

FAITH EFC SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

God is my travel agent

Luke 2:1-7

December 13, 2009

Discuss with your group the problem of evil and human responsibility. Below is a discussion of that topic from Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology. I think you will find it helpful.

B. Concurrence

God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do.

This second aspect of providence, *concurrence* is an expansion of the idea contained in the first aspect, *preservation*. In fact, some theologians (such as John Calvin) treat the fact of concurrence under the category of preservation, but it is helpful to treat it as a distinct category.

In [Ephesians 1:11](#) Paul says that God “accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will.” The word translated “accomplishes” (ἐνεργέω, G1919) indicates that God “works” or “brings about” *all things* according to his own will. No event in creation falls outside of his providence. Of course this fact is hidden from our eyes unless we read it in Scripture. Like preservation, God’s work of concurrence is not clearly evident from observation of the natural world around us.

In giving scriptural proof for concurrence, we will begin with the inanimate creation, then move to animals, and finally to different kinds of events in the life of human beings.

1. Inanimate Creation. There are many things in creation that we think of as merely “natural” occurrences. Yet Scripture says that God causes them to happen. We read of “fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!” ([Ps. 148:8](#)). Similarly,

To the *snow* he says, “Fall on the earth”;
and to the shower and the *rain* “Be strong.” ...
By the breath of God *ice* is given,
and the broad waters are frozen fast.
He loads the thick cloud with moisture;
the clouds scatter his *lightning*.
They turn round and round by his guidance,

to accomplish all that he commands them
on the face of the habitable world.
Whether for correction, or for his land,
or for love, he causes it to happen. (Job 37:6–13; cf. similar statements in 38:22–30)

Again, the psalmist declares that “Whatever the Lord pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps” (Ps. 135:6), and then in the next sentence he illustrates God’s doing of his will in the weather: “He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses” (Ps. 135:7; cf. 104:4).

God also causes the grass to grow: “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth” (Ps. 104:14). God directs the stars in the heavens, asking Job, “Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs?” (Job 38:32 NIV; “the Bear” or Ursa Major is commonly called the Big Dipper; v. 31 refers to the constellations Pleiades and Orion). Moreover, God continually directs the coming of the morning (Job 38:12), a fact Jesus affirmed when he said that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

2. Animals. Scripture affirms that God feeds the wild animals of the field, for, “These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed” (Ps. 104:27–29; cf. Job 38:39–41). Jesus also affirmed this when he said, “Look at the birds of the air...your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt. 6:26). And he said that not one sparrow “will fall to the ground without your Father’s will” (Matt. 10:29).

3.

Some wonder how God’s sovereignty over death relate to earthly causes of death. It is important to recognize that even though there may be immediate “earthly” causes of death - such as disease, a gunshot wound, a car wreck, or the like - still it is God who is sovereign over death.

The death of Saul in the Old Testament illustrates this truth. 1 Chronicles 10:1-4 tells us that the immediate cause of Saul’s death was the enemy’s arrows and his own sword. But several verses later, we read, “Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord; he did not keep the word of the Lord, and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the Lord. So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse” ... 1 Chronicles 10:13-14.

Despite the immediate circumstances that brought death for Saul (enemy arrows and his own sword), God was nevertheless sovereignly behind those circumstances.

Special Supplement - The Death of Saul

Seemingly “Random” or “Chance” Events. From a human perspective, the casting of lots (or its modern equivalent, the rolling of dice or flipping of a coin) is the most typical of random events that occur in the universe. But Scripture affirms that the outcome of

such an event is from God: “The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord” (Prov. 16:33).²

4. Events Fully Caused by God and Fully Caused by the Creature as Well. For any of these foregoing events (rain and snow, grass growing, sun and stars, the feeding of animals, or casting of lots), we could (at least in theory) give a completely satisfactory “natural” explanation. A botanist can detail the factors that cause grass to grow, such as sun, moisture, temperature, nutrients in the soil, etc. Yet Scripture says that *God* causes the grass to grow. A meteorologist can give a complete explanation of factors that cause rain (humidity, temperature, atmospheric pressure, etc.), and can even produce rain in a weather laboratory. Yet Scripture says that *God* causes the rain. A physicist with accurate information on the force and direction a pair of dice was rolled could fully explain what caused the dice to give the result they did—yet Scripture says that *God* brings about the decision of the lot that is cast.

