



28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

"All things work together for good." Do they? All things? One woman is wrestling with this idea as I speak. She posted this on a Christian blog recently.

I'm having a difficult time right now trying to figure out all this "God allowed" stuff. Mom had her first radiation appointment today. They examined her and interviewed her to get her history, then informed her what to expect next. They didn't seem optimistic at all. They said she had a form of cancer that was very dangerous and that at her age and health conditions, was not a good candidate for chemo, and that the cancer was probably gonna return. Ok, is this happening because God is allowing it?¹

Can you relate to her struggle? If God is in control of everything, then how do we deal with the implications of that? Last Sunday, I stated that the foundation for verse 28 is found in verses 29-30. Verses 29-30 speak of God's sovereignty over our salvation. We were foreknown by God, predestined, called, justified and will be glorified. It is an unbroken chain of sovereign grace. So God makes all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. And his purpose is that we are sovereignly saved and kept by God.

But does God's sovereignty include just salvation or all things? Did God allow the cancer to enter the body of this woman's mother? And if so, why does he allow these things? As believers, we should not be afraid of questions like these because believer and non-believer alike ask them all the time. Now remember, when someone in the midst of suffering and asking questions like this, they aren't necessarily asking theological questions? How do you respond to a question like

this? If they are in great pain, you sit down on the ground with them and listen to them pour out their hearts, like Job's friends did at first. You respond pastorally first. But when the dust settles, when the pain subsides to some degree, people do want answers to these questions. Would you know how to answer them?

I am convinced the Scripture gives clear answers but first, let's look at a few wrong ways to answer this question. I pulled each of these from the same blog post about the woman's mother with cancer. Here's how a guy named Sam answered the question.

I have a hard time with this too. I have a harder time with people changing it from God allowing things to God actually causing things, to test us, or as a wake-up call, etc. However, something that has helped me is to arrive at the conclusion that we live in a [rotten] fallen world, and people make choices all the time that affect others.

I believe that God sees our lives in full, from beginning to end. It's like he's hovering in a helicopter above a parade, and that parade is my life, your life, each and every one's life. He sees the beginning, he sees the things that happen to us, he sees the end, and he is not bound by time so can 'touch down' in any place, at any time. He knows all, He sees all... the abuse that happened in secret, he was there and he wept, His heart broken. That one I can guarantee you.

What do you think of this answer? Unfortunately, it is fairly common among Christians. Allow me to share my thoughts. First he says that he doesn't like it when Christians say that God caused something instead of merely allowed it. I have answered this fallacy in prior sermons but let me take another stab at it. When we first moved to Viroqua, our kids were six, three and nine months old. I like where we live, but as most of you know, our backyard faces County Y. What if we had "allowed" our kids to play on that street? It's not a really busy road. It would not be like we were letting them play on Hwy 14, right? So would that be OK if we let them play on County Y? Why not? The obvious answer is because it is still very dangerous. And to the point, if I allowed them to play on the street, not only are they likely to get hurt or killed, I would be held accountable for allowing them to do this dangerous activity. So if I allow them and they get hurt, would I not be at fault?

Do you see? Some Christians attempt to "get God off the hook" by denying that he caused such and such an event. They say that God did not cause it, he just allowed it to happen? But can you see that the two are virtually one and the same?

Moreover, this person is writing about someone who had been abused. The blog I pulled this from is mostly for people who have been abused in some manner or another. I applaud them for their loving actions. They are certainly seeking to "lead in love" and that's good. They are seeking to "be pastoral first and theological second", and that's good. But the theological answers they offer are just plain wrong. Not only are they wrong, they are empty of hope and potentially dangerous. This same person concluded this way.

He only wants us to bring our hurts and our wounds to him so he can heal us. He receives glory from a broken life that has been redeemed. He didn't cause it or allow it, but He will redeem it and for sure will use it for good, and for His glory.

First of all, he starts off saying that he doesn't like it when people move from God allowing things to God causing things to happen. But now he has stated that God doesn't cause or allow bad things to happen. That is such an obvious contradiction.

