

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

INTRODUCTION

Since the early Greek philosophers, many thinkers have concerned themselves with what has become known as the “problem of evil.”¹ This paper seeks to introduce and examine this issue from the perspective of Scripture, and, reasoning from the Scriptures, give an intelligent, coherent defense of the biblical position.

WHAT IS THE “PROBLEM OF EVIL”?

The “problem of evil” can be stated in the following terms: How can evil exist in a universe created and governed by an all-powerful, benevolent [inherently and completely good] God?

PRESUPPOSITIONS

It must be understood at the outset that all human thought is presuppositional, i.e., man is not intellectually neutral [completely open-minded], but approaches any given subject with certain assumptions that govern his thought-process. This is certainly evident in the realm of theology and metaphysics. Such issues as the finiteness of human reason, the nature of Divine special revelation,² and the noetic effects of sin,³ all have a determining force on the subject of the origin of sin and the problem of evil. Finite creatures simply cannot comprehend an infinite Being, unless that infinite Being in some way condescends to reveal himself or his actions to them. *Apart from such a Divine revelation, they are simply left with a man-centered, finite, empirical or philosophical speculation.* The triune, self-disclosing God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe has, however, chosen to reveal himself, his moral self-consistency, redemptive purpose and some of the ultimate issues of good and evil, righteousness and judgment, in his inscripturated Word—a Word that is understandable, inspired, infallible and authoritative. This Divine special revelation is not exhaustive, yet it is sufficient for both faith and practice. Man’s knowledge, however, is not only finite, it is further limited by the noetic effects of sin. Thus, there is a given amount of prejudice or sinful limitation on his part when approaching Divine truth. The Scriptures must be taken as they are, and the person, character, purpose and actions of God must not be called into question—finite creatures do not have that right (Rom. 9:14–21). The Scriptures must speak as the final authority. Any explanation as to the origin of sin or the problem of evil must be found in the nature, actions or purpose of God as revealed therein.

¹ This paper has been adapted from Appendix Two of the book, *Lectures on Calvinism and Arminianism* by WRD.

² God has revealed himself in both general [nature, creation] and special [direct, intelligent communication that has been inscripturated] revelation. Divine special revelation—the Scriptures—must not be explained away anthropomorphically or figuratively. It is basic to understand that special revelation has been given to be understood by man.

³ The term “noetic” derives from νοέω, “to think,” and refers to the sinful and limiting effects of the Fall on the human thought-process. The Spirit of God in Divine illumination compensates for some of this in the case of true believers (1 Jn. 2:20, 27), but not all limitation or prejudice is removed.

THE MYSTERY OF EVIL

The existence of evil in the universe of a righteous and holy God is a great mystery, yet the Scriptures reveal that God has determined all things and this must include sin. To deny or seek to circumvent this would bring God down to the level of the finite and leave evil as an inexplicable mystery existing in opposition to God in a dualistic sense. This is certainly unsatisfactory. I. Howard Marshall, a New Testament scholar, seeks to do this because of his Arminian assumptions concerning God and the nature of evil:

The Bible is clear that God is not the author of evil. Its origin is and perhaps must be a mystery. Its evilness lies in its lack of good purpose, and thus in its irrationality and opposition to the purpose of God. How it can have come to exist in a universe created by God is unknowable. We must be content to leave the question unresolved. The Calvinist falls into error when he ascribes the reason why some people are not saved to the decretive will of God; in effect, he is trying to *explain* evil. It is wiser to locate the reason why some people are not saved in the sheer mystery of evil.⁴

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

That God is absolutely sovereign over all things, even evil, and uses such for his purpose and glory, is a scriptural fact: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.” (Isa. 45:7).⁵ God sent an evil spirit between the men of Shechem and Abimelech (Judg. 9:23–24). He sent an evil spirit to obsess King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14; 18:10; 19:9). He brought evil upon Israel for her sins (1 Kgs. 9:9). A lying spirit was sent by God to lead Ahab to his defeat and death (1 Kgs. 22:20–23). The Lord appointed the defeat of Ahithophel’s counsel that he might bring evil upon Absalom (2 Sam. 17:14). God turned the hearts of the Egyptians to hate the Israelites (Ps. 105:25). The greatest crime in history—the illegality of the trial, the abuse, shame, suffering, and death of the Son of God with all its attendant sin on the part of men—was predetermined by God (Lk. 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). How can God do these things and yet remain holy, righteous and free from sin? The issues are two: the origin of sin and the problem of evil.