This shows us that it is incorrect for us to reason that if we know the “natural” cause of something in this world, then God did not cause it. Rather, if it rains we should thank him. If crops grow we should thank him. In all of these events, it is not as though the event was partly caused by God and partly by factors in the created world. If that were the case, then we would always be looking for some small feature of an event that we could not explain and attribute that (say 1 percent of the cause) to God. But surely this is not a correct view. Rather, these passages affirm that such events are entirely caused by God. Yet we know that (in another sense) they are entirely caused by factors in the creation as well.

The doctrine of concurrence affirms that God *directs*, and *works through* the distinctive properties of each created thing, so that these things themselves bring about the results that we see. In this way it is possible to affirm that in one sense events are fully (100 percent) caused by God and fully (100 percent) caused by the creature as well. However, divine and creaturely causes work in different ways. The divine cause of each event works as an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore could be called the “primary cause” that plans and initiates everything that happens. But the created thing brings about actions in ways consistent with the creature’s own properties, ways that can often be described by us or by professional scientists who carefully observe the processes. These creaturely factors and properties can therefore be called the “secondary” causes of everything that happens, even though they are the causes that are evident to us by observation.

5. The Affairs of Nations. Scripture also speaks of God’s providential control of human affairs. We read that God “makes nations great, and he destroys them: he enlarges nations, and leads them away” (Job 12:23). “Dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations” (Ps. 22:28). He has determined the time of existence and the place of every nation on the earth, for Paul says, “he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation” (Acts 17:26; cf. 14:16). And when Nebuchadnezzar repented, he learned to praise God,

For his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing;
and *he does according to his will in the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;*
and none can stay his hand or say to him,
“What are you doing?” (Dan. 4:34–35)

6. All Aspects of Our Lives. It is amazing to see the extent to which Scripture affirms that God brings about various events in our lives. For example, our dependence on God to give us food each day is affirmed every time we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11), even though we work for our food and (as far as mere human observation can discern) obtain it through entirely “natural” causes. Similarly, Paul, looking at events with the eye of faith, affirms that “my God will supply every need” of his children (Phil 4:19), even though God may use “ordinary” means (such as other people) to do so.

God plans our days before we are born, for David affirms, “In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Ps. 139:16). And Job says that man’s “days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his bounds that he cannot pass” (Job 14:5). This can be seen in the life of Paul, who says that God “had set me apart before I was born” (Gal. 1:15), and Jeremiah, to whom God said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5).

All our actions are under God’s providential care, for “in him we live and *move*” (Acts 17:28). The individual steps we take each day are directed by the Lord. Jeremiah confesses, “I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps” (Jer. 10:23). We read that “a man’s steps are ordered by the Lord” (Prov. 20:24), and that “a man’s mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Prov. 16:9). Similarly, Proverbs 16:1 affirms, “The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.”³

Success and failure come from God, for we read, “For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up; but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another” (Ps. 75:6–7). So Mary can say, “He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree” (Luke 1:52). The Lord gives children, for children “are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Ps. 127:3).

All our talents and abilities are from the Lord, for Paul can ask the Corinthians, “What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor. 4:7). David knew that to be true regarding his military skill, for, though he must have trained many hours in the use of a bow and arrow, he could say of God, “He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze” (Ps. 18:34).

God influences rulers in their decisions, for “the king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1). An illustration of this was when the Lord “turned the heart of the king of Assyria” to his people, “so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel” (Ezr. 6:22), or when “the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezr. 1:1) to help the people of Israel. But it

is not just the heart of the king that God influences, for he looks down “on all the inhabitants of the earth” and “fashions the hearts of them all” (Ps. 33:14–15). When we realize that the heart in Scripture is the location of our inmost thoughts and desires, this is a significant passage. God especially guides the desires and inclinations of believers, working in us “both *to will* and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

All of these passages, reporting both general statements about God’s work in the lives of all people and specific examples of God’s work in the lives of individuals, lead us to conclude that God’s providential work of concurrence extends to all aspects of our lives. Our words, our steps, our movements, our hearts, and our abilities are all from the Lord.

