

EVIL AND SUFFERING IN
A SOVEREIGN
GOD'S
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PREFACE

Lord willing, this small volume will be the first in a series of books that seek to address important theological teachings in a brief, biblical, and cogent way. To be sure, very large volumes could be used to address even a single chapter in this book, but the intended goal of the author is to provide the reader with a gamut of broad and general thoughts, which can help the reader in his/her pursuit of a better understanding of the deep things of God.

If these works can help motivate us to think and to wrestle through difficult theological issues, if they can provide some additional soil for the seed of edifying biblical thought, then they will have accomplished the intended purpose of the author. I pray that the Lord will sanctify and utilize these thoughts for the good of His church and as a productive means of contributing to the discussion on various, difficult theological issues.

INTRODUCTION

If God is all sovereign and if God is good, why is this world in the condition that it is in? Why is there suffering and death? Why do some people starve, including young children? Why is there poverty? Why is there war? Why is there corruption? Why are there terrorists, and why do they get away with murdering so many innocent people? Why do babies die? Why are children abducted, raped, and murdered? Why do Christians, sometimes, suffer so terribly, if God's favor is upon them? Why is there evil, and where did it come from? Can God truly be righteous if evil exists? If God is before all things, at what point does evil erupt on the scene, and how does it exist? Is evil itself a separate entity that has always existed alongside of God yet outside of God Himself? If so, where does it get its life from? Is God truly sovereign over all things? Why didn't God stop Adam and Eve from sinning if He knew they would do

so? Why, why, why is this world such a mess if God is all-sovereign and good?

If we are honest, most of us have probably wrestled with these kinds of difficult questions at one time or another. The presence of evil and suffering in a world created by a singular Creator who is holy, righteous, and good is very difficult to process in our finite minds.

Perhaps, these types of questions plague you, or, at the least, you find yourself stumped when your unbelieving family members, friends, and coworkers ask you such questions. While you must ultimately “trust in the Lord with all of your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5), are there any comforting ways of addressing these kinds of questions? Does God’s Word offer us any sense of relief? Is there a lens by which we can view the evil and sufferings of this world and make sense of it all? Can the given statement that “God must be good” survive the reality of the presence of evil and suffering everywhere around us (and in us, for that matter)?

The purpose of this book is to help answer these types of questions, offering comfort to the heart that is understandably troubled by the gross evils and overwhelming sufferings that pervade this creation of which we find ourselves part. While I cannot specifically identify the precise purposes for every single event that transpires, I will seek to provide some general principles that can help us properly

view any and all of God's providences through a comforting biblical lens. Our short journey will take us through the deep and difficult questions surrounding the origin of evil and the reality of agonizing sufferings. I trust that the reader will take in enough to joyfully recognize the goodness and all-sovereign power of God while maintaining a sobering and healthy understanding of the ills and hardships that fill this world.

May God be pleased to use this short work for His glory and the good of His church, both of which run parallel in accordance with His marvelous divine plan.

I

GOD IS ALL SOVEREIGN

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.

—*Ephesians 1:11*

Introduction

God is *all-sovereign*. What do I mean by this? God is the supreme ruler over all things, and as such, He works *all* things out in accordance with His own unchangeable divine will and for His glory. He never relinquishes or forfeits His sovereign control, in any sense whatsoever, to his creatures. In fact, were He to do so, He would ultimately cease to be God. Yes, even the horrible and gross atrocities that are committed in this world will ultimately be used by God to accomplish all of His sovereign purposes, which are

past our finding out. “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

There are many, many excellent works available that thoroughly affirm God’s absolute sovereignty over all things. I might recommend Arthur Pink’s classic, fine, and short work, *The Sovereignty of God*, to the reader, as one such example. So as to keep from eclipsing the main topic of this book, I will avoid “reinventing the wheel” then, by limiting this chapter to a few key points that are relevant to our subject. And so, in many ways, I will presume what can be found in a wealth of volumes that deal with the sovereignty of God in far greater detail.

Joseph and Jesus

Two great examples that reveal the reality of God’s sovereignty in a profound way are found in the lives of Joseph and Jesus.

Joseph was a godly young man, who was loved greatly by his father Jacob. In fact, we are told in Genesis 37:3, “Now Israel [*Jacob*] loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors.” Joseph’s ten older brothers didn’t take too well to the fact that Joseph was Dad’s favorite. The fact that Joseph had dreams (that he didn’t keep to him-

self) that elevated him above his brothers only added to the envy that sprouted in their hearts. In verses 8b and 11a of the same chapter, we are told, "So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words...And his brothers envied him." Joseph's brothers' hatred for him grew so strong that they had planned on murdering him. However, at the advice of Judah, they ultimately sold Joseph to a company of Ishmaelites, who, in turn, brought him down to Egypt where he became a slave. From there, Joseph spent several years in slavery, leading to an unjust imprisonment (due to the false accusations of Potiphar's wife), before being divinely elevated to rule over all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. In that position of great authority, Joseph became the deliverer of his people, Israel (the very tribes that betrayed him), providing for them during the seven years of great famine.