THE ORIGIN OF SIN

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *how* art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, “Predestination in the New Testament,” *Grace Unlimited*, p. 138.

⁵ Note the statement made by the *Scofield Reference Bible*: “Heb. *ra*, translated ‘sorrow,’ ‘wretchedness,’ ‘adversity,’ ‘afflictions,’ ‘calamities,’ but never translated *sin*. God created evil only in the sense that he made sorrow, wretchedness, etc., to be the sure fruits of sin.” p. 754.

רָעָה (*ra*), however, is the common word for *moral evil* and, although never translated “sin,” it is translated hundreds of times as “evil,” and eighty-one times as “wicked,” “wickedly” and “wickedness,” referring to all types of sins. In this context neither *peace* nor *evil* can be used in such a restricted sense as the *Scofield Reference Bible* has attempted to give these parallel terms, as the Scriptures in their use of these reveal.

the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. (Isaiah 14:12–15)⁶

And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. (Luke 10:18)

Ye are of *your* father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. (John 8:44)⁷

And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. (Jude 6)

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season....and the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet *are*, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Revelation 20:1–3, 10)

Sin did not originate with the fall [apostasy] of man. Sin originated in the spirit [angelic] world. Lucifer [Satan, the devil] apostatized from God and took a number of angelic beings with him. He it was in the guise of the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve and through this brought about the fall of mankind. The entrance of sin into the human race came through Adam's willful disobedience to the explicit commandment of God (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:1–7; Rom. 5:12; 3:23).⁸ The human race apostatized from God in Adam as their representative head. In dealing with the origin of sin, however, we must come to terms, not only with its history as revealed in Scripture, but also with its relation to an absolutely just or righteous and holy God. Holding the Scriptures to be the inspired, infallible Word of God in scripturated, we must accept their record as to the origin of sin.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

SCRIPTURAL STATEMENTS

And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein *is* the breath of life, from under heaven; *and* every thing that *is* in the earth shall die. (Gen. 6:17)

⁶ The context of Isaiah 14 (v. 4ff) refers this statement to “the king of Babylon,” evidently addressing Satan through this king.

⁷ “...from the beginning...” must refer to the temptation and subsequent fall of Adam through the temptation of the devil through the serpent.

⁸ The use of the aor. in both Romans passages, in their given context, point to an event, i.e., mankind did not simply inherit a sinful nature or tendency from Adam—“all have sinned,” thus referring to personal experience and activity, but “all sinned” in an event, a point in time (Rom. 3:23, πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ. “For all sinned and are subsequently constantly coming short...” Rom. 5:12, ...δι’ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον...ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον. “by one man sin entered into the world...for all sinned.”). Every human being is a sinner by imputation, nature and personal activity.

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as *it is* this day, to save much people alive. (Genesis 50:20)

...and thou shalt come, thou and the elders of Israel, unto the king of Egypt, and ye shall say unto him, The LORD God of the Hebrews hath met with us: and now let us go, we beseech thee...And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof: and after that he will let you go. (Ex. 3:18–20)

And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I *am* not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I *am* slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the LORD said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say. (Ex. 4:10–12)

And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go. And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel *is* my son, *even* my firstborn: and I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, *even* thy firstborn. (Ex. 4:21–23)

And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee...And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth mine armies, *and* my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments. And the Egyptians shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I stretch forth mine hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them. (Ex. 7:1–5)

And it came to pass, that at midnight the LORD smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that *was* in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for *there was* not a house where *there was* not one dead. (Ex. 12:29–30)

And it came to pass on the seventh day, that they rose early about the dawning of the day, and compassed the city after the same manner seven times: only on that day they compassed the city seven times. And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the LORD hath given you the city. And the city shall be accursed, *even* it, and all that *are* therein, to the LORD: only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that *are* with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent...And they utterly destroyed all that *was* in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword. (Josh. 6:15–17, 21)

Therefore it shall come to pass, *that* as all good things are come upon you, which the LORD your God promised you; so shall the LORD bring upon you all evil things, until he have destroyed you from off this good land which the LORD your God hath given you. When ye have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed yourselves to them; then shall the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which he hath given unto you. (Josh. 23:15–16)

Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn unto them: and they were greatly distressed. (Judges 2:15)

Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. (Judges 9:23)

