

God's Will and Power in Relation to Evil and Human Responsibility

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Introduction

When we believe the biblical testimony to the power of God and His dominion (rule) over all things we must forsake all *dualistic* views of the world. Dualistic thinking takes different forms but in all cases God is not unquestionably supreme over all things, *including evil*. One form of dualism asserts that God and creation have existed side by side eternally and thus there are *two* (dual) ultimate forces in the universe. Another form suggests that there is a long term conflict between a good God and evil in the universe. Will God ultimately triumph over evil? Even when Dualists answer this question “yes”¹, they seldom answer a second question correctly; *when* will the good God ultimately triumph over evil? No one really knows.² These points of view deny God's lordship over creation and some of them deny the biblical account that God created all things good. “One recent example of dualism in modern culture is the series of Star Wars movies, which postulate the existence of a universal “force” that has both a good and an evil side. There is no concept of one holy and transcendent God who rules over all and will certainly triumph over all.”³ Many people, even Christians, have *unconsciously* accepted a dualistic world view in varying degrees. The Bible's teaching on the power and dominion of God leave no space for such thinking.

The “Problem of Evil”

Definition When we receive the Bible's teaching that God is all powerful and He is in control of all things, questions arise in our minds relating to what is called *the problem of evil*. Unbelievers often raise this subject in an effort to deny the Christian faith and belief in a God who is *both* good and all powerful. Sometimes the questions are genuine and reflect that one is seriously thinking through these matters. The supposed *problem* simply stated is this:

If God is all powerful He must not be good or He would have prevented evil from occurring. If He is thoroughly good then He must not be all powerful or He would have eliminated evil long ago. Therefore, the Christian God who is claimed to be *both* all powerful and all good cannot exist since we all agree that evil *does* exist. With the Christian God rejected, various forms of dualistic world views are all that remain.

In view of the above it is important that we understand and accept the Bible's teaching in regard to God's dominion over evil.

Distinctions in the Meaning of Evil

The Bible uses the term evil in two senses. That of moral evil and that of calamity. A more precise definition of moral evil is, *behavior which is contrary to the Law of God*. For purposes of discussion we will call this *lawbreaking evil*. The Bible also speaks of evil in the sense of calamity, disaster or destruction that results in human suffering.

Amos 3:6 *Shall a trumpet be blown in the city and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it? (KJV)*. The answer to both questions is “no”. When people hear the warning siren they do become afraid because they know some disaster may be near. When there is evil in a city the Lord *has* done it. In Amos chapter 4 the prophet mentions a list of *evils* that occurred in their city which the Lord had done, 4:6 - famine, 7-8 - drought, 9 - blight, mildew and locusts, 11 - death of men. All these “natural” disasters or calamities are evil that the Lord brings upon a city

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1. And often the attitude is that we need to be on God's side so we can contribute to accomplishing this ultimate triumph.
 2. The biblical answer of course is, “whenever He pleases and this has been known in His mind from eternity past.”
 3. Wayne Grudem

when He judges. The Hebrew term translated *evil* (KJV)⁴ in Amos 3:6 is used approximately 650 times in the OT. The use of the term in Amos and Jonah illustrate its two common meanings.

Amos 3:6 - calamity
Amos 5:12-13 - lawbreaking (?)
Amos 5:14 - lawbreaking
Amos 5:15 - lawbreaking
Amos 6:3-7 - calamity (NKJV - doom)
Amos 9:4 - calamity (NKJV - harm)
Amos 9:10 - calamity (NKJV - calamity)
Jonah 1:2 - lawbreaking (NKJV - wickedness)
Jonah 1:7 - 9 - calamity (NKJV trouble)
Jonah 3:8 - lawbreaking

When the problem of evil is discussed both types of evil are in view. Calamity brings human suffering. Lawbreaking ultimately leads to calamity (judgement) and more human suffering.

God Rules Over Evil and Uses Evil for His Purposes

Before discussing the “problem of evil” further, we should acquaint ourselves with the biblical testimony that God rules over evil (in both senses) and uses evil (in both senses) for His purposes. His will of dominion⁵ extends over all evil.

- Gen. 37-50* The history of Joseph is a clear example of God’s rule and use of both kinds of evil. Scripture states that Joseph’s brothers hated him, wanted to kill him, did evil when they cast him into a pit and sold him into slavery. Yet Joseph correctly tells 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)⁶.
- Ex. 4:21-23* Should Moses disagree with God regarding this matter? “Lord, you are telling me to tell Pharaoh, speaking in Your behalf, to let Israel go and yet You are going to harden his heart so that he will not let them go?” Moses should not disagree.
- Ex. 7:1-5* One reason God hardened Pharaoh’s heart was to ensure His signs and wonders would be multiplied in Egypt. It is evident that God knew that if He did not harden Pharaoh’s heart the resistance he would put up would be too small, and perhaps too brief, to result in God’s intended display of the number and greatness of His judgments and outstretched hand.
- Ex. 8:15-16* How are we to interpret this statement in view of the context beginning in Ex. 4:21-23? To ask the question in another way, how would Moses and Aaron, after having received Ex. 4:21-23, 7:1-5 interpret what is happening? Is it not obvious that they would think, this is exactly what God told us would happen! God has hardened Pharaoh’s heart so he will stubbornly refuse, i.e. harden his own heart, so as not to let the people go. Vs. 16 then is not surprising, God has obtained another opportunity to display His great judgments and outstretched arm.
- Ex. 8:32* Same interpretation as 8:15-16 applies.

4. NKJV, NASB render it calamity, NIV disaster. In all cases in the following examples the same Hebrew term, *rag*, is used.

5. The phrase “will of dominion” is used to distinguish God’s intent or desire regarding what occurs in His universe from His “will of precept”, i.e. His commands informing His creatures as to what is right or wrong behavior.

6. Psalm 105:17 states that God “had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave”

- Ex. 9:11-12* The *but* makes it clear that the reason pharaoh did not let them go was because the Lord hardened his heart, *and he did not heed them*.
- Ex. 9:33-35* Same interpretation as 8:15-16. Notice vs. 35b, *as the Lord had spoken by Moses*. God is not a “rubber stamp” hardener in these cases of Judgment. God’s judgments are fearful and glorious and are to be attributed to Him, His will, His power.
- Ex. 10:20* Same - fourth time
- Ex. 10:27* Same - fifth time
- Ex. 11:10* Same - sixth time
- Ex. 14:4* The plain understanding of this text is, if God did not harden Pharaoh’s heart he would not have pursued them once he let them go. Again, God is not a “rubber stamp” hardener, that is unless God did this act the pursuit God desired would not have occurred.
- Ex. 14:8-9* Same - eighth time
- Ex. 14:17* The plain understanding of this text is that by this point it is likely that the Egyptian army would not have pursued the Israelites into the middle of the red sea, but God intended to destroy them in this way so He hardened their hearts to ensure the pursuit.⁷ Again, any “rubber stamp” explanation is inadequate.
- Psa.105:23-25* The authors of scripture have no difficulty making such statements as verse 25. Certainly this hatred was lawbreaking evil.
- Rom. 9:17-18* Vs. 18 confirms that the evil events (both kinds) associated with Israel’s slavery in Egypt (Psa. 105:25) and their mighty deliverance were according to God’s will of dominion.
- Cases similar to Egypt* Many are surprised when the first encounter the record of God’s dealings with Pharaoh and Egypt. Even more surprise comes when they realize that Pharaoh’s case was not unique.
- Josh. 11:19-10* It’s evident that many of these cities, after receiving word of Israel’s “victory” over Egypt and Israel’s initial victories in the land of Canaan, would have attempted some sort of treaty or surrender. But vs. 20 explains that this was not the outcome God desired *so it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle*.
- The notion, that God is in heaven, wringing His hands trying to save and desiring to save everyone on earth is simply untenable when our understanding is informed by all Scripture.
- Ju. 3:12-14* The Lord strengthens evil kings to fulfill His purposes.
- Ju. 9:23* God stirred up a conflict between Abimelech and the men of Shechem.
- Ju. 14:3-4* God’s will of dominion at work.
- 1 Sam. 2:24-25* The final reason for their hardness is assigned to God’s will of dominion. Once again we should observe that the authors of scripture have no difficulty making such statements. They have no difficulty with the truth that God’s will of dominion is the *ultimate* reason things happen, not the arbitrary desires of the any creature.
- 1 Sam 16:14* God uses evil (lawbreaking) spirits for His purposes.⁸

7. Who cannot think that the conflict between the God of the Hebrews and Pharaoh is not happening on a much larger scale, for the same purposes, and with the same assured outcome between the God of Christ’s people and Satan? Do not statements in the book of revelation demonstrate this?

2 Sam. 12:11-12 As a chastisement of David's immorality the Lord said that He would raise up evil against David. If we understand evil in vs. 11 to mean adversity, which it appears to mean, we must not forget that much lawbreaking evil was the means God used to produce the adversity of which He spoke.

2 Sam 12:15-18 The death of David's child born to him by Bathsheba.

2 Sam 16:5, 9, 10-12 David's understanding of the situation was correct.

2 Sam 24:1,10 God "moved" David to sin because He intended to judge Israel.

1 Kings 11:14, 23 These were evil (lawbreaking) kings that God raised up against Solomon.

Job 1:12,15, 17, 19, 21 Both kinds of evil were occurring in this situation. The lawbreaking evil of Satan, the Sabeans and the Chaldeans. The calamity evil of the windstorm. But all of this is in accordance with God's will of dominion, vs. 21, and Job attributed the cause of all that he lost to God. Sadly, there are many who would counsel Job that he was mistaken. Consider also that the "rubber stamp" view gives no comfort in these situations.