When Joseph's brothers had to face him again, they were terrified about what he might do to them, since they sold him into slavery. Joseph suffered for several years because of the wicked envy of his brothers. And yet when he finally revealed himself to them, he extended a profound hand of grace to them. And following the death of their father, Jacob, he comforted them with these words:

"Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?
But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God

meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19–21)

What exactly did Joseph mean by these words? Clearly, he reveals two different intentions that were attached to the same event. Being motivated by envy and hatred, his brothers sold him into slavery with wicked intentions. However, God utilized even the wicked intentions of Joseph’s brothers to ultimately bring about salvation for Israel. God’s broader sovereign plan actually laid hold of the wicked intentions and actions of Joseph’s brothers and used them for great good! Consider this reality further illustrated in the crucifixion and death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the time of Pentecost, when Peter preached that powerfully convicting sermon to the Jews in Acts 2, we note these words found in verses 22–24:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

*whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death,
because it was not possible that He should be held by it.*

Again, we find here what we've found in our brief consideration of how Joseph was treated by his brothers. What wicked men (the Israelites in this case) meant for evil—God meant and used for good. Jesus was crucified by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God. God planned it, determining before time to secure a vicarious atonement on behalf of sinners by way of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And yet, at the same time, Jesus was crucified because of the wicked and lawless deeds of the Israelites. They were guilty of evil, while God (with righteous intentions) worked good even through their evil intentions.

Understanding that which is clearly revealed about Joseph (in Genesis) and Jesus (in Acts), leads us to answer the following question in an “it depends” type fashion. “Was it God’s will for Joseph’s brothers to sell their brother into slavery, and was it God’s will for the Israelites to turn Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified?” The answer to this question is, “Yes and no,” or better yet, “It depends.”

God’s Moral and Decretive Wills

In a very real sense, we can say *from a moral standpoint*, that God *never* wills for any sinful act to ever take place.

God has no delight whatsoever in evil. He hates everything about evil. He is incapable of authoring, partaking in, or enjoying evil in any sense. God is pure light and in Him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). And so there is no inclination within God, ever, to delight in evil in any sense. Recognizing this affirms that from a *moral standpoint* God never wills for evil to exist or take place. When He gives mankind His ten commandments, He avows that He is absolutely opposed to any violation of those commands and, as a just and righteous God, He must punish those who violate His commands accordingly.

Therefore, we can most certainly say that, from a moral standpoint, it was *not* the will of God that Joseph's brothers should have sold Joseph into slavery, and it was *not* the will of God that the Israelites should have delivered Jesus over to be crucified. To put it another way, neither Joseph's brothers nor the Israelites were to be commended for aiding God in some sense simply because God's *decretive* will was fulfilled by their doing so.

What then is God's decretive will? God's decretive will is His eternal purpose to use every iota of everything that takes place (at anytime and anywhere, in both the heavenly and earthly realms) to glorify Himself, in accordance with His predetermined, unalterable, fixed plan, which has been decreed before anything was even created (Eph. 1:11). It is God's "decreed" and perfect will, and, therefore, it cannot

be changed ever. We might think of God's decretive will as an enormous ocean toward which every action is inevitably pouring. Nothing will escape it. There will be no puddles on the side, which have somehow gone around or outside of that ocean. It is the big picture toward which every short-term reality (good and evil) is moving.

And so from the standpoint of God's eternal decrees was it the will of God that Joseph's brothers should sell their brother into slavery, and was it the will of God that the Israelites should deliver Jesus over to be crucified? Absolutely. And by both of these means, He has accomplished salvation and brought glory to His holy Name! He has preordained and used short term realities (even the evil acts of His creatures) to bring about a far greater and eternal good!

Conclusion

It is God's decretive will, therefore, which undeniably affirms that God is *all-sovereign* and that He never relinquishes this sovereignty, in any sense, to the will of His creatures. Moving forward then, wherever we wind up in our analysis of evil existing in a sovereign God's world, our conclusion must take for granted that God is *all-sovereign*. If this reality is somehow lost in the computations, then we will compromise and mar what must be true.

Let me close this chapter with the glorious, divinely inspired profession of King Nebuchadnezzar, who learned this wondrous truth the hard way:

And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?' (Dan. 4:34–35)

Reader, ponder these words and let them lead you to bow your head in joyful, reverent praise to your God!

II

GOD IS GOOD

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.

—*Psalm 136:1*

Introduction

Before we address the matter of the existence of evil, it is important that we establish a second “given” in our mathematical equation. Indeed, God is all-sovereign, but equally so, God is good! All the time!

God Is the Very Essence of Goodness

In Matthew 19:16–22, the Lord is approached by a wealthy young man, who is zealous to understand what must be done to inherit eternal life. While we will not get into