

How the Existence of Evil Relates to God's Sovereignty: Part 2

David Ellingson, Missionary to Madagascar (July 25th 2021)

Four Aspects of God's Sovereignty in Relation to Evil

I. Consider the nature of God's decree

God's decree is (a) eternal, (b) unconditional, (c) immutable, and (d) exhaustive.

II. Consider God's role in relation to evil

(a) God does not passively permit evil.

(b) God actively brings about evil.

III. Consider the blameworthy causes of evil

- After examining the nature of God's decree, we concluded that God is the ultimate cause of all things.

→ Is there a way to understand how it can be that God is not culpable for sin, even though He ordains that it be? The answer is "Yes."

→ God, as the ultimate cause, decrees what will come to pass, but He may do so through secondary causes who *directly* do an action or *provoke others* to do it.

A. Not the ultimate cause

- God, by *predestining all of the events* that led to a sinful action or evil event, guarantees that it will occur, but He Himself does not incur guilt, but remains pure from every stain of sin because He ordains evil *only for good*.

B. But, secondary causes

- The immediate cause is the one *directly doing* the action. This is the one who *carries out an action* according to his own sinful inclination, and thus is culpable.
 - The instrumental cause is the one that *sets in motion* a sequence of events by *stirring up* or *provoking* evil with wicked intentions, and thus is culpable.
- Scripture teaches that God is not rightly to be blamed for the sinful actions of His creatures. In fact, God always and only ordains evil for good.

"Assyria, the rod of My anger": Isaiah 10:5-7, 12-14

- God is the ultimate cause who guarantees that the destruction of Israel will come about by *sending* and *commissioning* His tool—the nation of Assyria—to execute His righteous judgment on Israel (v. 6).
- Assyria is the immediate cause, the one *directly carrying out* the pillaging and plundering and trampling down of Israel.
- Assyria acts in accordance with *its sinful desires* "to destroy and to cut off many nations" (vv. 7, 12-14).
- Thus, Assyria is the blameworthy cause of evil. And as such, God pronounces "woe" on her (v. 5) and would later punish her (vv. 12, 16-19).
- Though Assyria "does not so intend, nor does it plan so in its heart" (v. 7), what is done is *the fulfillment of God's decree* (vv. 5-6, 15).

David is incited to sin: 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21

- **2 Samuel 24:1** – "Now again the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel, and He incited David against them saying, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'"

- **1 Chronicles 21:1** – "Then Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to number Israel."
- God is the ultimate cause who *predestined all of the events* that led to this sinful action, but He did so *for good*: that David would be *lovingly disciplined* and Israel would be *righteously judged for its apostasy*.
- Satan is the instrumental cause who, with wicked intentions, *provokes* David to sin, and *is culpable*.
- David is the immediate cause who *directly does* the action according to *his own sinful inclination*, and thus, *incurs guilt* for this sin.
- God did not force David to sin *against his will* and neither did Satan *make him do it*. David recognized that he *personally* had "sinned greatly" against God, and asked God to take away his "iniquity" (2 Sam 24:10; 1 Chron 21:8).

The cause of the crucifixion: Acts 2 & 4

- **Acts 2:22-23** – "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."
- **Acts 4:27-28** – "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 purpose predestined to occur."
- The Jews are the instrumental cause of Christ's death because they *provoked* the Romans to do it.
- The Romans are the immediate cause because they *actually carried out* the crucifixion.
- Together they *sinfully plotted* to murder the Man who indicted them for their sin, thus *are culpable*.
- God is the ultimate cause because this evil was accomplished by His *predetermined decree*. God does not incur the guilt rightly due to the immediate and instrumental causes because God only ordains this evil *for good*.

IV. Consider God's purpose in ordaining evil

A. God always ordains evil for good.

- **Jonathan Edwards** helps us think correctly: "[It is consistent to say] that God has decreed every action of men, yea, every action that is sinful, and every circumstance of those actions; that He predetermines that they shall be in every respect as they afterwards are; that He determines that there shall be such actions, and just so sinful as they are; and yet that God does not decree the actions that are sinful, as sin, but decrees them as good ..."

- "... By decreeing an action as sinful, I mean decreeing it for the sake of the sinfulness of the action. God decrees that they shall be sinful, for the sake of the good that He causes to arise from the sinfulness thereof; whereas man decrees them for the sake of the evil that is in them." – (Edwards, Works, 2:527).

- **But, what is the good for which God ordains evil?**
→ Answer: *The shining forth of His own glory.*

- **Romans 9:18–19** – "So then [God] mercies whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'"

- To those who would reproach God by objecting to His absolute sovereignty in this way, Paul reminds them that they are *mere mortals* made from dust.

- **vv. 20–21** "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have authority over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"

- **vv. 9:22–23** – "And what if God, wanting to demonstrate His wrath and to make known His power, endured with much patience vessels of wrath having been prepared for destruction, and in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory?"

- God ordains sin and evil—He even ordains the eternal punishment of the wicked—to make known the riches of His glory to His elect.

- There can be no demonstration of mercy and grace where there is no justice.

- **Jonathan Edwards** excellently states, "*It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent [i.e. radiant], that the beholder may have a proper notion of God.... It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all.... Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all."* (Edwards, Works, 2:528)

B. The proper knowledge of God's glory brings about our highest happiness.

- **Edwards** connects our happiness to God's glory:

"If it were not right that God should decree ... and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired.... So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect." (Edwards, Works, 2:528)

- **Fanny Crosby**: "*For I know, whate'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well.*"

- **John Calvin**: "*This, I say, is [the believer's] comfort, that his heavenly Father so embraces all things under his power—so governs them at will by his nod—so regulates them by his wisdom, that nothing takes place save according to his appointment; that received into his favor, and entrusted to the care of his angels, neither fire, nor water, nor sword, can do him harm, except in so far as God their master is pleased to [bring upon him].... Give heed, and you will at once perceive that ignorance of Providence is the greatest of all miseries, and the knowledge of it the highest happiness.*" (Calvin, Institutes, 1.17.11)

- **Charles Spurgeon**: "*The sovereignty of God is the pillow upon which the Christian rests his head.*"

- **Adoniram Judson**: "*If I had not felt certain that every trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings.*"

- **Sarah Edwards** wrote: "*My very dear child, What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands upon our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am; and love to be.*"

- "Our knowledge of God would be imperfect if we did not see the full expression of his attributes: grace, mercy, forgiveness, justice, righteousness, and [so on]. And yet none of those attributes could be expressed fully if there was not sin to punish and to forgive or sinners to whom to be gracious or on whom to exercise justice. God is not less glorious but more glorious because he has ordained evil, and the more he magnifies his glory, the greater is his love to his people. Surely God cannot be charged with unrighteousness for doing that which amounts to the greatest benefit for those who are his." (John MacArthur, ed., *Biblical Doctrine*, 51)