But we must guard against misunderstanding. Here also, as with the lower creation, God’s providential direction as an unseen, behind-the-scenes, “primary cause,” should not lead us to deny the reality of our choices and actions. Again and again Scripture affirms that we really do *cause* events to happen. We are significant and we are responsible. We *do have choices* and these are real choices that bring about real results. Scripture repeatedly affirms these truths as well. Just as a rock is *really hard* because God has made it with the property of hardness, just as water is *really wet* because God has made it with the property of wetness, just as plants are *really alive* because God has made them with the property of life, so our choices are *real choices* and do have significant effects, because God has made us in such a wonderful way that he has endowed us with the property of willing choice.

One approach to these passages about God’s concurrence is to say that if our choices are real, they *cannot* be caused by God (see below for further discussion of this viewpoint). But the number of passages that affirm this providential control of God is so considerable, and the difficulties involved in giving them some other interpretation are so formidable, that it does not seem to me that this can be the right approach to them. It seems better to affirm that God causes all things that happen, but that he does so in such a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make *willing, responsible choices* choices that have *real and eternal results* and for which we are *held accountable*. Exactly how God combines his providential control with our willing and significant choices, Scripture does not explain to us. But rather than deny one aspect or the other (simply because we cannot explain how both can be true), we should accept both in an attempt to be faithful to the teaching of all of Scripture.

The analogy of an author writing a play may help us to grasp how both aspects can be true. In the Shakespearean play *Macbeth* the character Macbeth murders King Duncan. Now (if we assume for a moment that this is a fictional account), the question may be asked, “Who killed King Duncan?” On one level, the correct answer is “Macbeth.” Within the context of the play he carried out the murder and is rightly to blame for it. But on another level, a correct answer to the question, “Who killed King Duncan?” would be “William Shakespeare”: he wrote the play, he created all the characters in it, and he wrote the part where Macbeth killed King Duncan.

It would not be correct to say that because Macbeth killed King Duncan, William Shakespeare did not kill him. Nor would it be correct to say that because William Shakespeare killed King Duncan, Macbeth did not kill him. Both are true. On the level of the characters in the play Macbeth fully (100 percent) caused King Duncan’s death, but on the level of the creator of the play, William Shakespeare fully (100 percent) caused

King Duncan's death. In similar fashion, we can understand that God fully causes things in one way (as Creator), and we fully cause things in another way (as creatures).

Of course, someone may object that the analogy does not really solve the problem because characters in a play are not real persons; they are only characters with no freedom of their own, no ability to make genuine choices, and so forth. But in response we may point out that God is infinitely greater and wiser than we are. While we as finite creatures can only create fictional characters in a play, not real persons, God, our infinite Creator, has made an actual world and in it has created us as real persons who make willing choices. To say that God *could not* make a world in which he *causes us to make willing choices* (as some would argue today; see discussion below), is simply to limit the power of God. It seems also to deny a large number of passages of Scripture.⁴

7. What About Evil? If God does indeed cause, through his providential activity, everything that comes about in the world, then the question arises, "What is the relationship between God and evil in the world?" Does God actually cause the evil actions that people do? If he does, then is God not responsible for sin?

In approaching this question, it is best first to read the passages of Scripture that most directly address it. We can begin by looking at several passages that affirm that God did, indeed, cause evil events to come about and evil deeds to be done. But we must remember that in all these passages it is very clear that Scripture nowhere shows God as *directly doing anything evil* but rather as bringing about evil deeds through the willing actions of moral creatures. Moreover, *Scripture never blames God for evil or shows God as taking pleasure in evil* and Scripture never excuses human beings for the wrong they do. However we understand God's relationship to evil, we must *never* come to the point where we think that we are not responsible for the evil that we do, or that God takes pleasure in evil or is to be blamed for it. Such a conclusion is clearly contrary to Scripture.

There are literally dozens of Scripture passages that say that God (indirectly) brought about some kind of evil. I have quoted such an extensive list (in the next few paragraphs) because Christians often are unaware of the extent of this forthright teaching in Scripture. Yet it must be remembered that in all of these examples, the evil is actually done not by God but by people or demons who choose to do it.

A very clear example is found in the story of Joseph. Scripture clearly says that Joseph's brothers were wrongly jealous of him ([Gen. 37:11](#)), hated him ([Gen. 37:4, 5, 8](#)), wanted to kill him ([Gen. 37:20](#)), and did wrong when they cast him into a pit ([Gen. 37:24](#)) and then sold him into slavery in Egypt ([Gen. 37:28](#)). Yet later Joseph could say to his brothers, "*God sent me before you to preserve life*" ([Gen. 45:5](#)), and "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" ([Gen. 50:20](#)).⁵ Here we have a combination of evil deeds brought about by sinful men who are rightly held accountable for their sin and the overriding providential control of God whereby God's own purposes were accomplished. Both are clearly affirmed.

