

God's Providence over Evil: Genesis 3
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We come to the beginning of the third chapter of Genesis, and we face one of the deepest and most difficult questions in the Christian life. It's the question of the origin of evil. Where did evil come from? Where did sin originate? And more specifically, how should we understand the relationship between the presence of evil in the universe and God's sovereignty over all things? That's the question I want to deal with this morning. God's providence over evil. This morning's sermon is not going to be an exposition of Genesis 3, but rather a response to this important question that Genesis 3 raises in our minds. Is God in control over evil? Is it part of His plan for His creation? Did he ordain the Fall? Was the temptation by Satan and the Fall into sin all part of God's providential plan? These are weighty issues, indeed, and they are questions that I don't think we will fully resolve in this life. My desire this morning is simply to affirm what the Bible affirms and then humbly trust God with those things I can't comprehend.

A few weeks ago I raised the question, "Why did God create?" Why did He create this universe, knowing and planning that evil would be part of it. The answer is that He created to display His glory. His delight in Himself overflowed, and He went public with His glory. There's some overlap between that sermon and this one. But this morning I want to focus more specifically on this question of God's providence over evil.

Where did evil come from? The first two chapters of Genesis tell us about God's good creation. Everything He made was good. There was no flaw, no imperfection, no evil, no sin. And then at the beginning of chapter 3 we read about this serpent who is tempting Eve to disobey God! What happened? Where did this evil tempter come from?

As Moses wrote this book of Genesis, apparently he wasn't interested in explaining where this serpent came from. But later in the Old Testament there are some hints about the fall of Satan and his demons. Satan's fall must have happened sometime after God completed His work of creation and called it "very good." Everything God created was good, including the spiritual beings. But sometime after He finished creating (but before Genesis 3:1) there was a rebellion in the heavenly realm. Many of the angels rebelled against God, and the one who initiated and led the rebellion was Satan. Even he was not created evil. He was created good. But he became prideful and wanted to make himself like God.

Isaiah 14, which refers to the fall of the king of Babylon, seems also to be describing the fall of Satan. Jesus actually alludes to one of these verses in Luke 10:18 where He says, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Here are the words of Isaiah 14:12-14: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'"

This good and wonderful angel somehow came to have a root of pride in his heart, and he sought to elevate himself to the level of God. And therefore God cast him down. That was the fall of Satan. That was the very beginning of evil. And it was by Satan's

craftiness that Eve was tempted and deceived, and she and her husband both disobeyed God and thus the entire human race fell into sin.

How are we to understand all of this in light of God's sovereignty? We trace the origin of evil all the way back to that first prideful thought in the mind of Satan. And then we ask, Where did that come from? How was that even possible? In God's perfectly good creation, how could this angelic being turn evil? And how could Adam and Eve, who had every good pleasure available to them, how could they be tempted to rebel against the One who gave them paradise?

How do we respond to this question of God's sovereignty (or God's providence) over evil. God's providence means that He is in control of all things. Everything that happens is part of His ultimate plan. So what does that mean for all the evil in the world, from the very beginning of evil to all the evil we see in our world today? Is all of that part of God's sovereign plan?

There are three points that I think are important here. They don't resolve all the questions we might have, but each is absolutely essential if we are to remain consistent with the Bible.

I. God does no evil.

The first point is that God, Himself, does no evil. God is completely righteous and holy. He never sins, and never has sinned. So we cannot attribute sin or evil to God in any direct sense. We cannot blame Him in any way, like Adam tried to do when he said, "The women whom YOU gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12). We can't accuse God of any wrongdoing. We cannot blame Him for the sin in our own hearts. 1 John 2:16 makes this clear, "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world." So when you see worldly desires in your heart, you can't blame God for that. It's not from Him, but from the world. It's from our own sinful nature.

Also, James 1:13-14, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." God does no evil. He is not tempted by evil, and He doesn't tempt anyone else to do evil. The evil that we do comes from our own desires, and therefore we're held accountable for it.

We also know from Scripture that God takes no delight in evil or sin. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). And in Genesis 6, before the Flood, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." God hates sin. He grieves over evil. He is perfect and righteous and holy. God does no evil.

II. God, in His justice, holds us responsible for our actions.

The second point that is important for us to understand is that God, in His justice, holds us responsible for our actions. God is in control of all things, but that does not mean we're off the hook. When we sin, it's us sinning. And we sin willingly. Nobody is twisting our arms. We sin because we want to, and it's only appropriate that we are held accountable for those sins. The Lord says in Isaiah 66:3-4, "These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose harsh treatment for

them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight.” We choose evil, and we are rightfully held responsible for the evil we choose. No one should ever try to plead innocent on the basis of God’s sovereignty. Yes, God is in control of all things, and He has planned out the end from the beginning. But one of the deep mysteries of this universe is that He is sovereign AND we make real choices for which we are completely and rightfully accountable.

