you were young, you were a really good speaker. You just haven’t been using that ability, but I can revive it.” Instead, God reminded him, “I made you that way.”

Worldly wisdom tells us that physical abilities or the lack of them is in the genes, or one is just born with a defect. Fanny Crosby, the blind lyricist and hymn writer who penned many of our beloved hymns, cherished God’s sovereignty. As a child, Fanny’s life was changed when a doctor made a mistake and put something on her eyes that blinded her. We are prone to think that was a terrible accident. However, if you read about her life and testimony, she considered her blindness a gift she received from God’s sovereign hand. Because of this “gift,” she was able to write the lines for over 8,000 hymns during her lifetime.

Consider who makes the ear to hear or not hear? Who makes the eye to see or not see? Who makes our abilities, like Moses’ slowness of speech? God says, “I did.” This is a great reminder that our physical condition is not an accident. We do not need to think about what could have happened if the Lord had done this or that differently. Even our physical afflictions have been sovereignly determined and brought about for God’s purposes. Maybe we were born with it, or maybe it came afterward, but it was not an accident.

Hannah (Samuel’s Mother)

Let’s next consider Hannah, a godly woman who became the mother of Samuel, one of God’s chosen prophets.

Hannah was barren for “the Lord had closed her womb” (1 Sam.

1:5). However, God would open her womb as He had a special purpose for the child (Samuel) that would be born. We recognize the hand of God even in these situations. Today we would say there was a medical problem that closed Hannah's womb. Remember, there wouldn't have been a closed womb if God hadn't determined it would be closed.

Our personal circumstances may not be what we would have chosen for ourselves, but as God's children we have confidence in knowing that what He chooses for us is for our good. We can rest secure in that. Hannah's womb was closed, she prayed, and God opened her womb because that was part of His plan.

Hannah prayed, "There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God" (1 Sam. 2:2). Ultimately all things are in God's hands. That doesn't mean we don't exercise our will and make certain decisions. As God's children, we pray about our decisions and then we act. But we also accept that some things we may not be able to change.

Hannah's prayer continued, "The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts" (1 Sam. 2:6, 7). Although God makes the poor and the rich, that doesn't mean we can be lazy and decide that if He wants us to be rich, we'll win the lottery.

You may have worked hard all your life and not have much money, but the heavenly Father has provided what He intended for you. You may have been faithful in working hard while others have not worked as hard and have more money. Be glad for them. God's purposes for you are best for you, and God's purposes for them are best for them. Knowing this takes the pressure off. God is in control. You are to do everything to be pleasing to Him. In His sovereignty, He determines what He will do for you, with you, and in you.

Job

In the Book of Job, we see evil inflicted on a righteous, godly man, and all his suffering was in the plan of God. "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them" (Job 1:6). Satan came accusing, and God asked

him, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil" (Job 1:8). What a commendation from God!

Satan replied, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). Satan's accusation was clear: "The only reason Job is faithful to you is because you treat him so well. You've made him rich, you've given him health, you've given him a great family, all his businesses are successful, and he is admired and honored in the community. If all that weren't true, he wouldn't honor You." Keep in mind that this conversation between God and Satan took place in heaven, not on earth. Neither Job nor his friends heard any of it.

The Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him" (Job 1:12). Satan could do whatever he wanted to Job, but he could not hurt his body. The attacks began, and we see Satan's power. He caused people to raid and kill and caused lightning and wind to kill also.

Job's flocks and herds, which were the source of his wealth, were attacked by foreigners. All the slaves were killed, and the animals were taken. Other animals and slaves were destroyed by lightning from heaven and marauders took the last of his animals and killed the servants.

The worst of the attacks came last. Job had ten children, seven sons and three daughters. The children were enjoying a banquet together when a strong wind blew the house down on them. All ten children were killed.

Yet, after Job had heard all this devastating news, he fell to the ground and worshiped God. "He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord' " (Job 1:21).

Like Job, we also must fix our minds on the truth God has given us concerning His complete sovereignty so that when trials come, we will hold onto the truth. That's what Job did. Despite all the evil inflicted on him, his faith in God did not waver. Job knew that God was still sovereign and claimed, "The God who gave it all to me decided to take it all away. How can I do anything but give Him praise?"

Some may say, “I don’t want to serve a god like that.” Others would argue that God didn’t do it, Satan did it. However, Satan only did it because God said, “Go ahead and do it.” Job recognized that. He didn’t say, “The Lord wouldn’t do this to me, this must have come from Satan.” Instead, he said, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.”

A while later, Satan again came before God. God said, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil. And he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause” (Job 2:3). Note that God took responsibility for everything that happened to Job.

Satan told God that what truly matters to a person is his own life, his health or personal well-being. Since God protected Job’s life, Job was still healthy. “Of course Job would still honor God,” Satan said.

“So the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life’ ” (Job 2:6).

Satan is able to make a man miserable and bring unimaginable pain. Job was covered with boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. He had no relief from his continuous pain. He couldn’t lie down; every part of his body was covered with painful boils. He couldn’t stand; boils were on the soles of his feet. We can’t imagine the misery and pain that led to Job scraping his flesh with broken pieces of pottery.

