

Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained that Evil Be?

Jonathan Edwards on the Decrees of God
As Preached by John Piper
July 1, 1998

Fourteen years ago Charles Colson wrote,

"The western church – much of it drifting, enculturated, and infected with cheap grace – desperately needs to hear Edwards' challenge. . . . It is my belief that the prayers and work of those who love and obey Christ in our world may yet prevail as they keep the message of such a man as Jonathan Edwards."

That conviction lies behind The Jonathan Edwards Institute and behind this conference. And I certainly believe it.

Most of us, having only been exposed to one of Edwards' sermons, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God," do not know the real Jonathan Edwards. We don't know that he knew his heaven even better than his hell, and that his vision of the glory of God was just as ravishing as his vision of hell was repulsive – as it should be.

Most of us don't know:

- ✓ That he is considered now, by secular and evangelical historians alike, to be the greatest religious thinker America has ever produced
- ✓ That he not only was God's kindling for the Great Awakening in the 1730's and 1740's, but was also its most penetrating analyst and critic
- ✓ That he was driven by a great longing to see the missionary task of the church completed, and that his influence on the modern missionary movement is immense because of his *Life of David Brainerd*
- ✓ That he was a rural pastor for 23 years in a church of 600 people
- ✓ That he was a missionary to Indians for 7 years after being asked to leave his church
- ✓ That, together with Sarah, he reared 11 faithful children
- ✓ That he lived only until he was 54 and died with a library of only 300 books but, nevertheless, his own books are still ministering mightily after 250 years.

But not as mightily as they should. Mark Noll, who teaches history at Wheaton and has thought much about the work of Edwards has written:

“Since Edwards, American evangelicals have not thought about life from the ground up as Christians because their entire culture has ceased to do so. Edwards's *piety* continued on in the revivalist tradition, and his theology continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to *his God-entranced world-view* or his profoundly theological philosophy. The disappearance of Edwards's perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.”

One of the burdens of this Conference, and certainly one of the burdens of my life, is the recovery of a "God-entranced world-view." "Evangelicals Seeking the Glory of God," in my understanding, means "evangelicals seeking a God-entranced world view." But what I have seen over 18 years of pastoral ministry and six years of teaching experience before that, is that people who waver with uncertainty over the problem of God's sovereignty in the matter of evil usually do not have a God-entranced world view. For them, now God is sovereign, and now he is not. Now he is in control, and now he is not. Now he is good and reliable when things are going well, and when they go bad, well, maybe he's not. Now he's the supreme authority of the universe, and now he is in the dock with human prosecutors peppering him with demands that he give an account of himself.

But when a person settles it Biblically, intellectually and emotionally, that God has ultimate control of all things, including evil, and that this is gracious and precious beyond words, then a marvelous stability and depth come into that person's life and they develop a "God-entranced world view." When a person believes, with the Heidelberg Catechism (Question 27), that "The almighty and everywhere present power of God . . . upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand" – when a person believes and cherishes that truth, they have the key to a God-entranced world view.

So my aim in this second message is to commend to you this absolute sovereign control of God over all things, including evil, because it is Biblical, and because it will help you become stable and deep and God-entranced and God-glorifying in all you think and feel and do.

And when we set our face in this direction, Jonathan Edwards becomes a great help to us, because he wrestled with the problems of God's sovereignty as deeply as anyone. And I want you to know how he resolved some of the difficulties.

So my plan is to lay out for you some of the evidence for God's control of all things, including evil. Then I will deal with two problems:

1. Is God then the author of sin?
2. And why does he will that there be evil in the world?

I will close with an exhortation that you not waver before the truth of God's sovereignty, but embrace it for the day of your own calamity.

1. Evidence of God's Control

First, then, consider the evidence that God controls all things, including evil. When I speak of evil, I have two kinds in mind, natural and moral. Natural evil we usually refer to as calamities: hurricanes, floods, disease, all the natural ways that death and misery strike without human cause. Moral evil we usually refer to as sin: murder, lying, adultery, stealing, all the ways that people fail to love each other. So what we are considering here is that God rules the world in such a way that all calamities and all sin remain in his ultimate control and therefore within his ultimate design and purpose.

If you are wondering whether there is a connection between this message and the one I gave this afternoon (on the foreknowledge of God), there is. The denial of God's foreknowledge of human and demonic choices is a buttress to the view that God is not in control of evils in the world and therefore has no purpose in them. God's uncertainty about what humans and demons are going to choose strengthens the case that he does not *plan* those choices and therefore does not control them or have particular purposes in them.

For example, Gregory Boyd, in his book *God at War*, says,

"divine goodness does not completely control or *in any sense will* evil."