But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him....And it came to pass on the morrow, that the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, and he prophesied in the midst of the house: and David played [the harp] with his hand, as at other times: and *there was* a javelin in Saul's hand. And the evil spirit from the LORD was upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his javelin in his hand: and David played with *his* hand. And Saul cast the javelin; for he said, I will smite David even to the wall *with it*. And David avoided out of his presence twice....And the evil spirit from the LORD was upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his javelin in his hand: and David played with *his* hand. 10 And Saul sought to smite David even to the wall with the javelin; but he slipped away out of Saul's presence, and he smote the javelin into the wall: and David fled, and escaped that night. (1 Samuel 16:14; 18:1–11; 19:9–10)

And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, The counsel of Hushai the Archite *is* better than the counsel of Ahithophel. For the LORD had appointed to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, to the intent that the LORD might bring evil upon Absalom. (2 Sam. 17:14)

Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David enquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, *It is* for Saul, and for *his* bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites. And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites *were* not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah.) Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you? and wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the LORD? And the Gibeonites said unto him, We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel. And he said, What ye shall say, *that* will I do for you. And they answered the king, The man that consumed us, and that devised against us *that* we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel, Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, *whom* the LORD did choose. And the king said, I will give *them*...And he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the hill before the LORD: and they fell *all* seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first *days*, in the beginning of barley harvest...And he brought up from thence the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son; and they gathered the bones of them that were hanged. And the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son buried they in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the sepulchre of Kish his father: and they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God was entreated for the land. (2 Sam. 21:1–14)

And they shall answer, Because they forsook the LORD their God, who brought forth their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and have taken hold upon other gods, and have worshipped them, and served them: therefore hath the LORD brought upon them all this evil. (1 Kgs. 9:9)

And Jehoshaphat said unto the king of Israel, Enquire, I pray thee, at the word of the LORD to day. Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said unto them, Shall I go against Ramothgilead to battle, or shall I forbear? And they said, Go up; for the Lord shall deliver *it* into the hand of the king. And Jehoshaphat said, *Is there* not here a prophet of the LORD besides, that we might enquire of him? And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, *There is* yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the LORD: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. And Jehoshaphat said, Let not the king say so. Then the king of Israel called an officer, and said, Hasten *hither* Micaiah the son of Imlah...And the messenger that was gone to call Micaiah spake unto him,

saying, Behold now, the words of the prophets *declare* good unto the king with one mouth: let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of one of them, and speak *that which is good*. And Micaiah said, As the LORD liveth, what the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak. So he came to the king. And the king said unto him, Micaiah, shall we go against Ramothgilead to battle, or shall we forbear? And he answered him, Go, and prosper: for the LORD shall deliver *it* into the hand of the king. And the king said unto him, How many times shall I adjure thee that thou tell me nothing but *that which is true* in the name of the LORD? And he said, I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd: and the LORD said, These have no master: let them return every man to his house in peace. And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, Did I not tell thee that he would prophesy no good concerning me, but evil? And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade *him*, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore, behold, the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee. (1 Kgs. 22:5–23)

Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, *even* all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read. (2 Kings 22:16)

And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that *there is* none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath *is* in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD....And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that *there is* none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause. And Satan answered the LORD, and said, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he *is* in thine hand; but save his life. So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes. Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips. (Job 1:8–12; 2:3–10)

And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. (Job 42:10)

Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain. (Psalm 76:10)

The LORD hath made all *things* for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil. (Prov. 16:4)

O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give

him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but *it is* in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few. For he saith, *Are not my princes altogether kings? Is not Calno as Carchemish? is not Hamath as Arpad? is not Samaria as Damascus?* As my hand hath found the kingdoms of the idols, and whose graven images did excel them of Jerusalem and of Samaria; shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols? Wherefore it shall come to pass, *that* when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done *it*, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant *man*: and my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs *that are* left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped. Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? *or* shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake *itself* against them that lift it up, *or* as if the staff should lift up *itself*, as if *it were* no wood. (Isa. 10:5–15)

I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)

...shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it? (Amos 3:6)

Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power *at all* against me, except it were given thee from above... (Jn. 19:10)

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. (Acts 2:23)

...they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou *art* God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. (Acts 4:24–28)

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. (Romans 8:28, 35–36)

(For *the children* being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? *Is there* unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then *it is* not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will *have mercy*, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to

him that formed *it*, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? (Romans 9:11–21)

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable *are* his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, *are* all things: to whom *be* glory for ever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are [exist] and were created. (Rev. 4:11)

THE ESSENTIAL ISSUE AND POSSIBLE ANSWERS

The “problem of evil” can now be re–stated: How can evil exist in a universe created and governed by an all–powerful, benevolent [inherently and completely good] God? The possible answers, according to human reasoning, are:

