

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

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Is Everything That Happens God's Will?

Colossians 1:9-14 (NIV)

9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, 10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, 12 and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 6:9-10 (NIV)

9 "This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

10 your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Mark 1:40-45 (NLT)

40 A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean," he said.

41 Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" 42 Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed. 43 Then Jesus sent him on his way with a stern warning: 44 "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."

45 But the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened. As a result, large crowds soon surrounded Jesus, and he couldn't publicly enter a town anywhere. He had to stay out in the secluded places, but people from everywhere kept coming to him.

Revelation 21:1-7 (NLT)

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

5 And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." 6 And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. 7 All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

[Slide 1] Opening

[Slide 2] Good morning church! We have been looking at this difficult question: If God is perfectly good and all-powerful, why is there pain and suffering and evil in the world? How can we believe in the goodness of God without denying or ignoring or minimizing the reality of pain, suffering, and evil? How can we as Christians hold onto all three parts of this paradox as true?

[Slide 3] Review

So far, we've looked at the parts of the answer that explain the *reasons why pain and evil exist in the world God created*. They don't tell us about particular cases (like the most recent shooting), but they explain generally how it is that pain and suffering and evil should exist at all.

(1) We saw that the creation of a real world allowed for *the possibility of pain* as a necessary aspect of reality. The constancy of properties meant that some things that were good and beneficial in some settings could bring us pain if they were used improperly or if we failed to recognize their limitations (like trying to breathe water if you're not a fish).

The real world also included *the likelihood of experiencing pain and suffering* as a consequence of living in this world with its attendant dangers. Our bodies were created with systems and mechanisms that alerted us to dangers (so that we would take actions that would prevent greater pain), and that allowed us to

heal after being injured or infected, and even to improve as a result of encountering these hostile entities.

So God's good world was never intended to be free from every possibility of pain or suffering. It was always meant to be one in which we were expected to encounter various kinds of pains or suffering and to be strengthened by those encounters so that we were better able to thrive in the world.

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(2) God's good world also had another necessary aspect built into its very structure: *human beings were given genuine freedom, the possibility of choosing* whether we would live in dependence upon God or attempt to live independently as if we were gods. God gave us freedom because he wanted to have a genuine relationship with people, where we responded to his love with love in return, freely choosing to obey and trust him. He could have made us puppets who merely acted out the script that he had written. But that isn't what he wanted; he wanted someone with whom he could engage fully, who would be a genuine partner in the adventure of fulfilling his purposes for the universe he had designed for us.

That freedom made it possible for Adam and Eve, our first parents, to turn away from God. And the "*law of consequences*," which is a part of the moral structure of the universe, meant that Adam's sin affected all of humanity. The seeds of rebellion and self-determination that he sowed led to destruction that was reaped by every one of his descendants. As a result, we are all broken from birth, cut off from the source of life and the knowledge of what is good, true, and right. In our brokenness, we bring damage and pain to ourselves and to others. Each of us has been damaged personally, as has our families, our society, and every human culture throughout history. We have contributed to the pain and suffering of the world and we have been recipients of that damage at the hands of others.

Because God is faithful to his nature and to his purposes for his creation, he limited himself by allowing our choices to stand, even when those choices have led to consequences he did not want for us and did not intend for us to experience.

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So the beginning portions of the answer showed us two key principles. First: *The creation of a real world in which cause and effect (the law of consequences) operates shows us that some pain is due merely to the fact that (a) the properties of the universe are constant and (b) the possibility of choosing evil was a necessary construct of this world.*

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And second: *Consequently, much of the pain and suffering and evil in the world is due to: (a) the effects of human sinfulness on the natural world; (b) the sinful choices of people; and (c) the consequences of those choices, including the systemic and universal integration and enculturation of evil.*

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(3) We also saw that there is a complication in this basic plot. Sin did not enter the world through Adam; it had a prior history with Satan and the angels who followed him in rebellion against God. As a result of their freely chosen actions, there now exists a spiritual kingdom that is opposed to God and seeks to destroy all that he has made and loves.

So we have a third contributing reason for the existence of pain, suffering, and evil in the world—the reality of God’s enemy and the battle for the allegiance of the hearts of people. *Demonic evil began a cosmic conflict between God and the kingdom of darkness, led by Satan, who seeks to inflict pain and suffering upon people and to destroy all that God loves, especially human beings, their relationships, and societies. Demonic evil increases the pain and suffering in the world.*

[Slide 8] *Introduction to Part 4*

Earlier in this series, I mentioned that this problem/question/paradox has both an intellectual and a personal aspect to it. We are genuinely puzzled by the apparent inconsistency of believing that God is perfectly good and infinitely powerful while acknowledging that pain, suffering, and evil are real. It seems logically impossible. Parts 1-3 of this answer are helpful here—at least, I am persuaded by them, and I hope that they are helpful for you as well.