Jesus nor his disciples seemed to understand God's absolute power as absolute control. They prayed for God's will to be done on earth, but this assumes that they understand that God's will was not yet being done on earth (**Mt. 6:10**). Hence neither Jesus nor his disciples assumed that there had to be a divine purpose behind all events in history. Rather, they understood the cosmos to be populated by a myriad of free agents, some human, some angelic, and many of them evil. The manner in which events unfold in history was understood to be as much a factor of what these agents individually and collectively will as it was a matter of what God himself willed.

In other words "the Bible does not assume that every particular evil has particular godly purpose behind it."

This is diametrically opposed to what I believe the Bible teaches and what this message is meant to commend to you for your earnest consideration.

1.1 Evidence that God Controls Calamity

Consider the evidence that God controls physical evil – that is, calamity. But keep in mind that physical evil and moral evil almost always intersect. Many of our pains happen because human or demonic agents make choices that hurt us. So some of this evidence can serve under both headings: God's control of calamities and God's control of sins.

Life and death

The Bible treats human life as something God has absolute rights over. He

gives it and takes it according to his will. We do not own it or have any absolute rights to it. It is a trust for as long as the owner wills for us to have it. To have life is a gift and to lose it is never an injustice from God, whether he takes it at age five or age ninety-five.

When Job lost his ten children at the instigation of Satan, he would not give Satan the ultimate causality. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (**Job 1:21**). And, lest we think Job was mistaken, the author adds, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (**Job 1:22** RSV).

In **Deuteronomy 32:39** God says, "There is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, And there is no one who can deliver from My hand." When David made Bathsheba pregnant, the Lord rebuked him by taking the child. **2 Samuel 12:15** says, "Then the LORD struck the child that Uriah's widow bore to David, so that he was sick Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died." Life belongs to God. He owes it to no one.

He may give it and take it according to his infinite wisdom. James says "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. . . . You ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that'" (**James 4:14-15**; see **1 Samuel 2:6-7**).

Disease

One of the calamities that threatens life is disease. In **Exodus 4:11**, God says to Moses, when he was fearful about speaking, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" In other words, behind all disease and disability is the ultimate will of God. Not that Satan is not involved; he is probably always involved one way or the other with destructive purposes (**Acts 10:38**). But his power is not decisive. He cannot act without God's permission.

That is one of the points of Job's sickness. When disease happened to Job, the text makes it plain that "*Satan . . . afflicted Job with sores*" (**Job 2:7**). His wife urged him to curse God. But Job said, "Shall we indeed accept good *from God* and not accept adversity" (**Job 2:10**). And again the author of the book commends Job by saying, "In all this, Job did not sin with his lips." In other words: this is a right view of God's sovereignty over Satan. Satan is real and may have a hand in our calamities, but not the final hand, and not the decisive hand. James makes clear that God had a good purpose in all Job's afflictions: "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose (*telos*) of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful" (**James 5:11**). So Satan may have been involved, but the ultimate purpose was God's and it was "compassionate and merciful."

This is the same lesson we learn from **2 Corinthians 12:7** where Paul says that his thorn in the flesh was a messenger of Satan, and yet was given for the purpose of his own holiness. "To keep me from exalting myself, there was given me

a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself!" Now, humility is *not* Satan's purpose in this affliction. Therefore the purpose is God's. Which means that Satan here is being used by God to accomplish his good purposes in Paul's life.

There is no reason to believe that Satan is ever out of God's ultimate control. **Mark 1:27** says of Jesus, "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." And **Luke 4:36** says, "With authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out." In other words, no matter how real and terrible Satan and his demons are in this world, they remain subordinate to the ultimate will of God.

Natural disasters

Another kind of calamity that threatens life and health is violent weather and conditions of the earth, like earthquakes and floods and monsoons and hurricanes and tornadoes and droughts. These calamities kill hundreds of thousands of people. The testimony of the Scriptures is that God controls the winds and the weather. "He called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread" (**Psalm 105:16**). We see this same authority in Jesus. He rebukes the threatening wind and the sea, and the disciples say, "Even the wind and the sea obey Him" (**Mark 4:39, 41**).

Repeatedly in the Psalms God is praised as the one who rules the wind and the lightning. "He makes the winds His messengers, Flaming fire His ministers" (**Psalm 104:4**). "He makes lightnings for the rain, [he] brings forth the wind from His treasuries" (**Psalm 135:7**). "He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow . . . Fire and hail, snow and clouds; Stormy wind, fulfilling His word" (**Psalm 147:18; 148:8**; see 78:26). Isaac Watts was right,

"There's not a plant or flower below but makes your glories known; and clouds arise and tempests blow by order from your throne."

Which means that all the calamities of wind and rain and flood and storm are owing to God's ultimate decree. One word from him and the wind and the seas obey.