1 Kings 22:19-23 God uses spirits who delight in committing evil (lawbreaking).

We must keep in mind all men are sinners. In many of the passages above God brings evil (calamity), or even provokes to more evil (law-breaking) as an act of judgement upon men's sinfulness.⁹ We must not lose sight that all people are worthy of death, all are sinners and none deserve mercy, not one. Therefore when God brings various forms of evil upon them He has committed no evil (lawbreaking) or injustice. It is likely that the biblical authors do not flinch at making such statements because they understand God's ownership of all men and that humankind is *thoroughly* deserving of God's judgment.

Acts 4:27 The greatest evil (lawbreaking) of all history, the crucifixion of Christ, was according to God's will of dominion. Not just the fact, but all the individual actions of those people connected with it. The Christians at Jerusalem recognized this. Yet the apostles do not attach the moral blame to God, for the actions resulted from the willing choices of sinful men. Thus Peter can state *Him being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death (Acts 2:23).*

Isa. 45:7 That evil in this text should be *restricted* to mean only calamity is open to discussion. Could any restrict, in a context discussing a powerful heathen king, that the calamity in view only refers to *natural* calamities not caused by evil people? Is not lawbreaking evil often what brings calamity? Are we to think that God only created the *calamity* done by the lawbreakers and not the *lawbreaking* that created the calamity? Think about the example of Job considered above. However, there should be no doubt that God claims that He is the one who creates evil in the sense of calamity and disasters. This would certainly include wars, often scenes of great lawbreaking and surely the Hebrew mind would not exclude war from his list of calamities (evils) that God creates.

Lam. 3:38 Yes it is.

8. The NASB and NIV translate correctly as "evil spirit". The NKJV translation, "distressing spirit" does not convey to an English mind what would have been conveyed to a Hebrew mind.

9. This of course was not the case for Joseph and Job.

First Aspect of the Solution: Sinners Deserve to Suffer

For clarity of thinking we should keep in mind that “the problem of evil” has not arisen because of a consideration of the sovereignty of God, but because of the Bible’s teaching on the *omnipotence* of God. Most are agreed that “free will” is not such a sacred thing that if one is committing a terrible evil, and another has the power to prevent the evildoer from succeeding, he *should* (moral obligation) use his power to do so. If he does not, then, he too is considered evil. We put policemen on our streets, and give them power (right and ability) to override and restrain the free will of those we consider evildoers. What then of God, who has such power but does not always use it to restrain evil? As will be shown below the Biblical doctrine of the Sovereignty of God (that He does work all things, including evil, according to His will and plan) is a major part of the solution to the problem of evil.

Sinners *deserve* to suffer God’s judgement in this life and the next and God does sovereignly inflict such judgement. Bringing about calamity (evil) upon those who deserve judgment is a moral good. Those who pose the problem of evil are often making an assumption which they do not prove; that those suffering *do not justly deserve* to suffer.

If it can be demonstrated that those suffering *deserve* to suffer, then in all such cases the “problem of evil” *is not a problem* regarding all human history in which those suffering *deserved* to suffer. Actually, if they did not suffer, we would have another problem, “the problem of justice”. Consider the following progression of events for which numerous biblical examples may be cited.

Isa. 9:8-10:22

Lawbreaking evil > produces calamity and suffering > which is a righteous judgement from God

The above progression is true and righteous *only* if God is sovereign and just. God ensures that law breaking evil *is* according to his will and it does result in righteous judgment¹⁰. If law breaking evil were ultimately random and allowed¹¹ by God for no purpose, then we would have cause to question either God’s power or righteousness.¹² People always reap what they sow because God *is* sovereign and just over all evil.

Conclusion one:

God commits no lawbreaking evil when He uses lawbreaking evil to inflict righteous judgment upon those who deserve to suffer. And if evil is being inflicted as righteous judgement, under the sovereign hand of God, all supposed “problems” regarding this category of evil evaporate.¹³ The similar “progression” regarding evil as calamity, presents no problem whatever, *if God is sovereign over natural calamity*. But if people suffer meaninglessly and at random, then again we would have cause to question either God’s power or righteousness.

Calamity evil > produces suffering > which is a righteous judgement from God

The degree to which we feel the strength of the above argument depends on how deeply convinced we are that sinners *deserve* to suffer God’s judgements. Only a summary of the Bible’s

10. This is not to say that judgement is the only righteous purpose for law breaking evil. Others will be mentioned below. The sustained argument being developed is to prove that no evil in the universe can impugn either God’s power or righteousness. This first step of the argument “clears” God of any wrongdoing in relation to all deserved suffering. Also this discussion assumes that God is able to will lawbreaking evil for his good purposes (in this case judgment) without doing lawbreaking evil Himself. This will be discussed below.

11. Allowed reluctantly because He is powerless to prevent it or simply freely allowed it.

12. The Arminian view cannot effectively bring down the problem of evil argument presented by atheists.

13. In other words when people in this world suffer as a punishment for their sins there is nothing gone wrong with God’s government of the world. This, however, does not excuse those who may be the instruments used in bringing the punishments. Whether the instruments used by God are or are not committing lawbreaking evil in any given situation is another question.

affirmation of this statement will be given here. The scriptures teach us that we all deserve death and that God is the one who inflicted death upon us as a just punishment of sin. Death entered through sin. The world is a place continually filled with the displays of the wrath of God as it is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness of men. We are unashamedly taught that those who die unrepentant and unbelieving are perishing under God's wrath. The Genesis flood and all the world wide judgements presented to us in the book of Revelation are set forth as good and righteous acts of God, acts for which He is to be feared, praised and worshipped by angels and men. When Israel is in the midst of a season of the most intense suffering, God, through His prophet Jeremiah asks them a series of questions intended to encourage to a repentant attitude, *Who is he who speaks and it comes to pass, When the Lord has not commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that woe [evil] and well-being proceed? Why should a living man complain, A man for the punishment of his sins* (Lam. 3:37-39)? The following verses are an exhortation to repentance. A repentance that must begin with a deep change of attitude as to why they are suffering. The Bible represents the whole human race as going up in flames set by the wrath of God and heading for more flames that He will kindle. The Bible's message *is not* that the worst is here and now. The message is, *the worst suffering is yet to come!* The gospel warns, and warns, and warns and says escape now! Yes, we deserve to suffer.

Christ's sufferings

The greatest proof that we deserve to suffer is the suffering of God's Son. What can His sufferings under the wrath of God for those He is saving mean in relation to our deserving to suffer?! The Scriptures declare to us a real, substitutionary, atonement, which means *we deserved to be in His place*. Bernard expressed it accurately, "What thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain: mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain. Lo, here I fall, my Savior! *Tis I deserve thy place; look on me with thy favor, vouchsafe to me thy grace.*"

People's understanding of the atonement is often superficial. If we are thinking clearly the more we extol the gravity and magnitude of Christ's suffering under the wrath of God the more we are confirming that we are the ones who are worthy of suffering! On the other hand, the more we lessen the truth that sinners deserve to suffer, the more we undermine the Bible's message of Christ's atonement.

Our human hearts rebel against such truths, because, apart from God's grace, we are all deeply self righteous, proud and are unwilling to believe *we* deserve to suffer for our sins. A "Christian World view" should have more difficulty with the "problem of good" than the "problem of evil". This was Jonah's problem! How could God show any mercy to the wicked Ninivites? But He did.

Second Aspect of the Solution: It is not unjust for God to Use Evil to Promote a Greater Good

What about non-judicial suffering?

As helpful as the above considerations are they do not fully answer the problem of evil. Can we find people who do not deserve to suffer judicial punishment under God's wrath for their sins? If we can, and they still suffer, the above considerations do not address such cases. Furthermore, can we find scriptural statements that indicate some people suffer evil *because of* doing good? If so, this situation has not been addressed by the above.

Answering the first question; yes, we can find people who do not deserve to suffer judicial punishment. Jesus Christ immediately comes to mind! And all those for whom He bore their judicial punishment and redeemed from the curse of the Law also come to mind. The second question also receives a "yes" answer. We can find people and statements indicating that some people suffer for doing good. The case of Job comes to mind. He may not have suffered directly for doing good, but the record indicates that he did not suffer for doing evil. He did not deserve to suffer in the *judicial* sense dealt with above. Jesus' statement that, *blessed are those who are persecuted for righ-*

teousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, points to many who have suffered not because they deserved to.

God defines the greatest good.

Does the suffering of this group of people infer that God is either incapable of ending their suffering (i.e. He is not omnipotent) or, if He is capable of ending it but does not, is He unrighteous? At this point another concept must be introduced into the discussion. God does not only define what law breaking evil is, He also defines what is *good* and He defines *the greatest good*. If He has seen fit to use suffering to promote the good of the group of people we are now considering,¹⁴ and to promote the greatest good by their suffering, we have no right to stand in judgement of His methods.

Psalm 119:67-68, 71

Every real Christian learns that this is exactly the case and numerous passages of scripture attest to the truth that God sovereignly uses evil of both sorts for the good of His people. The evil, in both forms, that the Christian continues to experience *does produce good for him*. Reading verse 71, *It is good for me that I have been afflicted*, helps us understand what the author means in verse 68, *You are good and do good [to me]*. And God is the one who has *done him good* by supervising his afflictions!