Second, if God did not cause or allow the even to happen, then who is in charge of the universe? Who is causing and allowing all of these bad things to happen? Is Satan the sovereign power of the universe? Does God merely sit back and watch the devil wreak havoc on the human race?²

Third, if God doesn't cause or control anything that happens to us, then how can he ever help us? Why should we ever pray? If we dialed 911 in an emergency and no one ever came, how long would we keep dialing 911? That would last about 2 weeks, tops. The writer states that God "knows all and sees all" yet he has no power whatsoever to intervene and help us? This kind of God must be continually frustrated. He has infinite knowledge but severely limited power. Would you waste your time praying to a god like that?

Fourth, if God does not cause or allow anything to happen to us, if his power is so limited, why should we "bring our hurts and our wounds to him so he can heal us"? Is that all God can do? Is he like a medic on the battlefield? If you get shot or hit with a piece of shrapnel, do we run to him to get bandaged? It's nice to think of God weeping over our pain, and I do believe that. he is grieved when we grieve just as he is grieved when we deliberately sin against him, but is that the extent of his power? He cries and then gives us a bandaid?

Another person with the alias of "WouldRatherNotSay" wrote this. "Our pastor likens God's sovereignty like a ship on the sea, and God is the captain. He doesn't control every activity and action on the ship, but He knows the starting point and ending point, and is in charge of the ship's direction." If your pastor has this view of God, I would encourage you to get another pastor! This is pretty close to what the other people wrote, isn't it? It's just another attempt to get God off the hook, as it were.

But can you see where this analogy breaks down? Every captain on the sea knows the beginning and the end. That much is a given, but what a captain does not have is the ability to guarantee a safe journey that will bring everyone on board to their destination. Didn't you ever watch Gilligan's Island? ;-) The ocean floor is filled with countless ships that were lost in a storm, were sunk by the enemy or rammed into icebergs and rocks.

As I said, this view of God is not only devoid of any hope, it is downright dangerous. Watch what it did to one reader on this same blog.

"You might be interested to realize that this very topic – why the Christian god gets credit for all the GOOD things, but doesn't get the responsibility for the bad things – is what makes MANY people eventually come to the conclusion that religion is a man-created, Bronze-Age myth. Definitely not what you want to hear, I'm sure, but the cognitive

dissonance you are experiencing is very common among questioning, logical, thinking humans. It's one of the big reasons I am no longer a believer. (Carmen)"

Ouch. Do you see what bad theology can do to a person? Here's the incredible irony. The very kind of theology that is being promoted on this blog is the kind that led this woman to reject God.

Now some will say, "Yes, but I know people who have rejected God for the opposite reason. They reject the idea that he does cause or allow bad things to happen." I have two responses to this.

First, many people who reject a view of God who does have control still do not have a complete understanding of God, including his infinite mercy and love. So while they might appear to be rejecting a Biblical idea of God, their overall understanding of God is not Biblical.

Second, even if they do have a right understanding of God, many will still reject God. The Bible says that the path to destruction is wide and unfortunately, most people will reject God, but at least they are rejecting a right understanding of God. How sad it is that so many reject God because they have been taught a false view of God. They reject what they do not know or understand.

The view that these three people are espousing would all fit under a single heading called "Open Theism." Open Theism is defined as follows. "Open theism teaches that God does not know all that shall come to pass. It says that God's creatures make free choices which do not exist to be known before they are made. God does not know with certainty what his free creatures will choose before they choose."

One of the best known proponents of Open Theism is Greg Boyd. His best-selling book is called *Letters from a Skeptic*, which has sold over 250,000 copies and won the Gold Medallion award from the Evangelical Christian Book Award. So what that tells you is never trust popularity or awards for deciding what's a good book. Here's a relevant quote from the book.

When an individual inflicts pain on another individual, I do not think we can go looking for "the purpose of God" in the event. . . . I know Christians frequently speak about 'the purpose of God' in the midst of a tragedy caused by someone else. . . . But this I regard to simply be a piously confused way of thinking.³

So not only does God not know what's going to happen but all suffering is purposeless and meaningless? And this is supposed to help people how? Boyd is a pastor in the Baptist general Conference, or BGC, and was a professor at Bethel College. In 2000, there was an unsuccessful attempt to remove Boyd as a faculty member at Bethel College. How they decided the case is very strange.