- If evil exists (and it does as a sad and awful reality), then there is no omnipotent [all–powerful], benevolent God—the argument of the atheist.
- Evil exists, and therefore, if God exists, he must be either limited in his power or arbitrary in his moral character. The former is the argument of the Pelagian or Arminian; the latter, the argument of those who espouse a non–biblical [pagan] concept of God.
- Evil exists, therefore there is more than one God, or there are equal forces [good and evil] in conflict. This is the non–biblical [pagan] argument of those who would posit a dualism (a “good god” and “bad god” or opposing equal forces or principles of both good and evil), or a polytheism in conflict for control of the universe.⁹
- Evil does not exist, except as an illusion in our human thinking—the view of some western cults and Eastern religions (e.g., Christian Science, Buddhism). This would make any ultimate distinction between good and evil arbitrary, and thus deny the moral self–consistency of the Divine character.
- Evil exists as a mystery, independent of God, who remains to a *limited* degree powerful and benevolent. This is the inconsistent argument of some (including

⁹ This is the thinking of some professing Christians when they reduce their concept of God to the level of the devil, making them equals—a pagan, dualistic concept. Such [non–] thinking is present in such statements as, “God casts his vote, the devil casts his vote, and now it’s up to you to cast your vote,” when referring to the election of sinners to salvation. Such talk is utterly irrational. It is to hold a concept of God that is simply not scriptural, for the Word reveals that God is absolutely sovereign, even over the evil acts of men—and Scripture is the ultimate authority.

Pelagians and Arminians), who attempt to deliver God from the charge of being the “author of sin” and yet seek to retain his goodness.¹⁰

- Evil exists in the universe of an omnipotent, benevolent God, who is completely sovereign over it and uses it for his own glory and the highest good—the argument of the consistent Calvinist.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER EVIL

The last view—that God is absolutely sovereign over both natural and moral evil,¹¹ and uses evil for his own glory and the highest good—is the only view that can be consistently aligned to the teaching of Scripture. *Every other view, deriving from sinful [incapacitated by the noetic effects of sin and willful rebellion against God and his truth] humanistic reasoning, and so calling God and his actions into question, seeks to point out an incoherence in the Christian system. These views either deny God and evil, or limit God and seek to bring him down to the finite level and destroy his moral self-consistency—and thus any sufficient or consistent basis for morality.*¹²

The truth of the sovereignty of God over evil may be clarified by the following considerations and implications:

- The existence of evil in a universe created and governed by a benevolent God is not incoherent if God has a morally sufficient reason for this evil to exist. This “problem” is more psychological than logical or philosophical.¹³ Man would rather call God and his actions into question than submit himself in complete trust (Rom. 9:11–24), even to a God who is benevolent in the context of his righteousness.

¹⁰ Some of this group hold that God is either working in a utilitarian fashion as best he can, or that he merely foresaw evil and its results, but was not able to prevent them; or that there are some situations brought about by morally free agents that even God did not foresee. While the latter two are somewhat extreme, the idea that God merely foresaw or foreknew evil would not remove culpability from God. If God foresaw what would happen and then laid his plans accordingly, then *he could have prevented sins, but evidently chose not to do so*. Thus, God would be ultimately responsible for sin by allowing it, yet not controlling it for the highest good and his glory. Further, if God merely foresaw evil as a certainty—and it must have been certain for God to foresee it as such in the biblical sense—then God himself could not have prevented sin. Sin would have existed and been determined by a force outside God. He would thus finitely exist *within* a “universe” over which he exercised no ultimate control, a “universe” controlled in the final sense by an atheistic determinism!

¹¹ Natural evil is evil that occurs in the realm of nature (calamities such as floods, famine, disease, suffering, earthquakes and pestilence). Moral evil is evil or sin that occurs because of the wickedness of man against man (e.g., wars, rapes, torture, murders, hatred, deceit, theft, destruction, etc.).

¹² This is often the approach by the secular college or university professor in his challenge to students who are professing Christians, but doctrinally unsound and inconsistent in their faith. He seeks to destroy both their faith and their basis for morality.

¹³ This issue is fully dealt with by Greg Bahnsen in *Always Ready*. Texarkana: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996. pp. 165–174. He maintains that “The Problem of Evil” is actually a personal expression of a lack of faith.