Rom. 8:28-30

The *all things* referred to by Paul certainly includes the things he has mentioned starting with the subject of suffering introduced in verses 17-18. The suffering mentioned in these verses emphasizes persecutions for righteousness sake, for verse 17 speaks of *suffering with Christ*. This refers to the evil of others inflicted on Christ's people because they are His people. The *all things* would include the *bondage of corruption* referred to in verses 20-23 which includes the slow dissolution of our earthly bodies which, as part of the creation, have been subjected to futility. And surely the list of things he marshals in verses 35 and 38-39 are a part of the all things of verse 28. Note the expression in verse 37, *yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us!*

The purposed good for His people is defined in verse 29 as being *conformed to the image of His Son*. Paul's statement, *we know that*, is a confident assertion that God's purposes carry the day, even in relation to all the evil of men and devils raised up against Him and His people. He is the One who has set the *ultimate* purpose for all these things, our good. And *He will ensure that they do all contribute to our good just as He intended*. Paul builds the "golden chain" in verse 30 as a confirmation of verse 28. Everyone who is called (vs. 30), i.e. called according to His purpose (vs. 28) ends up glorified (vs. 30). Being glorified is synonymous with *being conformed to the image of His Son* which is the good that God ensures all things contribute to.

It is God who causes all these things to work for the believer's good. The sovereign activity of God *ensures* such an outcome! If God were not sovereignly *active* over the evils in a believer's life, willing and causing every evil to produce the good that He intends for His child, then we would have to face the atheist's "problem of evil"¹⁵. One would have to question either the power or love of a Christian god, who could not keep his children from such harm. Or, if he could but chose not to, how could he truly love them? Then again, maybe he does not know all things and is unaware that they are suffering? And what of their supposed forgiveness and assurance of no punishment for their sins? If they are forgiven then their suffering must be unjust and this god is impotent to enforce justice in his world, even for his own children!

The one who refuses to acknowledge God's rule over evil and insists that evil is the result of random events, or at least events outside of God's will, cannot answer the Atheist's charge. God must

14. I.E. those who suffer even though they do not deserve to be judicially punished.

15. At least in regard to the life of the believer who cannot judicially suffer.

be impotent, unrighteous, uncaring, perhaps not omniscient or some combination of all three. Alas, he must be like us! But praise God, He is not!

*Rev. 1:10,
Zech. 13:7-
10, Acts
9:15-16, Job
23:13-14*

God is not performing “cleanup” in these matters. As if he were saying, “I don’t want my people to suffer but since I cannot prevent it, I’ll follow after and try to make these evil things work out for their benefit.” The passages referred to make it evident that the events that happen to His people are *exactly* the events He has chosen for them, and based on Rom. 8:28, we should add, chosen for their good. Our heavenly Father does love us and He is omnipotent!

*Hebrew 5:8-
9*

A significant aspect regarding this discussion is that God used suffering even in the life of His Son, Jesus Christ, to make Him the perfect Saviour. This was intentional on God’s part and willingly accepted by the Son as both Father and Son worked out *their* plan of salvation.

*Conclusion
two.*

God commits no lawbreaking evil when He uses evil (both kinds) to produce good for His people. Nor does the suffering of His people indicate that His power is limited. But if His people suffer meaninglessly and at random, then we would have cause to question His power, righteousness or love.

In this argument the Bible’s definition of good *does not coincide with that of our culture*. The popular definition of good is something like; good is the minimum pain and the maximum pleasure in the present moment as defined by each individual for themselves.¹⁶

*The greatest
good.*

Since God ensures that the suffering of His people is good for them the problem of evil in regard to this second group of people also disappears. Proceeding one step further, if we consider the *greatest good* in relation to *either* group of people it will become even clearer that the problem of evil is not a problem when we think biblically. The Bible strongly attests that the greatest good and the most important thing in the universe is the *glory of God*.

*Isa. 43:1-7,
20-21, 1 Pet.
2:9, Eph.
1:6, 12, 14,
Rom. 8:29*

These passages teach us that God’s ultimate purpose for saving this second group of people is to promote this greatest of all goods, His glory.¹⁷ In Romans 8:29 after Paul explained that the *good* purpose of God toward His people is that they be conformed to the image of His Son he goes further and states a more ultimate purpose, *that He [the Son] might be the firstborn among many brethren*. To be firstborn among brethren is to be deserving of and receiving the most honor. Thus our good contributes to the greatest good. God has tied the good of His people to His own glory, a very comforting thought.

*Eph. 3:10-
11, 13, 20-21*

This text is worthy of careful consideration. It summarizes the larger picture of God’s works and purposes for the church¹⁸. The church is on display as the means of making known to the principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God. It is perfectly right for God to use His church, including the suffering of His people, for this greater good. We know from other Scripture that in doing so God has ensured that His people will share in His glory through Christ. Verse 11 tells us that this purpose is no after thought, but *according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*. Surely this passage doctrinally interprets the case of Job as an instance contributing to this larger purpose?¹⁹

16. Unbelievers will reject the above argument because it crosses their desires for this life. However, they cannot reject it as either unreasonable or illogical. It is purely an emotional or preference rejection. They are left only to deny *the Bible’s definitions of good and evil*.

17. It is not within the scope of this study to provide an extended proof of this ultimate purpose. Texts may be multiplied showing that God’s glory is the ultimate purpose for the existence of His church: Matt. 5:16, John 15:8, 1 Cor. 10:31, 1 Pet. 4:11 to mention a few.

18. By “the church” is meant real Christians, the real body of Christ and not necessarily the human institutions that are often called the church.

The significance of this display.

And do we think that those who observe this display, which God purposed in eternity past, are going to conclude that God could not prevent the churches' suffering? Or that the churches' suffering is going to undermine the display of God's wisdom? Or that things did not occur for the church the way God desired them to? Maybe when God puts His actual church on display it will only be a fraction of the size He eternally purposed and the principalities and powers will snicker under their breath? No! The display, which includes the suffering of His people, is going to demonstrate God's wisdom in regard to all that has happened to the church, including all the evil His church has experienced. The evil principalities and powers are going to be shocked at their defeat and God's victory and glory! They will realize that they too, even in all their evil, served the will and purpose of the Sovereign of the universe. There will not be one evil act for which they will feel successful. They will realize the truth studied earlier from Job 35:6-7, *If you sin, what do you accomplish against Him? Or, if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to Him?* The good principalities and powers will thunderously applaud, being filled with wonder and amazement at what God has accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord!²⁰ This is the program now underway in history which is according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. Notice the pinnacle on which the passage ends, verses 20-21.

John 9:1-3

This instructive incident should restrain us from interpreting God's providence in the lives of others. It is another of those instructive displays like Job. We simply do not know what is going on in relation to the secret portions of God's will of dominion.

Summary

Summarizing the second solution to the "problem of evil"; regarding those who are not suffering judicially, there is no problem with evil when God orders it to produce *both* the good of His people and the greatest good of His glory!

Those who deny that God's will of dominion extends to evil cannot adequately answer the Atheist's objection. They insist that evil is entirely independent of God's will of dominion and cannot be associated with *His* purposes for good. In so doing they (unconsciously, but logically true) represent God as running behind, or alongside of a *world out of control*. In this out of control world God is trying to do cleanup and salvage some good out of an unfortunate situation. If this is the case, it seems unreasonable to expect people to unreservedly trust in such an impotent god. Reasonable people would get busy saving and protecting themselves. For in a world filled with *out of control evil*²¹, evil that serves none of this god's purposes, such a god could not be *unconditionally relied upon in all situations*. A shrewd atheist will exploit these weaknesses in the Arminian representation of God to state that there is no compelling reason to believe in such a god. One is left with a god he cannot fully trust. And if this god cannot be fully trusted why should I fully obey him? He might be a nice guy, but not someone to render a total trust and obedience, for this would be unwise.

Personal thoughts

These are admittedly challenging subjects. In view of the above, the "problems" that arise when we do accept the teaching of scripture that God works all things, including evil, after the counsel of His will, appear, at least to this author, to be much smaller than the problems which arise when we accept the less than sovereign god of the Arminian. It appears that those who promote the

19. One of the fundamental differences between a believer and an unbeliever is that the believer is deeply committed to this purpose while the unbeliever is deeply opposed and resentful of it. The believer becomes willing to suffer for this purpose while the unbeliever hardens his heart against God under suffering.

20. The following is said graciously, as an attempt to spur people to think through the degree to which their conclusions are dishonoring to God. Arminian theology reduces this display of God's eternal purpose before the heavenlies as something their (the Arminian's) god might have to be ashamed of. An unfortunate compromise at best.

21. That is, out of God's control.

Arminian solution have ignored the implications of their system in regard to the glory and honor of God. Such a debate with the shrewd Atheist as described above would bring those implications out into the open. However, since very few people consider the glory of God as a matter of supreme importance, most quickly accept the Arminian's system of doctrine especially when they are not exposed to all scripture. Though it is very natural for men to make their good and their honor the best end of all things, such an attitude is dead wrong and it will always be brought down by God. A shrewd atheist can easily exploit the weaknesses of such beliefs.

How Should We Explain the Entrance of Evil Into the World?

