

# Sermon 10, Why Do Bad Things Happen to God Almighty?, Acts 2:23

**Proposition:** God's sovereign plan handed over Jesus to wicked men to kill Him.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we know that Acts has been written in order to give us certainty about the coming of the Kingdom. In this time of the King's absence in Heaven, how do we know that He continues to reign? There are many facets to this question, and Acts addresses pretty much all of them. But perhaps the biggest facet of the question is the problem of evil. We know that evil flourishes and prospers in this era. If Jesus reigns, why does evil seem to be practically omnipresent? Indeed, if Jesus is risen, why is there still wickedness in low places? Peter does not shunt this question to one side. He addressed it head-on in his Pentecost sermon. At the fulfillment of firstfruits, he made a one-verse comment on evil, putting responsibility for it squarely on the shoulders of those wicked men who bring it about by simultaneously indicating that God's plan and knowledge bound, restrain, and yes, even direct evil for God's holy and good purposes. In biblical language, God's sovereign plan handed Jesus over to wicked men to kill Him. In philosophical language, God rules and ordains evil but never does evil. Let's look, then, more closely at the Bible's teaching on the problem of evil and its relation to the Kingdom or sovereignty of God.

### I. Peter's Three Points

Last week, we looked briefly at the Trinitarian implications of this verse. It clearly shows that the Father was involved in the crucifixion. And I want to drill a little more deeply into what Peter actually says about that here.

#### A. Jesus Was Handed Over by God's Predetermined Plan and Knowledge, v. 23a

The verse says just what your translation implies that it says: God's bounded, definite plan and God's foreknowledge were the agents by which Jesus was handed over. The grammar here is passive. Jesus is the subject. "This one," Peter says, clearly referring to Jesus of Nazareth from the previous verse. RSV and ESV add "Jesus" here in v. 23 to make the referent crystal-clear.

We're talking about the most important person in history, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. In other words, Peter is confronting the problem of evil in its most acute form. Why do bad things happen, not merely to good people, but to the best person the world has ever seen and ever could see? Why do bad things happen to God Almighty? That's the question that Peter confronts.

The answer he gives, then, is that bad things happen to God Almighty because He planned those events in detail. Peter uses this phrase "determinate counsel" (KJV), also rendered "definite plan" (ESV) and "deliberate plan" (NIV). The Greek word is the standard one for plans or considered decisions, and affixed to it is the adjective "horizoned," from which we get the English word "predestination." To "encircle" or "horizon" something is to fix it within definite boundaries and limits. The horizon marks off the circle of Earth's surface which is visible to us. You can see for a certain radius around yourself wherever you happen to be standing; that radius is called the horizon. It's a Greek word in origin, and it refers to a boundary, in this case, the boundary of sight. Well, God's plan was not a fuzzy plan, with steps like "See what happens" or "wait for humanity's reaction to my Son." No. God's plan had some clear boundaries and limits. It was not accidental; it was deliberate. It was not fuzzy; it was definite, or defined. That's the plan which, according to the Apostle Peter, handed over Jesus.

The definite plan of God is paralleled with the foreknowledge of God. Peter says "God's definite plan and foreknowledge." What does this mean? Obviously foreknowledge is simply information prior to the event. To have foreknowledge is to be aware of what's going to happen before it happens. But if God's foreknowledge is a purely passive awareness, it would make no sense to say that God's foreknowledge handed Jesus over. If I am passively aware that the New York Stock Exchange will open at 9:30 AM Eastern time tomorrow, I can hardly say that the opening bell will be rung by my foreknowledge. I have knowledge that such an event is happening, but there is no causal relationship of any kind between my knowledge and the event. Instead, what "causes" my knowledge is the settled habits of those who run the stock exchange. They have announced that they will be open from 9:30 to 4 on business days.

But Peter's statement about God's foreknowledge by which Jesus was delivered indicates that God's foreknowledge is simply another way of referring to His plan. God foreknows what's going to happen because it is all part of His plan. I know the plans of the NYSE operators, and so my knowledge is based on their plans. But God's knowledge is not based on the plans of Roman soldiers, chief priests, stock exchange operators, or anyone else. His knowledge is based on His own plans, their definiteness and solidity.