Destructive animals

Another kind of calamity that threatens life is the action of destructive animals. When the Assyrians populated Samaria with foreigners, **2 Kings 17:25** says, "Therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them." And in **Daniel 6:22**, Daniel says to the king, "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths." Other Scriptures speak of God commanding birds and bears and donkeys and large fish to do his bidding. Which means that all calamities that are owing to animal life are ultimately in the control of God. He can see a pit bull break loose from his chain and attack a child; and he could, with one word, command that its mouth be shut. Similarly he controls the invisible animal and

plant life that wreaks havoc in the world: bacteria and viruses and parasites and thousands of microscopic beings that destroy health and life. If God can shut the mouth of a ravenous lion, then he can shut the mouth of a malaria-carrying mosquito and nullify every other animal that kills.

All other kinds of calamities

Other kinds of calamities could be mentioned but perhaps we should simply hear the texts that speak in sweeping inclusiveness about God's control covering them all. For example, **Isaiah 45:7** says God is the "The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these." **Amos 3:6** says, "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?" In **Job 42:2**, Job confesses, "I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted." And Nebuchadnezzar says (in **Daniel 4:35**), "[God] 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?'" And Paul says, in **Ephesians 1:11**, that God is the one "who works all things after the counsel of His will."

And if someone should raise the question of sheer chance and the kinds of things that just seem to happen with no more meaning than the role of the dice, **Proverbs 16:33** answers: "The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD." In other words, there is no such thing as "chance" from God's perspective. He has his purposes for every roll of the dice in Las Vegas and every seemingly absurd turn of events in the universe.

This is why Charles Spurgeon, the London pastor from 100 years ago said,

"I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes – that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens – that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche."

When Spurgeon was challenged that this is nothing but fatalism and stoicism, he replied,

"What is fate? Fate is this – *Whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains, must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some great end. Fate does not say that. . . . There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man."

1.2 God's Control over Moral Evil

Now consider the evidence for God's control over moral evil, the evil choices

that are made in the world. Again there are specific instances and then texts that make sweeping statements of God's control.

For example, all the choices of Joseph's brothers in getting rid of him and selling him into slavery are seen as sin and yet also as the outworking of God's good purpose. In **Genesis 50:20**, Joseph says to his brothers when they fear his vengeance, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." Gregory Boyd and others, who do not believe that God has a purpose in the evil choices of people (especially since he does not know what those choices are going to be before they make them), try to say that God can use the choices that people make for his own purposes after they make them and he then knows what they are.

But this will not fit what the text says or what **Psalms 105:17** says. The text says, "You meant evil against me." Evil is a feminine singular noun. Then it says, "God meant it for good." The word "it" is a feminine singular suffix that can only agree with the antecedent feminine singular noun, "evil." And the verb "meant" is the same past tense in both cases. You meant evil against me in the past, as you were doing it. And God meant that very evil, not as evil, but as good in the past as you were doing it. And to make this perfectly clear, **Psalms 105:17** says about Joseph's coming to Egypt, "[God] *sent* a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave." God sent him. God did not find him there owing to evil choices, and then try to make something good come of it. Therefore this text stands as a kind of paradigm for how to understand the evil will of man within the sovereign will of God.

The death of Jesus offers another example of how God's sovereign will ordains that a sinful act come to pass. Edwards says,

"The crucifying of Christ was a great sin; and as man committed it, it was exceedingly hateful and highly provoking to God. Yet upon many great considerations it was the will of God that it should be done."

Then he refers to **Acts 4:27-28**, "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, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur" (see also **Isaiah 53:10**). In other words, all the sinful acts of Herod, Pilate, of Gentiles and Jews were predestined to occur.

Edwards ponders that someone might say that only the sufferings of Christ were planned by God, not the sins against him, to which he responds,

"I answer, [the sufferings] could not come to pass but by sin. For contempt and disgrace was one thing he was to suffer. [Therefore] even the free actions of men are subject to God's disposal."

These specific examples (which could be multiplied by many more instances) where God purposefully governs the sinful choices of people are generalized in several passages. For example, **Romans 9:16**: "So then it does not depend on the

man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." Man's will is not the ultimately decisive agent in the world, God is. **Proverbs 20:24**: "Man's steps are ordained by the LORD, How then can man understand his way?" **Proverbs 19:21**: "Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD will stand." **Proverbs 21:1**: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." **Jeremiah 10:23**: "I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself, Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps." Therefore I conclude with Jonathan Edwards,

"God decrees all things, even all sins."

Or, as Paul says in **Ephesians 1:11**, "He works all things after the counsel of His will."

2. Two Questions

And I pose two questions as an evangelical who is seeking the glory of God, and who longs for a Biblical, God-entranced world-view. 1) Is God the author of sin? 2) Why does God ordain that evil exist? What are the answers that Jonathan Edwards gave to each of these questions?