- Such a view does not take all the mystery out of the problem of evil. God is infinite, and so are his wisdom, power and purpose. We are finite, and simply cannot comprehend all that is implied in this profound issue. Why God, who is absolutely morally self-consistent, should ordain evil, must to a given degree remain a mystery to finite beings. Such matters must be approached by a faith that rests in a wise and morally self-consistent God.
- As finite creatures, we are temporally limited in our thinking to the present and the past. When considering the problem of evil, one must take into account the reality of time. What might be considered as evil in the context of past or present reality may later prove to be great blessing or to result in such. This was certainly true of all the evil realities and events that conspired in the providence of God in exalting Joseph to become the prime minister of Egypt (e.g., his being spoiled by his father, the envy and hatred of his brothers, his being sold into slavery, the attempted seduction by Potiphar’s wife, his imprisonment, and the forgetfulness of Pharaoh’s cup-bearer, etc.). None of these things were good in themselves—each was undoubtedly evil—but they all “worked together for good”. Such good may or may not be seen in this life, but may await the unveiling of eternity (Rom. 8:28–31).¹⁴
- The Scriptures teach that God is both benevolent [absolutely good] and also that he ordains evil deeds. The following quotation is in accord with the testimony of Scripture and deserves to be carefully studied:

God is good, yet he ordains evil deeds. We know that these truths are compatible, for Scripture teaches both and God cannot deny himself...God can foreordain evil only if he himself is good, for in Scripture “evil” is “evil” only by contrast with the goodness of God. God is truly good only if the evil in the world is foreordained by him, for only if evil is fully controlled by God can we be confident that there is a good purpose in it, and only if there is a good purpose in it can we trust the overall good purpose of God.¹⁵

- God foreordains evil; he does not merely “permit” or “allow” it. Such wording as “God permits [allows] evil” is often used by theologians who are either seeking to avoid the idea that God is the culpable author of sin, or are using human language for want of expression.¹⁶
- God, of course, is not the author of evil in the sense that he himself is culpable [blameworthy] or tainted by sin. Such would be a denial of his inherent goodness. That God is not the author of sin may be clarified by the following considerations:

¹⁴ It is important to note that the truth of Romans 8:28 occurs in the context of eternity, and is not limited to this earthly life (cf. v. 28–31). Further, the context contains the very worst that men can do to believers (v. 35–36).

¹⁵ John M. Frame, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, p. 321.

¹⁶ Such language as “permit” or “allow” when used of God, although an understandable accommodation to human language and finiteness, might suggest that God is relative, i.e., there is an absolute above or beyond him to which he himself is either subject or against which he must contend (i.e., evil exists independently from God). Neither are true.

1. The Scriptures hold men fully responsible for their own sins, which would not and could not be true if God were the author of sin (Acts 2:23; Rom. 1:18–32; 2 Thess. 1:7–9; Jude 14–15; Rev. 20:11–13).
2. If God were to charge men with sins for which he were really responsible, then he would not and could not be just, indeed, he would be less than just—he himself would become a criminal, a sinner! Such would be absolutely unthinkable and unscriptural. Thus, the biblical reality of human culpability would necessarily preclude God from being the author of sin.
3. Although God wills evil, it must not be imagined that he wills it in the same sense and manner that he wills what is righteous, holy and good. He ordains evil to exist and controls it, overruling it to the highest good and his glory (Psa. 145:17; Rom. 11:33–36; Rev. 4:11). He does not take pleasure in evil in a positive sense. Thus, it may be right for God to ordain what is not right for man to do and therefore wrong for God to command man to do under his preceptive will. The Dutch Theologian Herman Bavinck seeks to explain this truth by an illustration:

Because man is a rational, moral being, God does not treat him as if he were a stone or a log but deals with him and addresses him in accordance with his nature. Just as a father forbids his child to touch a sharp knife though he himself uses it without injury or damage, so God forbids us to sin though He himself is able to use and does use sin as a means of self-glorification.¹⁷

- God ordains sin, but he does not command it. Sin exists as part of the Divine teleological purpose, but it is not forced upon men by necessity. Men cannot make God culpable for their own sin and breach of God’s preceptive will. They must, as moral, rational, responsible beings, bear the consequences of their own transgressions. God thus controls evil, but not in the sense that he rejoices or takes pleasure in it. To say that God does not control evil is to deny his omnipotence. To say that he wills evil in the same sense as he does what is right and holy is to deny his righteousness and holiness. To say that he controls evil in such a way that men are relieved of their moral responsibility is to deny both their free moral agency and his essential nature. To say, however, that God ordains men to contradict his Law–Word through their own willful actions, and that he controls this for the ultimate good and glory of his eternal purpose, is to assert the absolute sovereignty of God over evil and yet preserve his wisdom, righteousness and holiness. Finite creatures must leave such mystery to the infinite God.