Up to this point in the argument we have considered all people in a *fallen* world over which God rules and in which evil is present. The problem of evil no longer appears as great as it might have when the Atheist first presented it. However, how should we understand the *entrance* of evil into the world? It was stated above, "If it can be demonstrated that those suffering do deserve to suffer, then in all such cases the "problem of evil" is not a problem regarding all of human history in which those suffering *deserved* to suffer." This statement was intended to lead us back through human history to Adam and Eve, *prior* to their disobedience. This was the only time in human history when we can find anyone who did not deserve to suffer. And of course they did not suffer until they sinned. But this raises the question, "why did God *not* prevent them from sinning?" The answer that He simply could not is superficial. After all He created the garden of Eden. He placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden!

Why are we considering these things?! Because they are part of what God has chosen to reveal to us (Genesis 1-3). He must desire that we grapple with these matters for all Scripture is profitable. The subjects are admittedly difficult, challenging and sometimes personally threatening. They make us think deeply about the world and surprisingly we have minds capable of thinking about such things, minds given to us by God.

The atheist's last challenge.

The atheist may concede that if all humans *since the fall* are as evil and deserving of punishment as has been indicated above, and if the good of those whose sins have been forgiven is ultimately secured by God permitting and supervising evil to this end, and if in this whole situation the *greatest* good is promoted, then it is logical that God can be *both* all powerful and all good.

At this point in the debate, the atheist (and most unbelieving hearts) who is seeking to justify himself and condemn "the Christian God" will bring up the case of Adam and Eve. The Christian faith asserts that God created everything in the heavens and earth, spiritual and physical, including Adam, Eve and the angels, and that all was *very good*. Further, as mentioned above, God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden and forbid Adam to eat the fruit of this one tree. So the atheist now returns with vigor to his original challenge: Either God was incapable of preventing the entrance of sin into the world or, if He was capable and did not prevent the entrance of evil, then He must be evil.

Three Inadequate Explanations

Various solutions by those who believe in the existence of God or gods have been proposed to this nagging "problem of evil". Four are considered below which are broadly representative of most of human thinking on this subject.

Dualistic proposals

²²Dualistic ideas have been prevalent among those who refuse to subject their thinking to God's revelation in His word. In many of these philosophies or religions evil is believed to have existed²³ eternally along side of a good god. Both are eternal and neither is decidedly more powerful than the other. The Scriptures decidedly reject any notion that anything other than God is eternal, teach that all things except God Himself are created by Him, and that the distance in

power between himself and all created beings is so great that all comparisons are meaningless (see Isaiah chapter 40).

*Powerful
creator but
impotent
governor*

This approach is often held unconsciously by many who have not seriously thought these matters through²⁴. A very good creator and creation are affirmed but his creation truly got beyond his control. He would have prevented the sin of angels and humans if he could have, but he could not. The disobediences either happened when He was not looking (i.e. he is not omniscient) and it was too late, or he was looking but he could not prevent it (i.e. he is not omnipotent). God's will of dominion was clearly overruled by the desires of the creatures he created. Those who think (often unconsciously) this way are frequently heard expressing, without a flinch, things like; "god wants to... but he can't", or "if you don't god can't."²⁵ These statements are often made as the main-spring of motivation for entire congregations. A study of the Bible's teaching on the knowledge and power of God shows that this is an unsatisfactory solution. God *does* know all things, all the time, and from eternity past! He knew these creatures would rebel *before* He created them. Yet He still chose to create them. He also has the right and ability to persuade any creature to obedience or restrain any from disobedience (addressed below). It should also be noted that this view tends to erode the faith of anyone seriously trying to *unconditionally* trust God *in all situations*.

*Evil was
unavoidable
if genuine
love was to
be exercised
by men and
angels*

A third approach has been advocated that states that God desired to create creatures that would love Him and serve Him. And unless these creatures were capable of, and free to, disobey Him, the love and service they might render would not be genuine. There are a number of assumptions underlying this approach which are not true.

We often use negation in definitions. For example, love is not hatred, obedience is not disobedience. But many things that have opposites do not *require* their opposite in order to exist. There is no compelling reason to think that if one does not have the ability to hate, this somehow limits his ability to love. Neither is there any compelling reason to think that if one lacks all ability and desire to disobey, this "lack" somehow *necessitates* a limitation or "cheapening" of his ability and desire to obey. That no such *necessity* exists can be seen by considering the most perfect of persons. God existing as three persons, demonstrates the ultimate essence of "personhood". Jesus *could not* hate the Father, and the Father *cannot hate* the Son, and neither Father or Son can hate the Holy Spirit. Such inability does not in any sense diminish the perfect love, freely given, by each member for one another.

The same is true with regard to the moral opposites of obedience and disobedience. The glorified saints in heaven will have become perfect persons, conformed to the image of Christ. In this state of perfection they will no longer be able to disobey their Lord and yet they will be able to obey in

22. I have chosen not to use uppercase first letters on pronouns referring to deity in the following paragraphs (with the exception of the final paragraph) since I've reserved such an approach to refer to the God revealed in the Bible.

23. Either in the form of a being or beings, or intrinsically in matter.

24. Often young professing Christian adults attend secular colleges and are confronted with these challenges to their faith and stumble badly. This could be avoided if churches would not shun the discussion of weighty issues that might be controversial. Earnest reflection and discussion is not wrong if we do it with patience, humility and love. Our relationships with one another cannot be based upon agreeing with everything and approving everything about each other! It is near certain that any course on religion or philosophy taught in a secular university will confront its students with these issues. And many students, regardless of their majors are required to take some such course. The author, majoring in a "hard science", electrical engineering, was still required to complete a philosophy course.

25. Sadly, there are some who do consciously think in this manner. See the two approaches to a counseling situation described in..... This is a practical illustration of how one's theology does affect one's practice.

a greater and fuller sense than was ever possible in this life! There will be nothing unreal or insincere regarding their obedience.

It appears that the idea that evil had to be allowed if creatures were to genuinely love and serve God is also based upon mistaken assumptions about human freedom. This subject will be considered in detail in a later section but suffice it to say at this point that if the definition of freedom is *the ability to do moral opposites* then none of the members of the Trinity has ever been free. Neither are the glorified saints in heaven free. However, for a person created in the image of God to do an act freely means that he does the act willingly, from his own heart, and without external constraint. Whether or not he has the ability and desire to do the contrary act has nothing to do with the definition of a *free* act, that is, an act which is unconstrained or unforced by another. So those who can only do good, certainly do do good in the truest sense of serving God from *willing* hearts.

Another weakness of this third approach is that it represents God as being in some type of compromising situation, a “jam” we would say. He must choose between the best of two not so good situations. He desires to create a world with beings that genuinely love him and desire to serve him. But He cannot do this if they do not also experience what it is to hate and disobey him. Neither of these situations is ideal; no beings who love him verses ending up with beings who love him but allowing evil to run its course in his world. But surely he could have created beings who would love him and serve him without the necessity of allowing the entrance of evil into the world. This third approach does not solve the “problem of evil” by representing God as being constrained between two less than ideal choices. At least it does not solve it in a way that honors and exalts our concept of God. *It “solves” the problem by putting an unnecessary limit on God’s freedom to act, a limit not mentioned in Scripture.*

Finally there does not appear to be *any scripture that would lead us to believe this is the best explanation.* And if Scripture points in another direction then surely we should not accept this third approach to the problem.

Third Aspect of the Solution: God Willed to Allow Evil as a Means of Promoting the Greatest Good

Scripture is not nearly as silent on this subject as many think. The best answer given is that God permitted evil as a means of displaying and promoting His glory. There are aspects of God’s character that would not have been displayed unless evil were present in the world. The above sections have shown how God’s purposes make use of evil in the life of His people for both their good and the greatest good of His glory. The following passages of Scripture teach that the evil of the ungodly and their ultimate destruction by God also serve this end.²⁶

Prov. 16:4

Regardless of how one translates the first phrase of the text the second phrase states a purpose for the wicked, *for the day of doom*. This text does answer the question regarding the entrance of evil into the world, *not by inferences and reasoning* as in the third approach above, but by simple declaration. They were made for the day of doom. We must not view the entrance of evil into the world as something outside of God’s rule or something which does not serve *His* purposes. From this text alone we cannot learn the ultimate purpose for the day of doom upon the wicked but other scripture will teach us that the purpose of this day of doom is that God would be honored.

John 5:21-23

All judgement (day of doom in Prov. 16:4) has been given to the Son to promote the greatest good, *that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father*. This text certainly contributes to the

26. In this discussion the concepts of bringing God glory, honor, and praise are all considered as aspects of the greatest good.

answer of the question what purpose do the wicked serve. The Son, who was most humiliated by the wicked will ultimately be honored by their judgment. The humiliated Son will actually be honored *as God* in this regard.

Philip 2:9-11

Philippians 2:9-11 is a parallel to John 5:22-30 and it gives further insight in How God will be glorified. That *Every knee* refers to all the angelic host (good and evil) and all humans beings (good and evil) is made clear by Paul's use of "cosmic" dimensions; *of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth*. There are two purpose statements in this passage, one subordinate to the other. The first has two parts; *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*. This first purpose fulfills the second, ultimate purpose, *to the glory of God the Father*. It is clear that when the evil angels and the evil portion of humankind bow the knee before the Lord Jesus and confess him as Lord, even as they are condemned, they will contribute to this ultimate purpose expressed in the text, *to the glory of God the Father*.

Rev. 14:6-7

All those who dwell on the earth are here commanded to *Fear God and give glory to Him*. The reason for doing so, the reason it is *right* to give glory to God and an *obligation* to do so, is that *the hour of His judgement has come*. God does receive glory because of his judgements. Were evil not allowed none of this revelation of God would have occurred.