Job’s friends told him that the Lord did all this to him. They were right! Where they went wrong was in saying that God caused all of Job’s loss and misery because of sin in his life (see Job 4-23).

We may slip into that thinking today when we assume, “If I do everything God wants me to do, then He won’t let trouble come into my life.” Then, when adversity comes, we may say, “I tried to be faithful. I don’t know what has gone wrong.” Perhaps nothing has gone wrong. Perhaps it’s the hand of God at work.

Job agreed with his friends to a point. He affirmed that God caused all that happened to him, but he did not agree that it was because of sin in his life. Mocking his friends, Job said, “Truly then you are the people, and with you wisdom will die!” (Job 12:2). Job criticized them for their

attitude of superiority, “Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this, in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind?” (Job 12:9, 10).

Job disagreed with his three friends’ assumption that God caused all this because of sin in his life. Job knew of no sin in his life, and he did not believe that God caused these things because of sin in his life.

Job described his desperate situation, “God hands me over to ruffians and tosses me into the hands of the wicked” (Job 16:11). Even when the wicked were mistreating him, Job acknowledged they couldn’t do it unless God had determined it would be done. “I was at ease, but He shattered me, and He has grasped me by the neck and shaken me to pieces; He has also set me up as His target” (Job 16:12). Job claimed that God was using him for target practice. “His arrows surround me. Without mercy He splits my kidneys open” (Job 16:13). Job clearly knew that God did all of this.

Yet, Job’s faith remained firm. “As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth” (Job 19:25). At the point of his greatest despair, Job’s faith in God was strong. He knew that God brought the evil, but he also knew that God was not cruel or unloving.

From Job we learn that sometimes God uses painful, difficult situations to accomplish His will, and that these situations are for our good. God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him. Like Joseph said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” Job was the most righteous man on the face of the earth, but he did not know why these things happened to him. Still, Job trusted God.

In his sufferings, Job wanted answers from God. With the Book of Job, we have the advantage of knowing what was going on behind the scenes (in heaven), while Job did not. We know God was proving that Job would honor Him, despite whatever evil came into his life. But God never gave Job a reason or an explanation for all that happened to him and his family.

Job concluded that God did not owe him an explanation. “Then Job answered the Lord and said, ‘I know that you can do all things, and that

no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, now, I will speak, I will ask You, and You instruct me’” (Job 42:1-4). Job grew in his understanding of God and God’s sovereignty.

As we study Job, we learn that we don’t have to know why God causes certain things in our lives. Our faith is stretched when we can’t see any reason, but we can honestly say, “Lord, I can’t see any purpose in this, but I walk by faith, not by sight, and I trust You. I believe You love me, and know this would not be happening to me if it were not for Your love for me.”

Protecting God’s Reputation

God is clear about Himself and said, “I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these” (Isaiah 45:6, 7). We think we are protecting the Lord’s reputation when we claim, “It wasn’t the Lord’s will for that to happen,” or “The Lord wouldn’t have wanted that to happen.” Those statements are simply not true. We must be certain to base our theology on the Bible, not from our emotions or our own personal sense of right and wrong.

God creates the calamity. It was God’s will for the house to fall upon Job’s ten children. The sovereign God did that, but He does not delight in making people suffer. As His children, we don’t have to fear Him, but we do have to accept what He does with the people and the world He has created. He does what is best for His children, even though we may not understand how that is possible as we live through sometimes extremely difficult and painful situations.

Where Am I Safe?

God asked a rhetorical question, “If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?” (Amos 3:6). Think about all the natural disasters and tragedies that have happened in cities. Where am I safe? I’m safe wherever the Lord puts me. That doesn’t mean I don’t use good sense. It doesn’t mean I don’t make wise decisions and plan carefully. It doesn’t mean I should take the locks off my doors and leave the front door open.

I must exercise my mind and the wisdom God gave me. I can't lie down in the middle of the street and say, "God is sovereign. If He wants me run over I will get run over." If I use my mind to do a foolish thing, I may be demonstrating my own foolishness to get me run over.

Our confidence is in the Lord. He controls even the terrorist attacks. God does not cause people to do what they don't want to do, but He determines what will happen in every detail. We must not get swept along with the world and wonder what this world is coming to. The world has no clue, but we know the sovereign God is in control.

God's love is demonstrated in His grace in offering salvation. His wrath is demonstrated in much of the wickedness going on in the world. That doesn't mean He will keep me from all suffering, but it means there is no suffering, difficulty, trial, or evil that I experience that the hand of God has not appointed for me. And the hand of God only appoints what is spiritually beneficial for me as His child in view of His purpose for me.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:28, 29).

Just as God worked in the lives of Joseph, Moses, Hannah, and Job to carry out His sovereign plan at that time, so He is still working today. The people and events that God used in Old Testament times are not the same as He uses today, but we can be fully assured that His hand is guiding all that goes on in the world now, the good and the evil. The world is not out of control. God is totally and sovereignly in control.

We can trust Him with our todays and our tomorrows. This is the hope that God has given us and that we bring to the world.