And if we ask, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” then the answer comes back in Romans 9, “who are you , O man, to answer back to God?” (Rom 9:20). These deep and weighty issues of God’s sovereignty ought to be so humbling for us. He is the potter, and we are the clay. And we should joyfully submit to His Word and to His plans, rejoicing in the fact that He rules! He is not a God who is partially in control. He is not a God who MIGHT triumph in the end. He WILL triumph, beyond the shadow of a doubt! He is the God who is working all things according the counsel of his will. And we are the beneficiaries of His power, because He began a good work in us and He will most certainly bring that work to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. He chose us before the foundation of the world, He called us, He justified us, He is in the process of sanctifying us, and one day He will glorify us. Let’s not object to His complete power, but rejoice in it.

III. God controls all things, including evil.

So far, the two biblical truths we must affirm are 1) God does no evil, and 2) in His justice, He holds us accountable for our actions. And the third point is that God controls all things, including evil. This is where the magnificent reality of God’s nature begins to escape us. God, Himself, does no evil. That is clear from the Bible. And it is also clear that we are moral beings who make choices that have real consequences, and we’re held accountable for those choices. And it is also clear from the Bible that God controls ALL things. And it is even clear that He ordains for evil to be part of His universe. With our finite and sinful minds we may not be able to grasp how all of these pieces fit together. We may not fully understand how God does no evil, and holds us responsible for our actions, and is also in complete control of every evil act in history. I can’t completely get my mind around that. But as I said at the beginning, we need to affirm what the Bible affirms and then humbly trust God with the parts that we can’t comprehend.

Let me give you some examples of God’s control over evil. In the story of Joseph, his brothers did all kinds of wicked and evil things against him. They wanted to kill him, they threw him in a pit, they sold him into slavery. And yet at the end of Genesis (50:20), Joseph said to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” What the brothers did was evil, and they were responsible for the evil they did, but it’s also true that God, in His good purposes, ordained for each of those evil actions to occur. That evil was part of His good plan. Notice that Joseph does not say, “God *used* it for good.” But he said, “God *meant* it for good.” It’s not as if, after the fact, God scrambled to bring something good out of this evil situation. No. Every event was carefully planned out by God, even the sinful and evil actions that took place. God *meant* them *for good*.

Or think of Pharaoh, in the book of Exodus. Pharaoh did great evil against the Israelites, and refused to let them leave Egypt. And repeatedly we read that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart. In Exodus 4:21 God says, "I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go." And then throughout the story it is repeated that the Lord hardened his heart. It also says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, which shows that God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is consistent with Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart. It's not either / or. It's both / and. God did not harden him against his will. It's not like Pharaoh wanted to show mercy to the Israelites, but God hardened him so that he would not let them go. Rather, Pharaoh was doing exactly what he wanted to do. And what we learn from the story is that God was in complete control over every detail, including Pharaoh's hard heart.

If we ask why God would do this, the Bible gives a very clear answer. In Exodus 9:16 God says to Pharaoh, "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." Paul quotes this verse in Romans 9 to illustrate God's sovereign freedom. Then Paul writes, "So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." These are the truths that are so difficult for us to grasp and accept, but these truths are also so glorious when we can simply trust in His supremacy over all things and submit to His sovereign will. When we can forget about ourselves and marvel at His greatness. In Exodus 14:17 God says, "And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen." You see, it's all about God's glory. It's not about you or me or Pharaoh or the Egyptians or the Israelites. It's about God's glory. God's mission is to display His greatness, to make His Name famous, to reveal the beauty of His attributes. God was in control of the evil that Pharaoh did, and it was all part of God's plan to glorify Himself.

The most evil act in all of history was the crucifixion of the perfect Son of God, Jesus Christ. And even here (I think we can say *especially* here) God was in absolute control. Those who conspired to kill Jesus were filled with sin and pride and wickedness. Their intentions were evil to the core. Luke 22:3 says that "Satan entered into Judas" as Judas went to make his plans to betray Jesus. Herod and Pilate, and the Jews who shouted "Crucify him," and the Gentile soldiers who mocked Him and beat Him, they were all filled with sin and evil as they played a role in bringing Jesus to the cross. Pure, Satanic evil. And yet it was all exactly according to God's plan. Listen to what Peter said in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:23): "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." The men who did this were lawless. They were sinning, and they were accountable for the evil they did. And at the same time, it was all according to God's definite plan.