Donald Macleod seeks to put the matters of the fore-ordination of sin and human freedom in simple, yet profound statements, by asserting that God has fore-ordained both sin and human freedom:

...God is not the author of sin. God has fore-ordained sin. He has fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass, and sin has come to pass, and God’s purpose controls, limits, preserves and governs the universe even in the

¹⁷ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 240.

presence of this fact of sin....He does not himself sin. He does not condone sin. He does not constrain to sin. He does not induce to sin. He does not tempt to sin....Fore-ordination is not destructive of freedom; God has ordained freedom...fore-ordination is what *establishes* freedom...nothing can take away from the human being the liberty essential to moral responsibility, because God has fore-ordained the freedom of men at the point of moral decision-making...God fore-ordains their actions, but he fore-ordains them as free actions: as things they do by their on personal volition....I am free because God fore-ordained my freedom.¹⁸

NOTE: The above statement by Macleod must *not* be interpreted in the Arminian sense that “God created man with a free will and so cannot violate that will,” but in the sense that God created man as a free and responsible moral agent. God would not, yea, could not externally limit his own sovereignty in such a way as to render himself morally incapacitated or even inconsistent. He would then cease to be God.

- In the great theodicy of Romans 9,¹⁹ the Apostle answers objections concerning the absolute sovereignty of God over the moral character and destiny of men. (His argument assumes three questions: Is God unfaithful to his covenant promise [v. 6–13]? Is God unrighteous in his sovereign prerogative [v. 14–18]? Is God unjust or arbitrary in holding men accountable [v. 19–29]?). He asserts that God is, indeed, absolutely sovereign in the spiritual, moral and ethical spheres, and that no one has the right to question the Divine prerogative or purpose.
- The absolute sovereignty and moral nature of God must lead to the conclusion that God is not the author of sin because he completely controls the evil of his moral creatures. God is the one great and incomprehensible “Absolute,” the ultimate source of all meaning. In the final analysis there is no true meaning apart from God. The created universe and every fact in it (being a created fact) derives its meaning from God and must be interpreted by him. Thus, evil itself must be and can only be comprehended and interpreted in the context of God as he has been pleased to reveal himself in Scripture. Thus, rather than make God the author of sin, predestination in the context of the scriptural revelation of his nature and character, preserves God from this charge and is a guarantee of his absolute moral perfection.
- The Christian’s faith or trust is in God as he is revealed in Scripture. His ultimate hope and comfort do not lie merely in the omnipotence or absolute sovereignty of God, although such truths are certainly comforting and encouraging. The believer’s ultimate hope rests especially in the self-consistency of God’s moral character—that he is absolutely righteous, good and truthful, gracious and merciful; that he cannot lie, and that his promises remain true. The truth, glory and hope of Romans 8:28—“we know that all things work together for good”—is that God is morally self-consistent and his purpose will infallibly result in his own glory and the

¹⁸ *A Faith to Live By*. Mentor, Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1998, pp. 40–44.

¹⁹ “Theodicy,” a defense of God, from θεός (*theos*), “God,” and δική (*dike*), “justice,” hence, an attempt to justify God in the context of the problem of evil. The apostle’s arguments are more than an attempt, however, they are inspired Scripture—and thus the final word on this subject.

highest good.²⁰ True, biblical faith is not merely or barely intellectual; it also includes an unreserved commitment to and a trust in an infinite Person and the moral self-consistency of that personality.



²⁰ Rom. 8:28, οἶδαμεν δὲ (and we perceive [by faith, which reaches far beyond all experience]) ὅτι τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν τὸν θεὸν (that to those characterized as habitually loving God) πάντα συνεργεῖ εἰς ἀγαθόν (all things are constantly working together for good), τοῖς κατὰ πρόθεσιν κλητοῖς οὖσιν (to those who are characterized as being called according to his [eternal, infallible] purpose). The context (vv. 28–39), which contains the very worst that men can do to believers, yet maintains the immutable love of God through Christ to his own, demonstrates the truth of v. 28. Note that οἶδαμεν is used, not γινώσκωμεν, to emphasize a perception that surpasses experience and relationships. This is necessarily the perception of a faith that rests in the eternal, infallible purpose of God.