1 Cor. 1:18-21

Verse 21 needs to be carefully considered by those who think that evil is outside of God's will of dominion. The fact that the world through its wisdom does not know God is exactly what God desired. This situation is actually according to *the wisdom of God!* To make the point somewhat roughly, God designed a world in which he would allow it to be full of fools so as to display His wisdom. This situation was not a backup plan. It was *wisely* intended. God did not come across an accident, capitalize on it, and then take credit.

Rom. 9:14-23

When we study the Bible's teaching on election we will return to this passage. However the passage does present an intelligible answer to the question of why God planned and allowed evil to be present in the world. This passage is predominately about God's *rights* as Creator and Judge.

Vs. 15 states His basic right (especially in view of the fact that all humanity is in sin).

Vs. 16 states clearly how we should interpret vs. 15. In the context, who's elected or not, who receives the promise or not, does not depend upon them, but on God who has compassion on whomever He wills to have compassion. Paul of course is assuming we believe Romans 1-3 and 5, that no descendant of Adam, Jew or Gentile, deserves to receive any compassion. In Adam death [justly] spread to all men.

Vs. 17 gives us an example of the principle just stated in verses 15-16. This text does address the supposed problem of God allowing evil to exist in the world. However "allowing" is much too weak of a term for Paul, note, *For this very purpose I have raised you up*. God is the One who raised up Pharaoh. The purpose is the greatest good, a display of God's glory in all the earth.

Vs. 18 gives a conclusion. The point is: He does this and He has the right to do so. Now it would have been good if the objectors to God's ways would at this point humble themselves and be quiet and they would not have received the even greater "blows" that follow. But, no, the objectors will contend with the Almighty.

Vs. 19 gives us their accusation. If God is sovereign as you have just stated, then no one can resist His will, then God must be unjust for condemning men, that is finding fault. At this point the objectors are quite confident that Paul will have to condition his earlier statements and retreat from the major premise that, "no one resists His will". They think if he agrees with this major premise he will be forced to say either 1) God does not find fault with men, or 2) if He does find

fault with them, then God is unjust. The objector thinks, the only way out is to retreat from the major premise, that no one resists His will. But shock of shocks Paul does not retreat! Why not? Because he does not agree with their *minor, unspoken premise*: That *God is incapable of willing all things and doing it in a way that men are still justly held accountable for their actions*. Paul obviously believed *both* for he always zealously defends that God is just. The objectors asked for it, now they are going to get it (note, the author was once one of the objectors).

Vs. 20 provides a rebuke. It's the same answer God gave to Job when Job began to question God's righteousness. In addition to the rebuke Paul now strengthens the position set forth in verses 15-18. The answer to the first questions is: I am not a being who has any right to complain that God still finds fault even though no one can resist His will. Answer to the second question: of course not.

Vs. 21 provides an illustration and re-enforces of the argument given in verse 20, that it is obvious that the thing formed cannot object to the owner and Creator who formed it (call to mind our earlier discussion about God's ownership of all things). "Power" here would be better translated "authority" meaning "having the right". This passage is about God's rights, here being illustrated by the potter's rights to do what he pleases with the clay. The question is not, "does he have the ability", but, "does he have the right", is it just for him to do so. The answer to the question is: of course he has the authority, the right, to make some vessels for honor and some for dishonor, he has committed no injustice in doing so.

A key aspect of Paul's argument with this illustration is that he says that the vessels come from the *same lump*. *The point is that it is the will of the potter that determines what the vessels will be, not anything in the raw material used to make them*. Both vessels come from the same lump. This is done to reinforce verse 16 and is the same message given regarding the case of Jacob and Esau in verses 11-12. In all *three* cases the ultimate reason for the outcome is not in Jacob or Esau, not in him who wills or him who runs, and not in the same lump (Indeed it would have been better had the objectors quieted down at the end of verse 18!).

Vs. 22-24 - The expected answer to the long question contained as part of verses 22-24 is, "He has the right to do so." It is the same as the expected answer to the parallel illustration given in verse 21, "He has the right to do so.", which of course he applied to verses 22-24. Paul got us to agree first in regard to potters and clay, he now expects us to agree with what he intended to apply the illustration to.

Has God done so? yes, for he has called some out for glory, not only from the Jews but from the Gentiles (vs. 24-26), but he has not called all Jews or Gentiles, the rest were left and hardened (see entire larger context). Verses 22-24 contain another form of the "Pharaoh" argument Paul introduced in verses 15-18. The parallels are quite clear. God raised up Pharaoh for His purposes, the potter makes the vessels for his purposes. The purpose in Pharaoh's case was to show God's power in him that God's name would be declared in all the earth. The purpose for the vessels of honor and dishonor is that *He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy*.

Conclusions

The six passages considered above are Divine revelation that addresses the question, "why did God permit the entrance of evil into the world?" They give us insight into His intentions regarding evil and the purposes He will accomplish by it. Not all mysteries are answered but of the four attempted solutions to the "problem of evil", the fourth does not rely upon inferences based on innate human ideas that "simply must be right". The fourth solution humbly accepts what God has said regarding the presence of evil in His world.

To summarize, God planned and permitted the fall for the purpose of making a greater display of His glory before the intelligent angels and men He created. The scriptures allow for no form of

dualistic thinking. God is supreme without compromise or competition. And when this phase of human history is completed with God's judgement and the establishment of His eternal kingdom among men, every form of dualistic thinking will have been expunged from all intelligent creatures in the universe. The solution to the problem of evil is to forcefully set forth that God sovereignly rules over all evil for His righteous purposes of 1) judgment, 2) the good of His people, and 3) His own glory. It would be good for all to heed the angel flying in the midst of heaven, *who had the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth - to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people - saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgement has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water"* (Rev. 14:6-7).

Distinctions in How God's Will is Accomplished

The Bible asserts that God's will of dominion extends to all things, good and evil, for all time, is never thwarted and always comes to pass²⁷. Scripture also clearly asserts that God is not the author of lawbreaking evil nor does He do lawbreaking evil. There is a measure of mystery surrounding these subjects but careful study of Scripture does provide insight into how these truths do not contradict each other. It should be understood that when it is asserted that God *works all things according to the counsel of His will* the matter of *how* God does so is a subject of further inquiry. God uses various means to ensure that His will is accomplished. There does not appear to be any compelling reason to restrict God to always accomplishing His will by one particular means.²⁸

Actively

1 Kings
22:19-23,34

God may directly exert His power over certain individuals or objects in the world to accomplish His will. This He did when He created. Miracles are examples of this type of God's control. We know from examples in scripture, such as God sending of a lying spirit into the hearts of Ahab's prophets and reserving for Himself seven thousand so that they would not worship Baal, that He may *actively* control the hearts of men. In the case of causing all the prophets to prophesy falsely, ensuring that Ahab would go to battle, God used a second cause, the lying spirit. The lying spirit actively controlled what came out of the mouths of the prophets. But notice that the power (authority and ability) possessed by the lying spirit was given to it by God for God said, *You shall persuade him*, which repeated what the spirit had suggested (vs. 21) granting an approval to do so. Further, the Lord said, *and also prevail*, assuring the spirit of the ability to cause all these prophets to give a false message. The words, *and also prevail*, should not be understood as nothing more than a prediction. They are God's assurance that He will "bless" the spirit with success in persuading Ahab to go to battle.

This example should cause us to realize another significant fact. Just because people *think* they are autonomous and uncontrolled *does not mean that they are*. These prophets had no idea they were being actively controlled. The opposers to the truth Paul describes in 2 Tim. 2:26 surely considered themselves free but we know that they had been *taken captive by the him [the devil] to do his will*. And how do we know this? By interviewing them? By reasoning ourselves? No. We know this because God reveals it to us. He tells us what is happening. *Scripture is our authority*. We as human beings exist in a spiritual world and that world has a profound effect on what we think and do. It is our darkness that so often denies and under represents this reality.

27. This subject is dealt with in the paper on the attributes of God, in the section on attributes relating to the sovereignty and will of God.

28. The following discussion should not be considered exhaustive on the subject of how God carries out His will of dominion.

Verse 34 should be understood that both the archer and arrow were guided by the hand of God to end Ahab's life.

2 Kings
19:35

When God destroyed a large portion of Assyria's army, without the use of one Israeli soldier, He did so without human intervention or human second causes. *The angel of the Lord went out and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand.*

Gen. 20:6,
Acts 9:3-8

It should be kept in mind that we cannot know with certainty to what extent God is acting directly, with or without second causes, in many situations because those controlled often have no idea that it is God who has acted to determine the outcome. In these cases God directly controls the outcome but the individuals are not *coerced*. As was the case with Abimelech whom God withheld from sinning against Him. Abimelech felt no coercion but we know that God withheld him! At other times individuals do know they are under God's control and His coercion is quite evident, as would have been obvious to Saul when God decided to convert him. God's coercion is also evident to the ones coerced when He casts out demons from individuals. In these cases they did not come out willingly, but they came out knowing they were coerced out.

This brief examination of a few cases regarding God's *active* carrying out of His will shows it can be carried out in a number of different ways:

1. Direct coercion and the objects know it (Saul on the way to Damascus, demons who have been cast out, the destruction of the Assyrian army).
2. Direct control and the objects do not know it (Abimelech).
3. God's use of *second causes* to directly control the object and the object doesn't know it (Ahab's false prophets).
4. Direct coercion by the use of second causes (The archer who shot the arrow at random and it struck and killed Ahab). God killed Ahab using the second cause of the archer. Ahab died unwillingly.