Remember how in 2 Peter we saw Peter using so many phrases in which he used two words to refer to the same reality — "life and godliness," "glory and virtue," and on and on through the epistle? Well, this is just a tiny bit of that same Petrine style here in Acts 2. Notice that the second half of this verse contains another one of these pairs: "crucify and kill." Is there some kind of major difference between crucifying and killing, like there is a major difference between hating and lifting, for example? Not at all. We can conclude on very solid grounds that, just as Peter will go on to use "crucify and kill" to mean one action, that of killing Christ, so he here uses "definite plan and foreknowledge" to mean one piece of information in the divine

mind, viz., knowledge that God definitely planned that Jesus would be betrayed and killed in exactly the way in which the events took place. That definite plan is perfectly certain; there is absolutely no chance of its failing to come to pass. And therefore, simply by knowing His plan, God can also know the entire course of world history.

God's knowledge of what would happen was a knowledge of what He Himself planned to do, and also a knowledge of what everyone else planned to do. This plan was set by God, ordered by God, and actuated by God.

In other words, if you want a demonstration that Jesus really reigns, that the Kingdom really is secure, Peter actually dares to point to the worst evil in human history — the cross. Even the cross is evidence for God's sovereign rule, for the fulfillment of His plan! The announcement is breathtaking, so breathtaking that a good many Christians openly doubt it, speak against it, say it ain't so. Yet Peter is perfectly clear, as are Paul, Isaiah, Moses, and Jesus Himself. God does not do evil. But He does plan it, define it, and set boundaries to it. He knows evil will happen because He plans on it happening.

#### **B. The Judeans Killed Him by Lawless Men, v. 23b**

But, that said — and this is incredibly important — God does not do evil. Peter credits the death of Jesus not to the plan of God, but to his audience acting by the hand of lawless men. Yes, God's plan handed Jesus over. But it was the Judeans who took Him. God handed Him to you, and you took Him! Peter puts “handed over” and “received” right next to each other in his Greek sentence, emphasizing the seamless transition of Jesus from God's power to theirs. Judas, so prominent in ch. 1, has disappeared here (thus giving the lie to the idiots who think that if a biblical writer doesn't mention something then he doesn't know about it). Peter knows about Judas, but he wants to emphasize how the Judeans collectively handed Jesus over to the Romans, here described as “lawless men.” The Romans prided themselves on law and order, but they demonstrated their deeper lawlessness when they took Christ, crucified and killed Him.

In other words, Peter does not see competition between God and man. He does not say that God's agency stops where human agency begins, and vice versa. In the last chapter he talked about Judas as the one who betrayed Jesus; here he says that it was all part of God's plan. Clearly, brothers and sisters, if the betrayal was part of God's plan the crucifixion was too! Yet Peter does not suggest that God was powerless once the Judeans got involved and started encouraging these lawless men to crucify the Son of God. Rather, God's power continued to operate. The solution to the problem of evil is that God and man are both at work on two different levels of causality. God always does what is right, but human beings often perform evil actions. The presence of evil in history, in other words, is no sign that God does not reign; rather, it is a sign that His reign is large enough even to encompass evil actions! We'll talk more about that in a minute. But I want you to notice where Peter goes with this. God let the wicked kill Jesus. He even planned on it. But He did not let evil have the last word!

#### **C. God Raised Him Up, v. 24a**

Rather, God raised Jesus up. Evil did its worst, and killed Him. But evil will not and cannot triumph permanently, for Jesus rose from the dead. The evil they perpetrated was undone.

This may in fact be the most crucial point of all in Peter's apologetic. The problem of evil is mitigated after a fashion when we understand that God allows and ordains evil. When you're suffering some evil event, don't freak out. God's got it under control! The alternative is to say that He doesn't have it under control, to say that God is helpless here and that evil is omnipotent within its sphere. The resurrection says otherwise. The resurrection says that evil has been defeated on its own turf. Jesus has risen from the dead; the power of God has broken into the closed system of birth, death, and new individual lives that has dominated all of fallen human and natural history. It was impossible for death to hold Him! Burial was not the end of His story. Again, this is the most important part of our defense against the problem of evil. Evil can't last! Evil must fail. Evil must be overcome and undone. God handed Him over, but not permanently. God freed Him from death.

## **II. The Implications**

So, theologically speaking, what can we say about Peter's statement that juxtaposes God's plan with the actions of lawless men?

### **A. Evil is part of God's plan and subject to His all-wise bounds and limits**

The first thing to emphasize is that evil is NOT outside of God's plan or control. There is not some dualistic division of the world whereby one part is evil and one good, and the two are run by different masters or opposing principles.

No. This world is run by God, and His plan includes things like the suffering of Israel in Egypt, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the capture and burning of Jerusalem, and even the first fall of angels and men and the crucifixion of Christ. The Bible says so. God planned on evil and contained it within His boundaries and limits. He ordained it. That includes the evils of our recent past, like slavery, and of our present, like abortion. God ordained those things, and they are evil.