The story of the exodus from Egypt repeatedly affirms that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh: God says, "I will harden his heart" ([Ex. 4:21](#)), "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" ([Ex. 7:3](#)), "the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh" ([Ex. 9:12](#)), "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" ([Ex. 10:20](#), repeated in [10:27](#) and again in [11:10](#)), "I will

harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 14:4), and "the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Ex. 14:8). It is sometimes objected that Scripture also says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34), and that God's act of hardening Pharaoh's heart was only in response to the initial rebellion and hardness of heart that Pharaoh himself exhibited of his own free will. But it should be noted that God's promises that he would harden Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21; 7:3) are made long before Scripture tells us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (we read of this for the first time in Ex. 8:15). Moreover, our analysis of concurrence given above, in which both divine and human agents can cause the same event, should show us that both factors can be true at the same time: even when Pharaoh hardens his own heart, that is not inconsistent with saying that God is causing Pharaoh to do this and thereby God is hardening the heart of Pharaoh. Finally, if someone would object that God is just intensifying the evil desires and choices that were already in Pharaoh's heart, then this kind of action could still in theory at least cover all the evil in the world today, since all people have evil desires in their hearts and all people do in fact make evil choices.

What was God's purpose in this? Paul reflects on Exodus 9:16 and says, "For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth'" (Rom. 9:17). Then Paul infers a general truth from this specific example: "So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills" (Rom. 9:18). In fact, God also hardened the hearts of the Egyptian people so that they pursued Israel into the Red Sea: "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" (Ex. 14:17). This theme is repeated in Psalm 105:25: "He turned their hearts to hate his people."

Later in the Old Testament narrative similar examples are found of the Canaanites who were destroyed in the conquest of Palestine under Joshua. We read, "For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be utterly destroyed" (Josh. 11:20; see also Judg. 3:12; 9:23). And Samson's demand to marry an unbelieving Philistine woman "was from the Lord; for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel" (Judg. 14:4). We also read that the sons of Eli, when rebuked for their evil deeds, "would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the Lord to slay them" (1 Sam. 2:25). Later, "an evil spirit from the Lord" tormented King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14).

When David sinned, the Lord said to him through Nathan the prophet, "I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun" (2 Sam. 12:11–12; fulfilled in 16:22). In further punishment for David's sin, "the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became sick" and eventually died (2 Sam. 12:15–18). David remained mindful of the fact that God could bring evil against him, because at a later time, when Shimei cursed David and threw stones at him and his servants (2 Sam. 16:5–8), David refused to take vengeance on Shimei but said to his soldiers, "Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him" (2 Sam. 16:11).

Still later in David's life, the Lord "incited"⁶ David to take a census of the people (2 Sam. 24:1), but afterward David recognized this as sin, saying, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (2 Sam. 24:10), and God sent punishment on the land because of this sin (2 Sam. 24:12–17). However, it is also clear that "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel" (2 Sam. 24:1), so God's inciting of David to sin was a means by which he brought about punishment on the people of Israel. Moreover, the means by which God incited David is made clear in 1 Chronicles 21:1: "Satan stood up against Israel, and *incited* David to number Israel." In this one incident the Bible gives us a remarkable insight into the three influences that contributed in different ways to one action: God, in order to bring about his purposes, worked through Satan to incite David to sin, but Scripture regards David as being responsible for that sin. Again, after Solomon turned away from the Lord because of his foreign wives, "the Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite" (1 Kings 11:14), and "God also raised up as an adversary to him, Rezon the son of Eliada" (1 Kings 11:23). These were evil kings raised up by God.