Permissively

God may, and often does, allow individuals to do *exactly what they want to do*, but in their so doing they are doing what he has previously desired and planned. Adam and Eve freely sinned and God allowed them to do so. Nevertheless their sinning was what God intended, that is, it was a part of his *previously* decided plan. God knew it would occur and He decided not to prevent it, therefore He willed that it happen (will of dominion) even though He commanded them (will of precept) to obey. This is true regarding all the lawbreaking evil in the world. It is part of His plan and will of dominion, yet His will of precept commands men not to sin. Since God possessed *exhaustive knowledge of all things (omniscience)* that would occur in the world *before* the world was created, He could have chosen not to create. But in view of this exhaustive knowledge of the events that would fill the yet uncreated world, He still chose to create, thus He willed that it all (i.e. all history) come into being.²⁹

29. Some who deny the sovereignty of God have properly understood the implications of God's omniscience. "Clark Pinnock also explains how he came to this position [that God knows *only* those things that are logically knowable and this *excludes* the results of the free decisions of human beings], 'I knew the Calvinist argument that exhaustive foreknowledge was tantamount to predestination because it implies the fixity of all things from eternity past, and I could not shake off its logical force'" Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, footnote 61, pg. 348. So Pinnock and others now deny the Bible's teaching that God really knows the end from the beginning in an exhaustive sense. And what he does not know are the free decisions of billions of human beings! In their view God must wake up and turn on the morning news like you and I to find out what has happened in the world. Can this be considered Christianity?

- Judas* Judas's betrayal of Jesus is often cited as an example of God's use of second causes to carry out his plan. The betrayal was predetermined by God long before Judas was born (Acts 2:23, 4:27-28). The thirty pieces of silver, the purchase of a field, these details were all known on the prophetic page. Yet Judas betrayed Jesus without constraint or coercion from God. Perhaps motivated by Satan, but not directly by God. In relation to God's permissive will and use of second causes *the counsel of the Lord* coincides with the *plans in man's heart* (Prov. 19:21) and James's words come to mind; *Instead you ought to say, "if the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that"* (James 4:15).
- God's freedom is what Scripture maintains.* It is important to understand that in these situations God *freely* chooses to allow men to do what they want and in their doing they fulfill His will of dominion. Thus God may allow men to do evil for any of His purposes considered in the previous sections and their evil accomplishes His purposes. Yet He Himself has not done evil and He is just in condemning them for doing the evil. God is not obligated to save anyone *nor is He obligated to restrain anyone from evil*. If He uses the evil they *willingly* commit for His purposes who can fault Him for this? But this in no way excuses them for doing the evil.
- Simple determination versus complacency or delight.* Louis Berkhof gives a helpful summary: "Most of them [reformed theologians] insist on it that God's will with respect to sin is simply a will to permit sin and not a will to effectuate it, as He does the moral good. This terminology is certainly permissible, provided it is understood correctly. It should be borne in mind that God's will to permit sin carries certainty with it. Others call attention to the fact that while the terms "will" or "to will" may include the idea of complacency or delight, they sometimes point to a simple determination of the will; and that therefore the will of God to permit sin need not imply that He takes delight or pleasure in sin."³⁰
- Finally, in relation to second causes and God's permissive will it should not be forgotten that all life and power ultimately comes from God. He gives to all life, breath and all things. Even Pilate had to be rebuked by Jesus regarding the authority he had to release Jesus or to sentence Him to death. The fact that Pilate was unaware that whatever authority he had, he had received from God, did not change the fact which Jesus stated; *You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above* (John 19:10). Such power is given by God and given *freely*. God is not constrained to give life and power to anyone. If they have it, it is because He willed to give it. God is the one who is truly, absolutely, free in all His acts.
- Concurrence language* It is helpful to reconcile ourselves to how God has chosen to describe the events that occur in His world. It is good for us to *think* in the way this language encourages us to think. Numerous actions of men and things are referred to both God and the individual or thing as having performed the action.
- 1 Chr. 21:1, 2 Sam. 24:1* 1 Chronicles states that Satan moved David to number Israel and 2 Samuel states that the Lord moved David to say, *go number Israel and Judah*. This could be a case of second causes. Maybe not. But why is it such a problem for us?
- Job* Job 1:15 and 17 indicate that the Sabeans and the Chaldeans stole Jobs property and killed his servants but when Job prayed he stated that the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.
- Daily bread* We should pray daily for God to *give us this day our daily bread* (Matt. 6:11) and be thankful when He does. But surely it is true, *he who will not work let him not eat* (2 Thes. 3:10). Now the atheist looks at this situation and snickers that we should not be giving thanks to God but to ourselves or our employers. What a mistake he has made in his thinking! He has made a god out of his experience and thinking and refuses to submit to God's revelation. He is going to be the one who will be judged under the witness of Acts 14:17, *Nevertheless He [God] did not leave Himself without witness, in*

30. Luis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, pg. 79

that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness, and the condemnation of Romans 1:21; although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful. Does God give the daily bread or not?

Philp. 2:13 God is at work in the believer both to will and do of His good pleasure. This surely does not lessen the reality of the believer's willing.

Jonah 1 Wayne Grudem's remarks regarding God's dealings with Jonah are very helpful; "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" (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."

Psa. 135:5-12 God feeds the wild animals of the field, for these all look to Him. He makes lightnings for the rain. He sends rain on the just and the unjust. He causes the grass to grow, he raises up nations and takes others down. He does all these things yet these things are also spoken of as doing the things too.

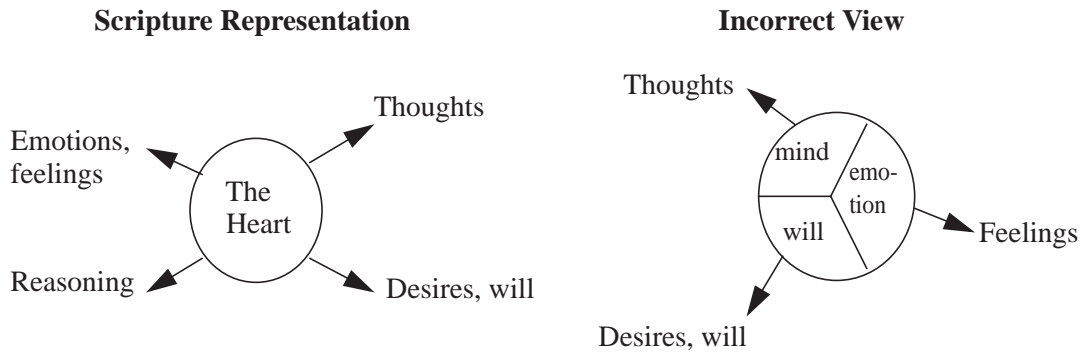
Conclusion Given the above examples we should separate in our minds *what* God wills and *how* He brings it to pass. Our minds often unconsciously limit God. If we cannot conceive of a matter we (arrogantly?) assume that matter cannot be, but if revelation from God tells us it is, then it is time for renewing and expanding our minds. There are no compelling reasons to restrict God to always accomplishing His will by one particular means.

God's Will of Dominion in Relation to Man's Will and Responsibility

Numerous Objections Often when the Scriptures considered above regarding the Power and Sovereignty of God are presented to human minds, objections arise to the clear and simple understanding of the texts. Those who do not believe in the authority of the Bible will usually interpret the passages correctly and then discount the author as being incorrect and having primitive religious views. This is seen, for instance, in regard to Paul's teaching on the roles of women. They know what Paul said and they have concluded he was simply wrong and a product of a culture gone wrong. However, for those who profess to believe in the authority of *all* the Bible, a struggle often ensues regarding the passages we have been considering. Can the simple understanding of these texts stand? Can a simple understanding of Eph. 1:11b stating that God is one *who works all things according to the counsel of His will* be correct? What follows does not remove all the "tension" we may feel in answering this question "yes", but it does indicate that the tension is not nearly as great as the objectors would have us believe. Most of the "tension" comes from wrong views in four areas.

Wrong Views Regarding the Nature of the Will of Man

People often speak about man's will as if it were a *component part* of his essential being. A person's will is not a part of him, like an engine is part of a car, but rather a *behavior* of his heart. Human hearts generate desires. Desires come out of hearts.



When I say, “my will (noun) is X”, I am expressing X is what I desire to happen or do.

When I say, “I am willing (verb) to do X”, I’m expressing I *desire* to do X or approve of doing it. In neither case am I referring to a component part of my being.

Matt. 12-33-35

We might speak of our wills as a component part of ourselves; i.e. “I have an evil or good will”, not meaning I have an evil or good desire, but there is no component part of me called “will” which is evil or good. Scripture (to the best of my current research³¹) never speaks in this way. Scripture speaks that one has either an evil or a good *heart* and that heart generates either evil or good desires. Our speech, actions, and yes, desires, are things that our hearts bring forth. If our hearts were perfect, like Christ's, only good speech, desires, and thoughts would come out of them. We would only will or desire what is good.

Wrong Views Regarding Freedom and Real Choices

The Bible's concept of freedom is not *the ability to do moral opposites*. If this were the case then none of the members of the Trinity has ever been free and neither are the glorified saints in heaven free, who's treasure chests are full of only good things. However, for a person created in the image of God to do an act *freely* means that he does the act *willingly*, from his own heart, and without constraint. Whether or not he has the ability and desire to do the contrary act has nothing to do with the definition of a *free* act, that is, an act which is unconstrained or unforced by another. So those who can only do good, certainly do do good in the truest sense of serving God from *willing* hearts.