But first, here is their affirmation regarding Open Theism.

Be it resolved that we, the delegates of the Baptist General Conference (who are also the delegates of Bethel College and Seminary) affirm that God's knowledge of all past, present

and future events is exhaustive; and, we also believe that the "openness" view of God's foreknowledge is contrary to our fellowship's historic understanding of God's omniscience.

Hey, that's sound pretty good, don't you think? You would guess, that based on this affirmation, that Body would have been let go, but that would be too simple. Here's is their actual decision.

We affirm the unanimous vote of the Committee for Theological Clarification and Assessment occurring on May 13, 1998, that [open theist] Dr. [Greg] Boyd's views did not warrant his termination as a member of the Bethel College faculty and by inference that his views fall within the accepted bounds of the evangelical spectrum.⁴

Say what? Open Theism is heresy but your most famous proponent of Open Theism is not espousing heresy? This is classic double speak and spin doctoring, logic than any ten year old would reject.

Speaking of statements of faith, this is a reminder that in two weeks we will be holding a meeting to discuss the proposed changes to our Constitution and By-laws. The by-laws committee made small changes with 2 exceptions. They granted me sovereign powers and they changed our statement of faith. Actually, one of those is true. Can you guess which one? ;-)
Thankfully, they did not grant me sovereign powers. You'll be glad to know that they did not change anything that relates to congregational input and approval. But they did change our statement of faith.

Let me give you a quick EFCA history lesson. And stay with me, because this is 100% relevant to open theism. The EFCA formed in 1950 when three Scandanavian Free Churches merged into one--the EFCA. So the doctrinal statement of our church is the one that was adopted at that first meeting in 1950. In 2008, the EFCA adopted a new statement of faith. Each church was given the option of remaining under the 1950 statement of faith or else adopting the 2008 statement. As a church, we haven't said too much about this, but the elders had it in the back of their minds that we would make the switch at some point. Since our statement of faith is prominent in our Constitution, it seemed like a good time to switch from the 1950 statement to the 2008 statement. So that is reason enough for you to get a copy of the proposed changes and read them over.

The changes in 2008 were reported on by Christianity Today. Here is an excerpt from that article.

If you want to make sure no one covers your denominational meeting, here's what you do: Revise your statement of faith before certain issues become disputed in your churches. And yet here I am writing about the Evangelical Free Church of America's newly revised statement of faith. Why? Because the time to fix your doctrine is when it isn't broke.

By and large, the EFCA has been insulated from the evangelical world's recent debates over open theism, the Atonement, justification, and inerrancy. That's not to say the EFCA has avoided the debates. Faculty at the EFCA seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), have actively engaged each of these controversial topics. But the newer interpretations have not gained traction among the denomination's 1,300 churches.

The first article says God has "limitless knowledge and sovereign power." Thus, the EFCA takes a stand against open theism, which claims that God granted humans complete free will, so he can't know the future precisely.

By being intentional about revising the statement of faith before it breaks down, EFCA leaders just might save themselves the trouble of fixing it later.⁵

Here are the 1950 and 2008 statements to which the author is referring.

1950

In one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

2008

We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

Can you see why he said we were attempting to fix the problem before it was broken? I also appreciate the fact that his "limitless knowledge and sovereign power" is chiefly illustrated by his plan of redemption. But even more important than our statement of faith is what Scripture declares about this topic. In part one of this mini-series, we looked at the life of Job. Let me remind you what he said to his despairing wife. *But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips (Job 2:10).*

Job said that God sent him "evil" but it also says that Job did not sin with his lips. Therefore we know this is an accurate statement. So, does God send us evil? The word that is most often translated as "evil" can also be translated as "calamity" or "disaster," as in the following verses.

Isaiah 45:7

I form light and create darkness,
I make well-being and create **calamity**,
I am the LORD, who does all these things.

Amos 3:6

Is a trumpet blown in a city,
and the people are not afraid?
Does **disaster** come to a city,
unless the LORD has done it?

God often calls people "my servant." Most of these come as no surprise.

- Genesis 26:24-my servant Abraham
- Numbers 12:7 my servant Moses.