But there is also the personal pain we have suffered or observed, pain that doesn’t disappear when the logical explanations are offered. I remember during my seminary years, when I first began to study this question in depth, I read a book by a notable theologian. His goal was to demonstrate that the present universe, with all of its pain, was, in fact, the best possible world that God could have created. His argument was brilliant, dense, filled with mathematical and logical proofs, and reasoned with consummate expertise. About the same time, my wife and I were dealing with the shock of having a personal friend whom we dearly loved attempt suicide. I remember writing on an exam or a paper something to the effect that in the face of our friend’s suffering I wanted to take all of those formulas and proofs and stuff them in the author’s mouth and say to him, “*Just shut up. I don’t care about all of your logic and your mathematical proofs right now.*”

It was an emotional response, not a rational one, to be sure. But the point I was trying to make was this—all of the logical explanations in the world, no matter how true or valuable they might be, aren't enough to heal the hurt in the heart of someone who is suffering. They are still important—and necessary—but they aren't sufficient by themselves to really address every aspect of this question, because it's more than just an intellectual exercise.

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Part four of this answer starts to move us a bit closer to a satisfactory position; it's going to help us with both parts of the problem. First, however, we have another complication, a dramatic turn in the story, if you will.

That turn will take us into a long and sharply-contested controversy in the Christian faith. So I want to say something as clearly as I can from the outset.

On both sides of this controversy, there are people who are faithful followers of Jesus Christ, who believe the Bible to be absolutely true, and who are not stupid. In fact, there are brilliant thinkers on both sides who nevertheless disagree very sharply and fundamentally about a crucial piece of this answer. So I want you to know that even though I hold to a particular viewpoint, which I am trying to persuade others to hold as well—that's why I'm telling you all this!—I recognize that there is a different view that is held by others within the faith. There are people for whom I have immense respect, my teachers, scholars far more knowledgeable than I am, friends and colleagues whom I love dearly, with whom I disagree. Not only do I disagree (on this particular point), I am convinced that they are quite mistaken in their beliefs (and they would say the same about me).

But I understand their position, and I understand why they hold to it and how they arrived at their understanding. I understand that they think that they are being faithful to Scripture and are interpreting it honestly. I just think they're mistaken.

So I'm going to try to present their side of the argument fairly without misstating or caricaturing it, while I also show where I think they're wrong and why and why that matters. I must admit to you that this is a complex matter—far more complex than I can present in a simple sermon. Again, for those of you who want to delve more deeply into the weeds, I can provide some additional resources, including my own arguments. But today I'm going to try to present this in a simplified manner, so that we can see how this helps us understand this problem of suffering and evil as it relates to our faith in a good God.

[Slide 10] *The viewpoint of determinism (compatibilism)*

There is a portion of the church that holds to a position which is known as “*determinism*.” (Its most popular form today is called “*compatibilism*.”) This belief goes back at least 1600 years, and includes among its adherents some of the most famous Christian thinkers in the history of the church. But most of us aren’t reading ancient theologians discussing abstruse questions of the faith. Most of us come across this position by hearing someone say something like this:

“I don’t know why all this bad stuff happens. I just know that God is sovereign and he is in control of everything. And I believe that everything happens for a reason, so it must be God’s will that (this unspeakable evil) happened.”

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Let’s lay out the assumptions and conclusions of this viewpoint.

(1) “*God is sovereign*” means that God has determined everything that has happened or will happen in time and space. His “control” is such that nothing occurs except what God has purposed to occur (i.e., “*meticulous providence*”), including all acts or consequences that we might deem evil and every occurrence of suffering of every kind. He is the ultimate cause of all that happens.

Let me be very clear here; I am not charging determinists with something they do not believe. It is their conclusion that Scripture teaches that God has determined everything that happens: every corrupt decision, every atrocity, every sin that you and everyone else commits, from the white lie to avoid being spanked to the torture and execution of prisoners in the death camps. “*God is in control*” means that he is the cause of everything that happens.

(2) However God is perfectly good and perfectly just and may not be charged with doing evil. All that he does is perfectly good, even when it does not appear to us to be good. Even things that his word defines as evil must be seen as good because they serve the greater good of his unknown purposes.

(3) We are finite, and thus are incapable of understanding the infinite God. Therefore we cannot comprehend how things that appear to be evil are actually good, because they serve the greater good of displaying God’s glory.

(4) Adam and Eve were the only people with genuinely free will. Since Adam’s sin, all humans are utterly sinful, unable to do good, and incapable of acting contrary to their nature, which is bound by sin. Our only freedom is the freedom to sin. We sin because it is our nature to do so; therefore we are responsible for our actions, *even though God has determined that we should do so.*

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We are therefore left with a paradox. According to this understanding of the biblical revelation: (a) God is absolutely sovereign and has decreed all that

happens. (b) Nevertheless, humans are responsible for their sins because they freely choose to sin by acting in accordance with their nature. What appears to be a contradiction is simply inexplicable, a mystery that cannot be fathomed.