Choices are real choices if they are made without coercion. *If they are real choices then men are responsible for the choices they make.* The author simply insists that God has so created and ordered things that the unconstrained choices of men still follow His predetermined plan. And why has the author reached this conclusion? Because the Bible clearly teaches that God's will of dominion, from eternity past, does extend to all things *and* the same Bible teaches that men are justly held responsible for their acts. If we must introduce a limitation, we should introduce it regarding *our* understanding and *not regarding either God's character or the clear statements He has made in His Word.* The Bible teaches us both truths:

31. Of the nnn uses of the noun θελημα ... and the nnn uses of the verb θελω in the NT ...

1. Men do act freely (in the sense defined above) and thus are justly held responsible for their actions.
2. Nevertheless God works all things (including the free acts of good and evil men) *after the counsel of His will*. What ultimately *stands* or comes to pass in all situations is the *previously* decided upon counsel of the Lord (Eph. 1:11, Prov. 19:21).

We are left to *believe* that God always tells the truth about *His world*. This leads to only one valid conclusion. God *is able* to, and has governed His world, according to *both* of these revealed truths. If a limitation must be placed, it must not be placed on the plain declarations of His speech or His ability. Can you imagine how little God would do if He only did what we considered He was able to do?? Or what we considered was “logically possible” for Him to do? *Human* logic is limited. Human logic raised against the plain declarations of Scripture is *wrong* every time. Let us use human logic to understand the speech of God. But once we have heard what He has said let us not use it to say He could not have possibly said that!

Wrong Views Regarding Choices Caused by God

Eze. 36:27

The insistence that choices are not real choices or pleasing to God unless they are uncaused by Him and free from His force is simply unbiblical. God’s force works on human hearts in special ways to produce *willing* outcomes.

God will cause them to walk in His Statutes and they will keep His judgements and do them. We know that there is no true keeping of His judgements if it is done unwillingly and with a long face. Thus God must change the *heart* so that the right desires freely come out of it.

Jer. 32:38-41

God seems perfectly delighted to receive the externally “caused” obedience of His children. Nor does it bother Him to fill His children with a type of *fear* that guarantees that they will obey Him. Though God is the one who put this constraining fear in their hearts He seems to be perfectly delighted in them - see verse 41! God is the one who makes the tree good. Once this is done the tree bears good fruit. A willing obedience which certainly has been caused by God is the result.

Psalm 110:1-3

It is the exertion of the exalted Christ’s *power* that results in Him having a throng of *willing* volunteers who enlist in His army (the figure of the passage). In the day of *His power* His people literally become *free will offerings*.^{32 33 34} His power is the cause. Their offering themselves is the effect. And yes, the offering is considered a *free will* offering!

The understanding advocated here is often misrepresented as a view which teaches that the love of God’s people is forced if God is ultimately the cause of it. Sinful souls need life from God if they are to love Him and others. Jesus’ statement that *it is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh profits nothing*, teaches us where life actually originates. The “love acts” of those born again by the Spirit are as free as any acts of one born the first time, born of the flesh. He had *nothing* to do with his first birth and should we conclude, that since he had nothing to do with his first birth, and *no* choice in the matter, that none of his latter actions and choices are *real choices*? Of course not. The position

32. The Hebrew term used often denotes the free will offerings established in the Levitical laws.

33. This is certainly not the picture of the risen Christ standing for years and knocking at the door of people’s unwilling hearts! “So sad, no one will enlist in Jesus’s army ...” This is a very dishonoring representation of the Lord. People have taken an invitation to repentance given to a fallen professing church (Rev. 3:20) and from this constructed their doctrine of how unbelievers are saved while ignoring the many passages which tell us how God saves. This is a misuse of Scripture.

34. The attitudes we have regarding choice and freedom have been heavily influenced by Americanism and we often unconsciously import these attitudes into our theology - i.e. the way we think things should be in God’s world.

advocated here is simply that Christ, by His power, by the Spirit, changes hearts giving them the *ability and desire* to love God. An ability and desire which they do not have while they are dead in sin and remain his enemies.

Wrong Views Regarding Human Responsibility

The objection that men cannot be held responsible if ultimately whatsoever comes to pass is God's will has already be dealt with above by insisting that many of men's acts are free, i.e. they are un coerced choices that they make.

However, when we study the Bible's teaching regarding the condition of the human heart in sin we realize that men left to themselves only make the *wrong* choices. They make un coerced choices but since the tree is bad and the treasure chest is full of evil, left to themselves only wrong choices come out of the heart. The Bible illustrates this condition with the figure of slavery and describes all people as being slaves of sin. They are free but not in the sense that they have the ability to choose a new master. They have no desire to turn to God and the light. However we must be careful to point out that in this *spiritual* slavery the subjects are willing slaves and will often times proclaim that they are doing exactly what they want to do. Which of course is true!

This situation raises another common objection; that if men are *unable* to do good it would be unjust to hold them responsible for doing good. This is a "back door" approach in defending the idea that man has a free will in the sense of having the *ability* to good or evil or moral opposites. The reasoning, either stated or implied, is; we all agree man is responsible for his actions, he cannot be responsible for something he is unable to do, therefore he must be able (without God's aid) to do the good God requires him to do³⁵, since he is able to do so then he does have a free will in the ultimate sense. This argument depends on the minor premise; God would be unjust to hold man responsible for something he is unable to do.

The argument assumes we are not responsible for our condition.

This minor premise is based on an often unconsciously held assumption. The argument has been expressed to the author as follows: "Now if non-flying was a sin, could God hold us responsible for something we were not designed to do? No, He could not. He is the designer, and it is up to Him to give us the ability to fly if we are supposed to do it.... God could not hold us accountable for this sin [not flying] because He did not give us the ability to be able to fly.... Being held accountable for the impossible, to me this is total nonsense."

The author of these statements is not looking at God's world based on God's description of it (at least regarding this matter of discussion). He is trusting in his own ideas. No Scripture (by the author just quoted, or any other author) has ever been put forth to defend the idea that human responsibility is based upon *sinful* man's ability to obey God's commands. Responding to the flying illustration, when God created Adam and Eve they were designed to fly *and* they could fly! Furthermore while they remained sinless, they did have free will in the sense of having the *ability* to choose good or evil. They were *able* to obey and disobey. They also were accountable to the law of God. And to this law Adam and all his posterity are still accountable. When God told Adam that if he disobeyed he would die He surely meant it. The point is: *Adam broke off his own wings* and he died. This death because of his sin, by which he plunged himself and all his posterity into sin, left him without the ability to fly. As created his heart was *very good*. Now his heart is evil and he has a darkened mind. God did not tell Adam, "if you sin and ruin yourself so that you are no longer able to obey my commandments, I will lower the standard, I will adjust my law to something that you are able to do now that you have wrecked yourself." The case for Adam is true

35. Often the good required that is in view in this discussion is to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, responding to the invitations and commands of the gospel.

of every person. All have used, and continue to use, their “free will” to wreck themselves, disobeying God as Adam did and much more. The view expressed above obligates God to change his law in response to *the consequences* of man’s sin. But God *is not* obligated to remove any of the consequences of *our* sins. He is obligated to uphold justice, and there is no injustice in God when He holds us responsible, even after we have ruined ourselves. *Indeed He would be unjust if He did not.* The argument that God cannot hold sinful men responsible for what they are unable to do has ignored the truth that *we have made ourselves* into dead sinners. The author agrees that, “we can not be held responsible for something we were not *designed* to do.” But he will assert that we are held responsible for what *we have done, including all the consequences resulting from our actions.* We are the ones who rebelled. We reap only what we have sown. The problem is, left to himself man will not do what is right with his free will. But this does not relieve him of his *obligation* to do so.³⁶

God’s commands are not relativistic.

A simple reading of Scripture reveals that what God commands people to do, and holds them responsible to do, is based upon His standards of right and wrong which have never changed. He is just and what is right is not conditioned on an individual’s ability, or state, or how many drugs he may have taken, or the environment in which he was raised.

Scripture examples

The above arguments appear to be confirmed by examples in Scripture where the inability of individuals to perform a certain good is stated and this is followed with a clear statement of their being held responsible to do what they have been told they cannot do.³⁷

Matt. 12:34-36

The answer to Jesus’ question, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? is obviously, they cannot speak good because they are evil. In verse 36 Jesus assures them that they will still give an account for every idle word they have spoken. Clearly they are being held responsible for what they speak even though they are unable to speak what is good.

Jer. 13:23-24

The prophet’s illustration is easy to understand. Of course the Ethiopian (or anyone for that matter) cannot change the color of his skin and neither can a leopard change its spots. Thus neither can they, from their own ability, begin to do good. Such inability does not lessen the justness of the coming judgement upon them.

Knowledge of right and wrong leads men to be responsible.

If the Scripture teaches that man’s responsibility relates to something he possesses, that something is not ability to do right, but *knowledge* of what *is* right. In God’s world knowing the right thing to do is what makes men responsible to do the right thing. Knowing what is right and being given knowledge upon which one should act is a common idea in the following texts: James 4:17, Luke 12:47-48, Num. 15:30-31, Matt 11:22-24, John 9:41, 12:48, 15:22-24.

Rom. 1:20-21

The knowledge given by God in general revelation to all men makes them responsible to worship Him and not idols. They are responsible enough to be *without excuse*. Man’s innate “reason” has often cried “foul” to this situation but this response, common to human hearts, must be a darkened, sinful response for the passage (Rom. 1) is quite clear that the people described are the ones who are unreasonable and evil, not God who judges them.