- Numbers 14:24- my servant Caleb
- 2 Samuel 3:18-my servant David
- 2 Kings 9:7- my servants the prophets,
- Job 1:8- my servant Job
- Isaiah 20:3 -my servant Isaiah

But watch who else is called "my servant."

- Jeremiah 25:9-Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant.
- Isaiah 45:5-Cyrus, I call you by name, and I give you a title of honor even though you don't know me.

Proverbs 21:1 says *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.* If you read the entire Old Testament you can't miss this stuff. God raises up people and nations to do his will, including all of Israel's enemies. God's people were tested at every turn and every last moment of every circumstance was part of God's sovereign plan. All of it is dripping with his purpose and his fingerprints, reminding us that "God makes all things work together for good."

John Piper has an excellent summary of the Bible's teaching on suffering and sovereignty.

This "all things" includes the fall of sparrows (Matthew 10:29), the rolling of dice (Proverbs 16:33), the slaughter of his people (Psalm 44:11), the decisions of kings (Proverbs 21:1), the failing of sight (Exodus 4:11), the sickness of children (2 Samuel 12:15), the loss and gain of money (1 Samuel 2:7), the suffering of saints (1 Peter 4:19), the completion of travel plans (James 4:15), the persecution of Christians (Hebrews 12:4-7), the repentance of souls (2 Timothy 2:25), the gift of faith (Philippians 1:29), the pursuit of holiness (Philippians 3:12-13), the growth of believers (Hebrews 6:3), the giving of life and the taking in death (1 Samuel 2:6), and the crucifixion of his Son (Acts 4:27-28).⁶

The Bible unequivocally teaches the absolute sovereignty of God over "all things." But it also teaches about human free will and responsibility. God held all guilty parties responsible for the crucifixion of his beloved Son, just as he holds all of us responsible for our sin. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are taught side by side all throughout Scripture and there is never a clear explanation of how they go together. We should never diminish one or the other but hold both of them as compatible.

I'll finish with a story from the life of Louis Zamperini. His story is one of the most amazing things you will ever read. His story was told in the best-selling book, *Unbroken*. This is a great book, but if you really want to learn about his miraculous conversion and changed life, you need to read his autobiography. *The Devil at My Heels*.

Here Zamperini is pictured with Angelina Jolie who produced and directed the movie, *Unbroken*, which is due to be released on Christmas Day. Here he is pictured with Billy Graham in the 1950's and again in a recent photo.

As an Olympic athlete, he shook hands with Adolf Hitler. As an itinerant speaker, he preached the gospel to Fidel Castro. He was a World war 2 bombardier on a B-24, nicknamed the "flying

coffin" due to the fact that so many crashed and were shot down by the enemy. (Superman-4 gashed from cannon fire & 594 bullet holes) On another mission, his plane crashed in the ocean and Louis spent a miraculous 47 days floating on a life raft with no food or water supplies, only to be captured by the Japanese. They held him for two and a half years where he endured great suffering and almost constant torture and abuse at the hands of a man the prisoners nicknamed the "Bird."

When he was 81 years old, he finally met the Bird while on a trip to Japan. You'll have to read the book to hear the rest of that story. On that same trip, he met the mayor of Joetsu, where he was to carry the Olympic torch.

The mayor asked, "Did anything good come out of your two and a half years as a prisoner of war?"

"Yes," I said. "It prepared me for fifty-three years of married life."

He roared with laughter. The Bible says that all things work together for good, for those who love the Lord. If it hadn't been for the Bird, I never would have been converted. My life would have never changed.

Zamperini died 4 days ago. Now he sees the Lord face to face. Now he knows more completely how God's sovereignty and human suffering work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. Are you convinced of this same truth?

Rich Maurer

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¹ <http://spiritualsoundingboard.com/2014/06/17/trying-to-make-sense-of-what-god-allows-good-and-evil/>

² Satan is the "ruler of this world" but he is not the sovereign ruler. He is a mad dog out to rip your throat open but he is on a leash--and guess who is holding the other end?

³ Greg Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*, Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1994, p. 47.

⁴ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/we-took-a-good-stand-and-made-a-bad-mistake>

⁵ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/julyweb-only/129-11.0.html?paging=off>

⁶ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-i-do-not-say-god-did-not-cause-the-calamity-but-he-can-use-it-for-good>