According to this view, then, the answer to the problem of evil is this: *God has ordained everything that happens in accordance with his perfect and good will, including all suffering and everything that may be termed evil, so that his glory may be revealed. We cannot understand why he has ordained anything, but it all fits into his plan, which will ultimately be shown to be good. Therefore we must trust him, for he is perfectly good, and what he wants for us is perfectly good. Even things that appear to be evil to us are part of God's good plan for us.*

[Slide 13] *The problems with this answer*

There are at least four major problems with this viewpoint—which I believe misunderstands the Scriptural teaching (not completely, but at a crucial point).

(1) Since God's sovereignty necessarily controls everything (by their definition), not even Adam and Eve had free will. Therefore their actions must have been determined by God, making him ultimately responsible both for their sin and for the subsequent state of humanity as controlled by sin. Any and all sins that people commit, as well as the thoughts and intentions that preceded their actions must reflect what God wants and determined must be. Consequently, *we are left with a God who wills sin in order to bring about good*, something which the Scripture emphatically denies is the case. (Paul recoils at the absurdity that God might will us to sin in order to bring about good, and repudiates the notion in the strongest possible language [Romans 3:8; see also 6:1-2, 15; 7:7, 13].)

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(2) If God wills that sin occur, and if everything that God wills is good (since anything that God does is good, and nothing happens that does not reflect his will), then it follows that *God considers sin to be good*. This is incompatible with God's nature as revealed in Scripture. How can that which God condemns and declares to be evil in his word be good? (Isaiah 5:20)

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(3) If we try to defend God's goodness by insisting that we simply cannot understand God's goodness (because we are sinful and finite), then "*good*" is a meaningless word, as is the statement that "*God is good.*"

Our only measure for goodness is conformity with God's person and nature, which we know from his word. If God's actions, by which he is the cause of evil, are declared to be good in contradiction to what the Scripture says about him and about what is evil, then we have no way to understand what "good" really is. I.e.,

it can't be evil for me to do something that God calls "evil" but good for him to do it. If God is "good" when he does something (or causes something to happen), something that he calls "evil" when we do it, then what does it mean to be "good"?

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(4) If we insist instead, as determinists do, that God is nevertheless good and cannot be charged with responsibility for evil, despite being sovereign over evil (determining that it exists), doesn't this imply that God is not only unfair, but unjust?

Suppose that an adult were to brainwash or compel a child to commit crimes. Even if we insist that the child is still guilty for his or her actions, *we would not exonerate the adult responsible for bringing this state of affairs about, since he or she clearly was responsible for causing the child to act the way he or she did.* And please note this well: the reason we would not exonerate the adult does *not* depend upon the adult's inherent sinfulness (which would allow us to exempt God). The reason we would not exonerate the adult is because of the adult's responsibility and power to bring about the state of affairs that compelled the child to act in the way that he or she did (which does not exempt God).

[Slide 17] *Escape from the moral dilemma*

Determinism thus leaves us with a moral dilemma: by their reasoning, we have a God who is responsible for human sin while condemning us for sinning. But the way of escape from this dilemma is actually relatively simple. The problem lies in the misunderstanding of divine sovereignty.

[Slide 18] *The nature of God's sovereignty*

God is sovereign—he is the absolute and sole master responsible for the creation and continuation of the universe. He is the ruler of the universe. But his exercise of sovereignty does not require that he determine and cause everything that happens. (Or, as I heard one scholar claim, that God is responsible for the precise movements of every subatomic particle in the history of the universe and every thought or decision by every person who ever lived.)

Rather, divine sovereignty may be understood not in the sense of meticulous control of all details, but the determination of the limits and framework in which everything would occur. God determined to create a universe in which certain things would be the case—and no one can change those things. That universe was one that he filled with morally responsible creatures—angels and people. In that universe, those morally responsible creatures would possess genuine, but limited, freedom; their actions and choices were not determined. That freedom and their capacities to decide freely were a part of the ordered structuring of creation, part

of the moral fabric of the world. The creation reflects his perfect will in that *this kind of world is the kind of a world he wanted, not that every event is what he wanted to happen*. God sovereignly created a world in which things happen that he did not determine and does not directly control.

[Slide 19] *The significance of this for understanding our world*

How does knowing this help us?