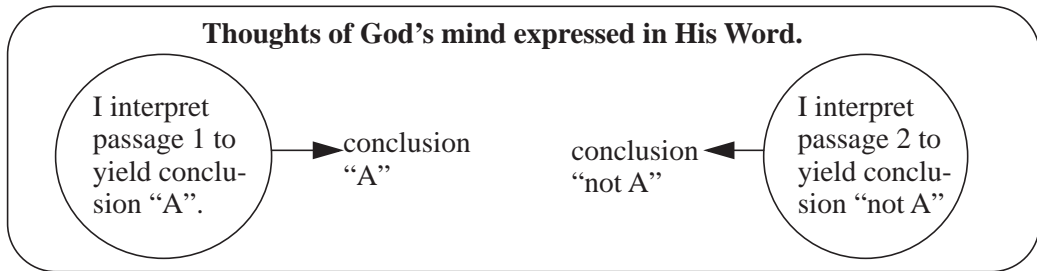
36. Understanding the above is one of the reasons why salvation is such a wonderfully glorious thing. When we were helpless, really, really helpless, Christ died for us. When we were dead, really, really dead, after we thoroughly committed suicide by rebelling against God, He made us alive together with Christ! (Rom. 5, Eph. 2). What harm can come to God’s glory or His people by believing this?

37. There is a great gospel appeal in this “hopeless” situation. Recognize that you are lost and need help, big time help!

Inferences From Innate Notions Cannot Override Revelation

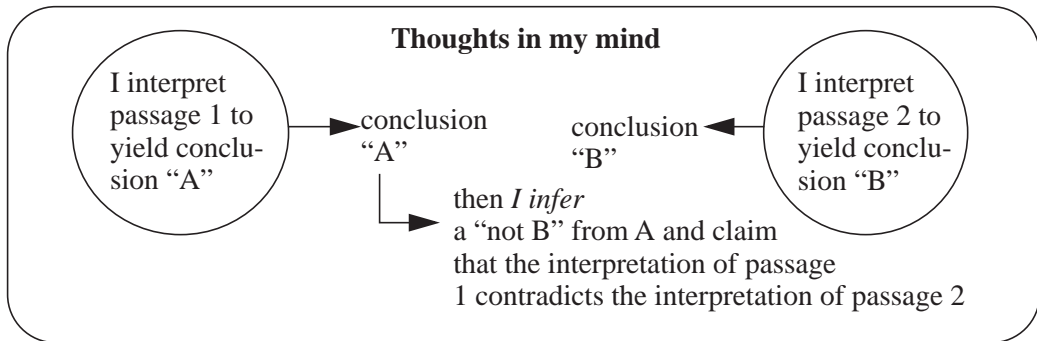
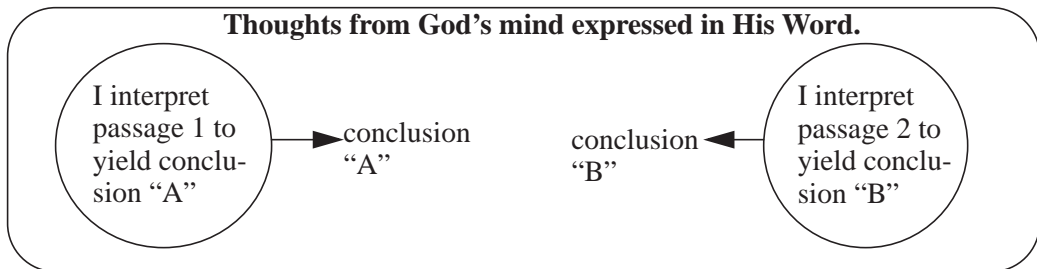
As we struggle with the word of God and what He has revealed to us, it is important to make a distinction between interpretations of passages which contradict one another versus interpretation of passages which contradict our deeply held notions. Often the plea is *incorrectly* made that an interpretation which contradicts a deeply held notion is an interpretation which is contradicting other Scripture. Consider the following figures.

Proposing a *real* contradictory interpretation



A contradiction only with my deeply held notions.

The contradiction exists in *my* mind, not in the statements of Scripture. I incorrectly claim a contradiction by *inferring* a “not B” from “A” based on my reasoning and experience. Once I’ve *inferred* “not B” from A, then I say “A” and “B” contradict. *My inferring goes beyond God’s revelation* and is the source of the conflict.



Example of proposing a real contradiction.

For example, if I conclude from James 2:24 that man is pronounced not guilty in God’s court *on the basis of commands he has obeyed* and then conclude from Romans 3:28 that man is pronounced not guilty *without* any basis on the commands he has obeyed, then I have proposed a genuine contradiction. I have said “A is not A”. I have said man *is* pronounced not guilty on the basis of obeying commands (James 2:24) and I have said man *is not* pronounced not guilty on the basis of obeying commands. Logically there are only four possible solutions out of proposed contradictory interpretations: Either my exegesis of James is wrong, or my exegesis of Romans is

wrong, or my exegesis of both texts is wrong or the Scripture has actually contradicted itself. We of course reject the forth solution.

Falsely asserting an interpretation of one text is contradicting another text.

However, if I conclude from Romans 9:19 that, “no one resists His will” and also conclude from Romans 3:19 that all mankind is responsible for what they have done in accordance with God’s Law, I have not proposed a *logical* contradiction in the teaching of Scripture. I have set forth *two* expressions from God’s mind. There is not even an *apparent* contradiction *between them*.³⁸ The often arising contradiction is between these expressions of God’s mind and deeply held notions and *inferences* of *my mind*. The fact that *I* cannot understand or do not experience how God can so rule to guarantee that no one has resisted His will and at the same time all the world is accountable (guilty) to Him *does not necessitate* that this situation is impossible. There is nothing in these interpretive conclusions, *regarding the meaning of these two portions of Scripture themselves*, that says “A” is not “A”. The conflict is between the expressions of God’s mind and *my notions* of how God’s world works. *My knowledge is limited* and from where I exist my observation is limited. To illustrate with our solar system, many people were certain that the sun traveled around the earth. From the knowledge they had and with their capacities of observation, they became deeply convinced that the sun traveled around the earth. But, given more knowledge (especially that gained from Galileo’s primitive telescope) we have been led to conclude that the earth travels around the sun. Neither is the earth flat and no one yet can really understand gravity. The word of God is the *given knowledge* which must rearrange our deeply held notions about God’s world. The two cases illustrated in the above diagrams are very different situations and most (all?) arguments against the sovereignty of God incorrectly claim that the interpretation given to some passages contradicts other passages, when in reality the interpretation contradicts *incorrect inferences people make from the interpretation given*. It cannot be stated too strongly that these inferences *are additions to God’s word* and thus cannot override the plain statements from God’s Word, i.e. statements from His mind.

The student must approach the text without bias and preconceived conclusions (other than those relating to the doctrine of scripture) and seek to determine what the text teaches. This is a tall order, but the next step is even taller. He must strenuously maintain the following separations in his mind: Are the conclusions I have made concerning what the texts say contradicting each other? or are they contradicting what I presently believe? Or *can I simply not conceive how God can create the reality He has described?* Remember, reality is what He says it is, not what we think or observe that it is. *Given knowledge* from God always trumps human reason and observation, not vice versa. Faith believes the *what* because God declares it. To some measure He has revealed the *how* and to some measure we can conceive of the *how*. But God forbid that we should limit His *what* to our ability of conceiving the *how*! This is what many interpreters are unconsciously doing when they insist that plain interpretations of disputed texts contradict other texts. They have made inferences from the plain interpretation which contradicts other texts. We must remember that such inferences are not part of the Word of God.

38. If I deduced from Romans 9:19 that “all the world is not accountable to God” since none resist His will then there would be an apparent contradiction with Romans 3:19. Or if I deduced from Romans 3:19 that “people do resist His will (of dominion)” because they sin then there would be an apparent contradiction with Rom 9:19. But in both cases the contradiction arises because of *my deducing* another “truth” as illustrated in the third box in the figure. I must infer the “not B” in order to say that the plain interpretations of passages 1 and 2 contradict. There is an *apparent* contradiction between James 2:24 and Rom. 3:28 for it sounds like “A is not A”. Thus either Paul and James were discussing different subjects using similar terminology, or the Bible contradicts itself. The former of course is the case.

No Scripture Attributing Ultimacy to Free Will

Finally, where has the emphasis on the “free will of man”, meaning neutrality and ability as regards doing good and evil, arisen from? Certainly not from scripture. There is not a single dogmatic text that states man either has a component part of himself called a will which is neutral toward God, or a single dogmatic text which states that the natural human heart can generate a righteous desire to seek God. The scripture repeatedly describes man, when in sin, as having a heart that turns aside to his own way, does not seek after God, hates the light and will not come to the light, will not come to Christ for life, loves the darkness, is at enmity toward God, and is unable to submit to His commandments. This is all true because men’s hearts are evil, and evil desires are what come out of evil hearts.

Neither is there any Scripture declaring an ultimacy to the “free will of man” as regards *any* of his actions. If we ask the question, “what is it that *ultimately* determines what comes to pass?” The Scripture gives ready answers, not only by example or inference, but by dogmatic declaration: *There are many plans in a man’s heart, Nevertheless the LORD’s counsel -- that will stand* (Prov. 19:21). *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that”* (James 4:13-15). Men do this or that **ultimately** because God wills that they do *this or that*.