

Evil and divine decrees

A Christian wrote and asked, *How can God limit sin and control the circumstances of its manifestation, without being guilty of being the cause of sin?*

—David

He used the example of Absalom who committed incest with the wives of David and showed it was God himself who raised up Absalom against David as judgment. Yet Absalom was considered guilty, even though his sins were decreed by God. How can God be exempt from the charge of being the cause of evil?

Dear David,

Your question brings up an entire branch of theology called *theodicy* which deals with the goodness of God and the presence of evil. This is a difficult aspect of theology and philosophy because it involves free will, justice and God's sovereignty. To what decree is the will free? Does a divine decree involve application of force? Is the presence of evil a good thing?

Partial answers exist but they are partial only and may not satisfy inquisitive minds such as yours. After considering some of the answers, you will come to a point where you must decide if you will be satisfied with partial answers.

Remember, we are dealing with an infinite mind which sees the end from the beginning and has not revealed everything about his eternal purposes. God is gracious to give us partial answers because the mere existence of the partial suggests that final answers must exist somewhere or at some time, though we are not yet equipped to see them. At some point we must decide to trust him or not.

God's strategy

Let's take a look at the supreme example of the interplay between good and evil and the outcome of it — the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ as described in the apostle's prayer in Acts 4:27,28 —

...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

As we look at the entire prayer starting from verse 24, we note these particulars:

- In the beginning of the prayer, the apostles addressed God as *sovereign Lord*. No question existed in their minds as to God's control over the circumstances.

- They expressed God's authority over his creation.
- They quoted from Psalm 2, which is a declaration of God's ultimate triumph over the forces of evil and the establishment of justice in the earth.

None of that is particularly controversial. Then comes one of the most remarkable statements in the study of theodicy:

The apostles state that the enemies of Christ gathered together to do what God predestined them to do, yet those people acted freely. Everything was done by his plan.

Notice also the apostles had no philosophical problems with any of this. Why not?

Here is where partial answers come in.

They saw clearly the results of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus — the salvation of all believers throughout all the ages. They saw an infinitely greater good came out of the evil than the significance of the evil itself at the time. It was so great a good that it makes the evil recede into insignificance.

We can deduce from the tone of the apostles that they saw no reason why an omniscient holy mind could not use evil as a tool to produce grace, glory and holiness for his people. It cannot be intrinsically wrong to decree that evil people should be allowed to do as they please, if the final outcome is good.

What an incredible paradox! What military general would deliberately arrange his own defeat as the main tool for victory? No human thinks like this, which shows that the entire plan was not human.

Because the crucifixion is in the past, we observe this pattern accurately. Hindsight is accurate. But what about the present? Or the future? Is it possible that God is now working out the same kind of strategic pattern, of which the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus was the supreme example?

If we can perceive the righteousness of God in the past, in the way he used evil to produce a greater good, then can we trust him with the future?

Striking examples

Is such a divine strategy exceptional? Let's look at some examples:

Was the apostasy of Israel in the Old Testament a good thing or a bad thing? Obviously apostasy is a bad thing and Israel got what it had coming. However, is it a bad thing that we have the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel and the Minor Prophets, with all their exhortations, pleas for holiness and predictions of a coming messiah with the glories to follow? Would we be pleased that those books be removed because apostasy

is a bad thing?

And what about the fall of Adam? Was Adam's disobedience a good thing? Certainly not. It was not only wrong but the consequence brought four things on his descendants: Sin, death, judgment and condemnation. (Romans 5:12-19) That's a heavy load to carry.

Of course there are the four things provided by the Second Adam: Wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. (1Corinthians 1:30) Those four things may sound a bit ambiguous for the moment but we will have all eternity to unpack each one and enjoy their contents.

The free will dilemma

We have looked at God's will and long-term strategy. Now let's look at the will of the people involved.

Did God oblige Pontius Pilate, Herod and the Jews to do anything they did not want to do? Clearly not. Nothing indicates they were acting under compulsion. They acted freely.

Could they have done otherwise with better knowledge? Yes. Paul said so. 1Corinthians 2:7,8 says,

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

This is a remarkable statement! If the rulers mentioned in this verse had known the hidden wisdom of God, they would not have crucified Christ. Why did God hide it from them? Because it is wisdom intended for our glory, not theirs.

Your original question was expressed using the incident with Absalom. God decreed judgment on David and that the application of it would be by allowing Absalom to commit incest with David's wives. A decree is not the same as the act that fulfills the decree. Saying that a thing must be done is not the same as doing it yourself.

That may not answer our questions as we may like. God's boldness in doing this sort of thing generates emotions along with questions. It could be doubts with fears; or trust with awe. The choice is ours.

As we look back on the events surrounding Jesus, we see the divine strategy is not fundamentally different than that involving judgment on David. Hindsight is easy. Foresight is hard. During the three years the apostles were with Jesus, they understood little about God's plan. The little they grasped was distorted. Even after the resurrection, during the days before his ascension, they supposed Jesus might be a military leader and restore Israel. (Acts 1:6)

This brings up the question: Was the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus the best possible

display of God's holiness for the purpose of bringing about salvation? Yes! In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, asking the Father to remove this *cup* of suffering from him, *if it is possible*. (Matthew 26:39)

Apparently nothing else was possible. Why? Because God is infinitely holy. Therefore, whatever he does must reflect that attribute in the greatest possible way.

At this point in time, we are in the same posture as the disciples before the crucifixion. We don't see the whole picture yet. In fact, we may not be seeing any more of our own picture now than the disciples did in their time.

We can, however, reason it through. The first coming of Christ involved a divine strategy that displayed the holiness of God against the backdrop of human depravity in a manner that could not happen otherwise.

At the second coming of Christ, will we find ourselves in the same posture as the disciples were when they prayed that prayer in Acts Chapter 4? Will we look back and see that of all the ways God could have displayed his holiness, this current world was the greatest of all possibilities?

I warned you at the beginning that the answers to your questions would only be partial. This causes us to face a moral choice. Either be satisfied with the partial and therefore trust God with the rest, or demand full answers before we trust him.

We have been given enough clues to see that God's decree to permit evil actions throughout history is holy because we have seen some of the outcomes. Therefore our faith in him is not blind. Shortsighted indeed, but not blind.

It appears that for time being, we must be satisfied with that.

Yours in His bonds,
Roger

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