As we've seen in the past two weeks, both humans and angels have the capacity to act contrary to the will of God. Those choices were neither predetermined by God nor necessary for the fulfillment of his purposes for creation. They were, however, possible, because God chose to make a world in which sentient beings could make genuinely free choices. This means that *God's will is therefore not the only factor that determines what happens in the universe*. The decisions by other beings (angels and humans) also affect what will occur within the overall limits of God's providential design for creation. And this is the crucial point of part four of the answer: *It follows therefore, that not everything that happens is God's will—some things happen that do not reflect his intentions, purposes, or desires for his creation*.

[Slide 20] *Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane*

Consider, for instance, a crucial scene that is part of the story of Passion Week—Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he is arrested and taken to trial before the Sanhedrin.

39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. 40 On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." 41 He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 42 "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:39-42)

Jesus did not sin, yet the possibility that he could act in opposition to God's will is explicitly mentioned in the prayer ("*yet not my will*"), and was apparently part of the struggle in Jesus' own life at that point. Jesus thus demonstrates that the possibility of choosing to oppose the Father's will is a real option. He also indicates that he understands the difference between his own desire (at that moment potential but unrealized) and the desire of the Father. His decision will determine whether or not God's will is accomplished. He does not pray, for instance, "*Father, since everything must reflect your will, help me to overcome these feelings of wanting to oppose your will*." The very real struggle between submitting to the will of the Father and choosing to exert his own desire to escape from the approaching suffering shows that human beings inherently have the

capacity to choose between real options, at least one of which is opposed to the will of God. Our decisions can determine whether or not God's will is done.

[Slide 21] *Other evidence*

Consider also the passages we read this morning.

The opening of Jesus' model prayer for the disciples in Matthew 6 is extremely important in this context. He tells his disciples to pray that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is a request for something to happen that is not currently happening. If everything that happened reflected God's specific will, then why are we to earnestly pray that God's will would come to pass? We are to pray for it *because his will is not happening, because the world does not yet reflect what he wants for us.*

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Likewise, in Paul's prayer for the Colossian church, he prays that they would know the will of God, so that they would live differently as a consequence of learning God's will. Paul does not assume that whatever is happening in the lives of these Christians must be what God intends for them. He wants them to understand who God is, what he is like, what it looks like to be a child of God, to experience the transforming power that comes from following Jesus Christ, *so that their lives reflect God's will* and make his will visible to the world.

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When the leper comes to Jesus in Mark 1, weeping, fearful, he is living under the assumption that what happened to him must be God's will, punishment for his sins. He has heard that there is a prophet of God who is performing miracles. The leper has no doubt whatsoever that Jesus can heal people. But what he does not know is *whether Jesus will heal him—because he is assuming that everything that happens is God's will. He assumes that his sickness is a punishment from God and he does not know if there is any way to escape.* Jesus shows us who God is in that moment—and remember, we have nothing that reveals God to us better or more completely than the person of Jesus, God himself in human flesh. Jesus shows us that this man's sickness was not God's will; instead, God was more than willing to heal him.

In fact, Jesus spent the entirety of his ministry fighting against all of the pain and suffering that had come upon the world. We see God's will expressed in Jesus' unwavering opposition to evil and his compassion to relieve the suffering of people. He did not assume that everything that happened was God's will. *Instead he set himself to do battle with evil and to relieve the sufferings of people and sent his disciples out to do likewise* (Matthew 12:28; 1 John 3:8; Matthew 10:7-8; Luke

10:8-9). Disease, afflictions, the oppression of injustice and poverty, the suffering due to violence, robbery, corruption, and hatred; none of that reflected God's will. God's will was revealed in his Son and the kingdom he came to establish.

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And in the final picture of the new heavens and the new earth from Revelation 21, we see what God intended for human beings all along. It is his will to overcome all suffering, all evil, and to transform what Satan has poisoned and what we have spoiled into glorious beauty forever. That is the heart of God. That is what he intended when he created this universe and placed us in it. The goal has always been and still is that we live with God as his people, freely choosing to love him because we have known his love, we have seen his goodness, we have received his mercy; and we have chosen to say "yes" to his grace, that we might live with him forever, freed from all of the rottenness that is part of this age.

[Slide 25] *Why this matters*

When we are in pain, suffering, grieving, we do not need to wonder if God wants us to suffer, if we are simply to assume that pain must be his will for us. Jesus shows us otherwise. There are things that happen in this world that God never intended, did not plan, did not predetermine, and does not want. Even when we are suffering from the consequences of our own sinful choices, those consequences are not God's will. They reflect the goodness of God's will in creating a universe with a moral fabric, but they do not reflect his intentions or desires for us. *Since things happen that are not God's will (that is, they do not represent God's desired plan or purposes for our lives or reflect his standards of what is good and right), then he is not to be blamed for all of the pain and suffering that I experience or observe in the world. Even when he brings discipline or judgment to a person or a nation, the pain and suffering is not what he wants; what he wants is for people to be well.*

[Slide 26]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]