In the story of Job, though the Lord gave Satan permission to bring harm to Job's possessions and children, and though this harm came through the evil actions of the Sabeans and the Chaldeans, as well as a windstorm (Job 1:12, 15, 17, 19), yet Job looks beyond those secondary causes and, with the eyes of faith, sees it all as from the hand of the Lord: "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; *blessed be the name of the Lord*" (Job 1:21). The Old Testament author follows Job's statement immediately with the sentence, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:22). Job has just been told that evil marauding bands had destroyed his flocks and herds, yet with great faith and patience in adversity, he says, "*The Lord* has taken away." Though he says that the Lord had done this, yet he does not blame God for the evil or say that God had done wrong: he says, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." To *blame* God for evil that he had brought about through secondary agents would have been to sin. Job does not do this, Scripture never does this, and neither should we.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament we read that the Lord "put a lying spirit in the mouth" of Ahab's prophets (1 Kings 22:23) and sent the wicked Assyrians as "the rod of my anger" to punish Israel (Isa. 10:5). He also sent the evil Babylonians, including Nebuchadnezzar, against Israel, saying, "I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants" (Jer. 25:9). Then God promised that later he would punish the Babylonians also: "I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste" (Jer. 25:12). If there is a deceiving prophet who gives a false message, then the Lord says, "if the prophet be deceived and speak a word, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel" (Ezek. 14:9, in the context of bringing judgment on Israel for their idolatry). As the culmination of a series of rhetorical questions to which the implied answer is always "no," Amos asks, "Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (Amos 3:6). There follows a series of natural disasters in Amos 4:6–12, where the Lord reminds the people that he gave them hunger, drought, blight and mildew, locusts, pestilence, and death of men and horses, "yet you did not return to me" (Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11).

In many of the passages mentioned above, God brings evil and destruction on people in judgment upon their sins: They have been disobedient or have strayed into idolatry, and then the Lord uses evil human beings or demonic forces or “natural” disasters to bring judgment on them. (This is not always said to be the case—Joseph and Job come to mind—but it is often so.) Perhaps this idea of judgment on sin can help us to understand, at least in part, how God can righteously bring about evil events. All human beings are sinful, for Scripture tells us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). None of us deserves God’s favor or his mercy, but only eternal condemnation. Therefore, when God brings evil on human beings, whether to discipline his children, or to lead unbelievers to repentance, or to bring a judgment of condemnation and destruction upon hardened sinners, none of us can charge God with doing wrong. Ultimately all will work in God’s good purposes to bring glory to him and good to his people. Yet we must realize that in punishing evil in those who are not redeemed (such as Pharaoh, the Canaanites, and the Babylonians), God is also glorified through the demonstration of his justice, holiness, and power (see Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:14–24).

Through the prophet Isaiah God says, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil:⁷ I the Lord do all these things” (Isa. 45:7 KJV; the Hebrew word for “create” here is אָרַב, H1343, the same word used in Gen. 1:1). In Lamentations 3:38 we read, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?”⁸ The people of Israel, in a time of heartfelt repentance, cry out to God and say, “O Lord, why do you make us err from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?” (Isa. 63:17).⁹

The life of Jonah is a remarkable illustration of God’s concurrence in human activity. The men on board the ship sailing to Tarshish threw Jonah overboard, for Scripture says, “So *they* took up Jonah and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging” (Jonah 1:15). Yet only five verses later Jonah acknowledges God’s providential direction in their act, for he says to God, “*You* cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas” (Jonah 2:3). Scripture simultaneously affirms that the men threw Jonah into the sea and that God threw him into the sea. The providential direction of God did not force the sailors to do something against their will, nor were they conscious of any divine influence on them—indeed, they cried to the Lord for forgiveness as they threw Jonah overboard (Jonah 1:14). What Scripture reveals to us, and what Jonah himself realized, was that God was bringing about his plan through the willing choices of real human beings who were morally accountable for their actions. In a way not understood by us and not revealed to us, God *caused* them to make a *willing choice* to do what they did.

The most evil deed of all history, the crucifixion of Christ, was ordained by God—not just the fact that it would occur, but also all the individual actions connected with it. The church at Jerusalem recognized this, for they prayed:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.* (Acts 4:27)

All the actions of all the participants in the crucifixion of Jesus had been “predestined” by God. Yet the apostles clearly attach no moral blame to God, for the actions resulted from the willing choices of sinful men. Peter makes this clear in his sermon at Pentecost: “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, *you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*” (Acts 2:23). In one sentence he links God’s plan and foreknowledge with the moral blame that attaches to the actions of “lawless men.” They were not forced by God to act against their wills; rather, God brought about his plan *through their willing choices* for which they were nevertheless responsible.