### **B. Evil is carried out not by God but by wicked men**

But He did not do those evils, and does not do evil now. We do evil. Wicked men and angels sin. They crucified Christ. They hurt each other.

Any adversarial account of divine and human agency, which insists that where God's agency stops man's begins, and vice-versa, is false. Divine and human agency run along together. But though God gave you the power of choice and plans on and sustains you in your evil choices, He does not Himself choose evil. You did it, not God. This is the foundation of freedom in human governments, the real source of the "right to be wrong." The right to be wrong does actually exist, in the sense that it is something God underwrites for His fallen creatures. God kept Adam and Eve breathing and their hearts and limbs going while they ate the fruit. He kept in existence and good health the men who were nailing His Son to the cross. He keeps you and me alive and sustains us while we do, say, and think evil things. He gives us the freedom to sin. But He does not sin, any more than I sin by providing a car and a credit card to my son who then goes out and uses them for evil. You say, "Yes, but at some point your action becomes willful negligence." So it does. And you know what, folks? Attempts to get God off the hook for evil can only end by making evil as powerful, or more powerful, than God. All we can say is that

it looks like negligence to us and that an ethical deity would have terminated the experiment the moment the snake entered the garden. But God has reasons beyond what we can understand. After all, if we could understand all of His thoughts, would we really believe Him to be a being far smarter, wiser, and better-informed than ourselves? Imagine taking a hick off the street in Arkansas and making him the ambassador to the People's Republic of China. Can you foresee anything going wrong because the hick has no understanding of China or its concerns — or even a good idea of what Washington wants to signal to Beijing? Well, we can say that for a certain number of hicks in Arkansas, thinking like the diplomats who staff the American Embassy in Beijing is completely out of reach. The hicks will never understand or care about what the diplomats understand and care about — and yet both are human, made in the image of God, equal in the eyes of the law. How much more, then, should we expect that most of us are never going to understand God's reasons for ordaining and allowing so much evil? God knows what He's doing. That is our confession of faith. We will be sure that it's true when evil has been finally vanquished, when the Kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as it is in Heaven.

### **C. God brings good even out of evil**

That day is coming, for God can bring good even out of evil.

Reality is indeed ultimately two, not one — but the split is not between a good reality and an evil reality, but rather between two kinds of good reality, the created and the uncreated. God exists, and so does the world, but they do not exist with the same kind of existence. The world's existence is derived and dependent, and that's why evil can get some purchase here. It is a purely negative thing, like a hole in a shirt. There is no "pure hole." Evil is a parasite on the good, a defect within something metaphysically good.

So no, evil is not something within God Himself. It is an accident that takes place in the created world under the sun, as opposed to being a substance created and sustained by God in being.

When you insist that reality is one, and that everything boils down to the same thing, then you must also affirm that evil is not evil, or at least that it is not essentially different from good. At worst, in a pantheistic framework where there is no distinction between God and the world, there is also no distinction between right and wrong. Evil becomes, at worst, a necessary step on the way to achieving the good. Understood this way, the crucifixion was not wrong at all, but a necessary step that ultimately produced the great good of the resurrection. Folks, that is entirely the wrong way to look at it.

Yes, God brought good even out of evil. But that does not reduce or eliminate evil's wickedness. It only exacerbates it. This evil had a good outcome because of the goodness of God, not because of the evil of the evil that was done! Your wicked action does not become a good action because God used it for good. The fact that Jesus would die to save us from sin did not make Adam and Eve's sin better, but worse, because it not only cost the lives of the entire human race, but now the life of God Himself, too.

In other words, God blast you if you say "Let us do evil that good may come. I am going to go sleep with my girlfriend in order to obtain the grace of forgiveness and thus bring about a

greater good.” No. Evil is still evil. Precisely because Christianity teaches this immanent frame, this world which is created by God but is not God, we have room for evil to be itself. Evil is bad and always will be, and will never become good. It can’t and won’t. But God does *use* evil, though it always remains itself and He always remains Himself, to bring about good. The evil of those lawless men brought about the good of your salvation. But we don’t sing hymns of praise to Pontius Pilate every week. We instinctively understand that he was a weakling and a villain. He was not a good person, nor a step on the path to good. He was evil — but God overruled his evil and brought good out of it anyway.

So Jesus was delivered over to wicked men by God’s plan. God planned their evil, but they did their evil. But God overcame their evil, raising His Son from the dead.

And so He will overcome your evil and raise you from the dead. Believe it, and you will live. Amen.