A couple chapters later, in Acts 4:27-28, Peter and John and their friends were praying to God, and they said, "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 plan had predestined to take place." The murder of Jesus Christ, the most evil act in all of history, was clearly ordained and predestined by God. And in this most evil act, God revealed Himself, and His glory, and His grace, in the most profound ways.

God does no evil. He never sins. But in His good purposes He wills that sin be part of His universe. And He does so in order to reveal the fullness of His glory. He desires to display ALL of His wonderful attributes. His goodness and mercy and grace and love, AND His righteousness and holiness and wrath and justice. And in order to make known the full spectrum of His glory, He saw fit to create a universe in which sin and evil and suffering would be present.

It's helpful to think about these things in terms of the two wills of God. That's not to imply that God's will is divided or contradictory. But as we try to understand what the Bible says about God's will, we can distinguish between His moral will (or revealed will), and His sovereign will (or secret will). On the one hand, God reveals His righteous character and makes it clear that He hates sin. He is against sin. He punishes sin. But in His sovereign plans, which are not fully revealed to us but are secret, He ordains that sin exist and that evil things happen.

Going back to the Fall, we must acknowledge it as a tragic event in terms of God's revealed will. In a very real sense, God did NOT want it to happen. He wanted Adam and Eve to obey Him and live in sweet communion with Him. But in terms of God's sovereign will, He ordained that the Fall happen, because He had a glorious plan for redeeming sinful humanity.

I want to read you a couple quotes from our statement of faith. First of all, here's the article on God's Providence from The Abstract of Principles, "God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures." That summarizes two of the points I've made. God is in complete control of everything that happens, and we are responsible for the choices we make. And in the 1689 London Baptist Confession we find a phrase that summarizes my other point in this sermon. It says that God, "being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin." God, Himself, does no evil. He doesn't sin. He doesn't tempt anyone to sin. He doesn't approve of sin in any way.

And then, also in the London Confession, in the article on the Fall, it gives this helpful summary of God's providence even over the Fall. It says that Adam and Eve willfully transgressed "the law of their creation, and the command given unto them, in eating the forbidden fruit, which God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory." The wording of that may be a little dense, so let me just make sure it's clear. The evil rebellion that happened in the Garden of Eden when the snake tempted Eve, and she and Adam disobeyed God, that was all part of God's plan. He knew it was going to happen. He planned it. He allowed it to happen as part of His wise and holy will. And He purposed it to happen for His own glory.

That is an amazing statement, and I believe it's true. The Fall was not a surprise to God. It was not outside of His control. In fact, He ordained it to happen. And He is good. He did not sin in permitting the Fall. And He is not unjust to hold Adam and Eve, and all of us, accountable as sinners. As their descendents we have inherited their guilt, and we have willfully sinned against God just like they did.

Now, how should we apply these truths to our lives? God's sovereignty can certainly be perplexing, but my desire is that we won't miss the great hope that it gives,

and the joy and peace that it should bring to our souls. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, has a chapter on God's providence, and then he has a whole chapter on the proper application of that doctrine to our lives. He talks about how an understanding of God's providence will lead us to attribute every good thing in our lives to God, because it is ultimately by His decree that we have anything good. It's not ultimately because of our hard work, or even because certain people have shown favor toward us. But it's God's grace that has caused others to favor us and has caused our work to prosper. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from Him, and we ought to thank Him constantly. It's by His providence that we have every blessing that we have.

As we embrace God's providence in all things, we will also learn to receive affliction as part of His good plan for us. He is in control. It's not the co-worker who is the ultimate cause of the hardship. Or the family member, or the boss, or the classmate, or roommate. Not even Satan has unrestrained power to afflict us. The only trials that will confront us in life are those that God allows and commands for our good. The doctrine of God's providence is a wonderfully freeing truth.

Let me read you this quote from Calvin. He writes, "The necessary consequences of this knowledge [of God's providence] are, gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and a wonderful security respecting the future" (1.17.7). So we're thankful when good things happen, we're patient when bad things happen, and we're filled with hope as we look to the future. Then a little later he writes, "ignorance of providence is the greatest of miseries, but . . . the knowledge of it is attended with the highest felicity" (1.17.10). If we resist this truth, it will only bring misery. But to embrace the truth of God's providence will bring great joy. It's true, brothers and sisters. Hold on to this truth, because it is a rock we can stand on. A rock we **MUST** stand on. In the good times, we praise Him alone. In the trials, we rest in Him. As we look to the future, we place our hope and confidence in His perfect and definite plan.

We should find great comfort in the fact that God is completely in control. Nothing, not even the Fall, is outside of His providential plan for His creation. And so we can trust in Him! For those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, He is working all things together for good. He is powerful enough to do that, and He has promised to do that. Meditate on the truth of God's providence, and let it radically change your outlook on the blessings and the challenges of life.