In an example similar to the Old Testament account of God sending a lying spirit into the mouth of Ahab’s prophets, we read of those who refuse to love the truth, “Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:11–12). And Peter tells his readers that those who oppose them and persecute them, who reject Christ as Messiah, “stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do” (1 Peter 2:8).¹⁰

8. Analysis of Verses Relating to God and Evil. After looking at so many verses that speak of God’s providential use of the evil actions of men and demons, what can we say by way of analysis?

a. God Uses All Things to Fulfill His Purposes and Even Uses Evil for His Glory and for Our Good:

Thus, when evil comes into our lives to trouble us, we can have from the doctrine of providence a deeper assurance that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28 NASB). This kind of conviction enabled Joseph to say to his brothers, “You meant evil against me; but *God meant it for good*” (Gen. 50:20).

We can also realize that God is glorified even in the punishment of evil. Scripture tells us that “the Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble” (Prov. 16:4).¹¹ Similarly, the psalmist affirms, “Surely the wrath of men shall praise you” (Ps. 76:10). And the example of Pharaoh (Rom. 9:14–24) is a clear example of the way God uses evil for his own glory and for the good of his people.

b. Nevertheless, God Never Does Evil, and Is Never to Be Blamed for Evil:

In a statement similar to those cited above from Acts 2:23 and 4:27–28, Jesus also combines God’s predestination of the crucifixion with moral blame on those who carry it out: “For the Son of man goes *as it has been determined*; but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22; cf. Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21). And in a more general statement about evil in the world, Jesus says, “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!” (Matt. 18:7).

James speaks similarly in warning us not to blame God for the evil we do when he says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am 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” (James 1:13–14). The verse does not say that God never causes evil; it affirms that we should never think of him as the personal agent who is tempting us or who is to be held accountable for the temptation. We can never blame

God for temptation or think that he will approve of us if we give in to it. We are to resist evil and always blame ourselves or others who tempt us, but we must never blame God. Even a verse such as [Isaiah 45:7](#), which speaks of God “creating evil,” does not say that God himself *does* evil, but should be understood to mean that God ordained that evil would come about through the willing choices of his creatures.

These verses all make it clear that “secondary causes” (human beings, and angels and demons) are *real* and that human beings do cause evil and are responsible for it. Though God ordained that it would come about, both in general terms and in specific details, yet *God is removed from actually doing evil* and his bringing it about through “secondary causes” does not impugn his holiness or render him blameworthy. John Calvin wisely says:

Thieves and murderers and other evildoers are the instruments of divine providence, and the Lord himself uses these to carry out the judgments that he has determined with himself. Yet I deny that they can derive from this any excuse for their evil deeds. Why? Will they either involve God in the same iniquity with themselves, or will they cloak their own depravity with his justice? They can do neither.¹²

A little later, Calvin heads a chapter, “God So Uses the Works of the Ungodly, and So Bends Their Minds to Carry Out His Judgments, That He Remains Pure From Every Stain.”¹³

We should notice that the alternatives to saying that God *uses evil for his purposes* but that *he never does evil* and is *not to be blamed* for it, are not desirable ones. If we were to say that God himself does evil, we would have to conclude that he is not a good and righteous God, and therefore that he is not really God at all. On the other hand, if we maintain that God does not use evil to fulfill his purposes, then we would have to admit that there is evil in the universe that God did not intend, is not under his control, and might not fulfill his purposes. This would make it very difficult for us to affirm that “all things” work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose ([Rom. 8:28](#)). If evil came into the world in spite of the fact that God did not intend it and did not want it to be there, then what guarantee do we have that there will not be more and more evil that he does not intend and that he does not want? And what guarantee do we have that he will be able to use it for his purposes, or even that he can triumph over it? Surely this is an undesirable alternative position.

c. God Rightfully Blames and Judges Moral Creatures for the Evil They Do: Many passages in Scripture affirm this. One is found in Isaiah: “These have *chosen* their own ways, and their soul *delights in* their abominations; I also will choose affliction 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” ([Isa. 66:3–4](#)). Similarly, we read, “God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices” ([Eccl. 7:29](#)). *The blame for evil is always on the responsible creature* whether man or demon, who does it, and *the creature who does evil is always worthy of punishment*. Scripture consistently affirms that God is righteous and just to punish us for our sins. And if we object that he should not find fault with us because we cannot resist his will, then we must ponder the apostle Paul’s own response to that question: “You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For

who can resist his will?' But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?" (Rom. 9:19–20). In every case where we do evil, we know that we *willingly* choose to do it, and we realize that we are rightly to be blamed for it.