2.1 Is God the Author of Sin?

Edwards answers,

"If by 'the author of sin,' be meant the sinner, the agent, or the actor of sin, or the *doer* of a wicked thing . . . it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin."

But, he argues,

"...willing that sin exist in the world is not the same as sinning. God does not commit sin in willing that there be sin. God has established a world in which sin will indeed necessarily come to pass by God's permission, but not by his "positive agency."

God is, Edwards says,

"the permitter . . . of sin; and at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted . . . will most certainly and infallibly follow."

He uses the analogy of the way the sun brings about light and warmth by its essential nature, but brings about dark and cold by dropping below the horizon.

"If the sun were the proper cause of cold and darkness," he says, "it would be the fountain of these things, as it is the fountain of light and heat: and then something might be argued from the nature of cold and darkness, to a likeness of nature in the sun."

In other words,

"sin is not the fruit of any positive agency or influence of the most High, but on the contrary, arises from the withholding of his action and energy, and under certain circumstances, necessarily follows on the want of his influence."

Thus in one sense God wills that what he hates come to pass, as well as what he loves. Edwards says,

"God may hate a thing as it is in itself, and considered simply as evil, and yet . . . it may be his will it should come to pass, considering all consequences. . . . God doesn't will sin as sin or for the sake of anything evil; though it be his pleasure so to order things, that he permitting, sin will come to pass; for the sake of the great good that by his disposal shall be the consequence. His willing to order things so that evil should come to pass, for the sake of the contrary good, is no argument that he doesn't hate evil, as evil: and if so, then it is no reason why he may not reasonably forbid evil as evil, and punish it as such."

This is a fundamental truth that helps explain some perplexing things in the Bible, namely, that God often expresses his will to be one way, and then acts to bring about another state of affairs. God opposes hatred toward his people, yet ordained that his people be hated in Egypt (**Genesis 12:3; Psalm 105:25** – "He turned their hearts to hate his people."). He hardens Pharaoh's heart, but commands him to let his people go (**Exodus 4:21; 5:1; 8:1**). He makes plain that it is sin for David to take a military census of his people, but he ordains that he do it (**2 Samuel 24:1; 24:10**). He opposes adultery, but ordains that Absalom should lie with his father's wives (**Exodus 20:14; 2 Samuel 12:11**). He forbids rebellion and insubordination against the king, but ordained that Jeroboam and the ten tribes should rebel against Rehoboam (**Romans 13:1; 1 Samuel 15:23; 1 Kings 12:15-16**). He opposes murder, but ordains the murder of his Son (**Exodus 20:13; Acts 4:28**). He desires all men to be saved, but effectually calls only some (**1 Timothy 2:4; 1 Corinthians 1:26-30; 2 Timothy 2:26**).

What this means is that we must learn that God wills things in two different senses. The Bible demands this by the way it speaks of God's will in different ways. Edwards uses the terms "will of decree" and "will of command." Edwards explains:

"[God's] will of decree [or sovereign will] is not his will in the same sense as his will of command [or moral will] is. Therefore it is not difficult at all to suppose that the one may be otherwise than the other: his will in both senses is his inclination. But when we say he wills virtue, or loves virtue or the happiness of his creature; thereby is intended that virtue or the creature's happiness, absolutely and simply considered, is agreeable to the inclination of his nature. His will of decree is his inclination to a thing not as to that thing absolutely and simply,

but with reference to the universality of things. So God, though he hates a things as it is simply, may incline to it with reference to the universality of things.”

This brings us to the final question and already points to the answer.

2.2 Why Does God Ordain that there Be Evil?

It is evident from what has been said that it is not because he delights in evil as evil. Rather he "wills that evil come to pass . . . that good may come of it." What good? And how does the existence of evil serve this good end? Here is Edwards' stunning answer:

“It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . .

Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.

If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . .

So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect.”

So the answer to the question in the title of this message, "Is God less glorious because he ordained that evil be?" is no, just the opposite. God is more glorious for having conceived and created and governed a world like this with all its evil. The effort to absolve him by denying his foreknowledge of sin (as we saw this afternoon) or by denying his control of sin (which we have seen this evening) is fatal, and a great dishonor to his word and his wisdom. Evangelicals who are seeking the glory of God, look well to the teaching of your churches and your schools. But most of all, look well to your souls.

If you would see God's glory and savor his glory and magnify his glory in this world, do not remain wavering before the sovereignty of God in the face of great

evil. Take his book in your hand, plead for his Spirit of illumination and humility and trust, and settle this matter, that you might be unshakable in the day of your own calamity. My prayer is that what I have said will sharpen and deepen your God-entranced world view, and that in the day of your loss you will be like Job who, when he lost all his children, fell down and worshipped, and said, "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."

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