d. Evil Is Real, Not an Illusion, and We Should Never Do Evil, for It Will Always Harm Us and Others: Scripture consistently teaches that we never have a right to do evil, and that we should persistently oppose it in ourselves and in the world. We are to pray, "Deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13), and if we see anyone wandering from the truth and doing wrong, we should attempt to bring him back. Scripture says, "If any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19–20). We should never even *will* evil to be done, for entertaining sinful desires in our minds is to allow them to "wage war" against our souls (1 Peter 2:11) and thereby to do us spiritual harm. If we are ever tempted to say, "Why not do evil that good may come?" as some people were slanderously charging Paul with teaching, we should remember what Paul says about people who teach that false doctrine: "Their condemnation is just" (Rom. 3:8).

In thinking about God using evil to fulfill his purposes, we should remember that there are things that are *right* for God to do but *wrong* for us to do: He requires others to worship him, and he accepts worship from them. He seeks glory for himself. He will execute final judgment on wrongdoers. He also uses evil to bring about good purposes, but he does not allow us to do so. Calvin quotes a statement of Augustine with approval: "There is a great difference between what is fitting for man to will and what is fitting for God....For through the bad wills of evil men God fulfills what he righteously wills."¹⁴ And Herman Bavinck uses the analogy of a parent who will himself use a very sharp knife but will not allow his child to use it, to show that God himself uses evil to bring about good purposes but never allows his children to do so. Though we are to imitate God's moral character in many ways (cf. Eph. 5:1), this is one of the ways in which we are not to imitate him.

e. In Spite of All of the Foregoing Statements, We Have to Come to the Point Where We Confess That We Do Not Understand How It Is That God Can Ordain That We Carry Out Evil Deeds and Yet Hold Us Accountable for Them and Not be Blamed Himself: We can affirm that all of these things are true, because Scripture teaches them. But Scripture does *not* tell us exactly *how* God brings this situation about or how it can be that God holds us accountable for what he ordains to come to pass. Here Scripture is silent, and we have to agree with Berkhof that ultimately "the problem of God's relation to sin remains a mystery."¹⁵

9. Are We "Free"? Do We Have "Free Will"? If God exercises providential control over all events are we in any sense free? The answer depends on what is meant by the word *free*. In some senses of the word *free* everyone agrees that we are free in our will and in our choices. Even prominent theologians in the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition concur. Both Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* (pp. 103, 173) and John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹⁶ are willing to speak *in some sense* of the "free" acts and choices of man. However, Calvin explains that the term is so subject to

misunderstanding that he himself tries to avoid using it. This is because “free will is not sufficient to enable man to do good works, unless he be helped by grace.”¹⁷ Therefore, Calvin concludes:

Man will then be spoken of as having this sort of free decision, not because he has free choice equally of good and evil, but because he acts wickedly by will, not by compulsion. Well put, indeed, but what purpose is served by labeling with a proud name such a slight thing?

Calvin continues by explaining how this term is easily misunderstood:

But how few men are there, I ask, who when they hear free will attributed to man do not immediately conceive him to be master of both his own mind and will, able of his own power to turn himself toward either good or evil....If anyone, then, can use this word without understanding it in a bad sense, I shall not trouble him on this account...I'd prefer not to use it myself, and I should like others, if they seek my advice, to avoid it.¹⁸

Thus, when we ask whether we have “free will,” it is important to be clear as to what is meant by the phrase. Scripture nowhere says that we are “free” in the sense of being outside of God’s control¹⁹ or of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything. (This is the sense in which many people seem to assume we must be free; see discussion below.) Nor does it say we are “free” in the sense of being able to do right on our own apart from God’s power. But we are nonetheless free in the greatest sense that any creature of God could be free—we make *willing* choices, choices that have *real effects*.²⁰ We are aware of no restraints on our will from God when we make decisions.²¹ We must insist that we have the power of *willing* choice; otherwise we will fall into the error of fatalism or determinism and thus conclude that our choices do not matter, or that we cannot really make willing choices. On the other hand, the kind of freedom that is demanded by those who deny God’s providential control of all things, a freedom to be outside of God’s sustaining and controlling activity, would be impossible if Jesus Christ is indeed “continually carrying along things by his word of power” (Heb. 1:3, author’s translation). If this is true, then to be outside of that providential control would simply be not to exist! An absolute “freedom,” totally free of God’s control, is simply not possible in a world providentially sustained and directed by God himself.