

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Seeing God's Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us

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### Scripture's General Perspective on God's Relationship to Evil

We need to know what Scripture says in general about God's relationship to evil. Scripture declares that the Judge of all the earth will always do what is right (see [Gen. 18:25](#)). God is, as Moses sings, "the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just." He is a "faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he" ([Deut. 32:4](#), NIV). God never *does* evil.

Yet this is not to say that God does not *create, send, permit, or even move others* to do evil<sup>1</sup> for Scripture is clear that *nothing* arises, exists, or endures independently of God's will. Thus, when the writer of Hebrews states that Christ "upholds the universe by the word of his power" ([Heb. 1:3](#)), he is claiming that God the Son is providentially governing everything through sustaining all of the universe's objects and events as he carries each of them to its appointed end by his all-powerful word.<sup>2</sup> This follows from the fact that the

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<sup>1</sup> To move someone to do evil is not the same as tempting that person to do evil. Scripture tells us that God tempts no one (see [James 1:13](#)). For how moving someone to do evil and tempting that person to do evil differ, see the passages from W. G. T. Shedd cited in n. 56, and especially 318-22.

<sup>2</sup> See William L. Lane, \*[Hebrews 1-8](#)\*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 47A (Dallas: Word, 1991), *loc. cit.*: "The . . . clause ascribes to the Son the providential government of all created existence, which is the function of God himself. As the pre-creational Wisdom of God, the Son not only embodies God's glory

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Greek word for “upholds” is *pherō*, which means to bring or bear or produce or carry. As Wayne Grudem notes, *pherō* “is commonly used in the New Testament for carrying something from one place to another, such as bringing a paralyzed man on a bed to Jesus ([Luke 5:18](#)), bringing wine to the steward of the feast ([John 2:8](#)), or bringing a cloak and books to Paul ([2 Tim. 4:13](#)).” Consequently, in our verse’s context it “does not mean simply ‘sustain,’ but has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another,” especially since *pherō* appears in our verse as a present participle, which “indicates that Jesus is ‘continually carrying along all things’ in the universe by his word of power.”<sup>3</sup> So here is the picture: God the Son holds each and every aspect of creation, including all of its evil aspects, in his “hands” — that is, within his all-powerful and ever-effectual word — and carries it by that word to where it accomplishes exactly what he wants it to do.

[Ephesians 1:11](#) goes even further by declaring that God in Christ “works all things according to the counsel of his will.” Here the Greek word for “works” is *energeō*, which indicates that God not merely carries all of the universe’s objects and events to their appointed ends but that he actually *brings about* all things in accordance with his will. In other words, it isn’t just that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those who love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects for his glory (see [Ex. 9:13-16](#); [John 9:3](#)) and his people’s good (see [Heb. 12:3-11](#); [James 1:2-4](#)). This includes — as incredible and as unacceptable as it may currently seem — God’s having even brought about the Nazis’ brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz as well as the terrible killings of Dennis Rader and even the sexual abuse of a young child: “The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil” ([Prov. 16:4](#), NASB).<sup>4</sup> “When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other” ([Eccl. 7:14](#), NIV).

As Thomas Goodwin noted, in this passage from Ephesians Paul wants to assure his Jewish Christian brothers and sisters that God has worked grace in their hearts as the consequence of his having predestined them before all time for salvation in Christ so that they will be confident of their eternal inheritance.<sup>5</sup> So how does Paul proceed? He argues

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but also reveals this to the universe as he sustains all things and bears them to their appointed end by his omnipotent word.”

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 316.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word for “evil” in this verse is *ra*, as is the word for “bad” in Ecclesiastes 7:14. *Ra*, as I point out below regarding Isaiah 45:7, is the primary Hebrew term for evil.

<sup>5</sup> Verses 11 and 12 read: “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.” Verse 13 then starts with the words, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth.” Goodwin, F. F. Bruce, Gordon Fee, Peter O’Brien, and

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from the general principle to the specific case. God “‘works *all things* after the counsel of his own will;’ he plotted *everything* beforehand, therefore certainly this [particular thing].”<sup>6</sup> In thus arguing from the general to the specific, Paul is arguing from what would be obvious to his biblically literate Jewish brothers and sisters to what would be less obvious for them as relatively new converts to Christ. These Jewish Christians would know that God—the God of the Old Testament whom they now recognized as the Father of Jesus Christ—declares “the end from the beginning” ([Isa. 46:10](#))—and, by implication, knows and has ordered everything in-between, even down to foreseeing and ordering the words we will speak (see [Ps. 139:4](#) with [Prov. 16:1](#)).<sup>7</sup> They would know that the One who said, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,” is the One who ensures this by bringing everything about, including, in the immediate context of Isaiah’s words, “calling a bird of prey from the east, . . . from a far country” ([Isa. 46:10f.](#))—that is, Cyrus the Great, king of Persia from 559–530 BC, who would conquer Babylon in 539 BC and then allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem so that they could rebuild the temple

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others argue from the “you also” that verses 11 and 12 are referring to the first Jewish Christians and that verse 13 then brings in the later Gentile Christians. This reading seems to be corroborated by [Acts 18:24–19:20](#).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians* in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 1 (Eureka, Calif.: Tanski Publications, 1996), loc. cit.; my emphasis. Goodwin lived from 1600–1680. His Ephesians commentary was published the year after his death. Goodwin was one of the greatest of the English Puritans. Ordinarily, if we were to say that someone did something according to the counsel of his own will, what we would mean is that the person first thought through on his own what he was going to do and then carried out what he had determined to do without having to take account of anything other than what he had determined to do. In other words, what he had determined to do was all that he took account of in acting as he did; he did not have to adjust what he did to anything beyond what he had determined to do. So if we interpret this part of [Ephesians 1:11](#) according to its plain sense, then we will affirm with the Scriptures that “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” ([Ps. 115:3](#); see also [135:6](#); [Dan. 4:35](#); and [Isa. 46:10](#), which is quoted below). At this point, open theists may seem to have one more move available to them. It seems that they could retort that what God has been pleased to do is to give human beings the sort of freedom that involves our deciding what we will do rather than his determining what we will do. But this move is not really a biblical option, given the fact that God would not then be working all things “after the counsel of his own will.” For he would then be taking into account not only what he willed but what we will.

<sup>7</sup> In [Isaiah 46:9](#), God declares that he is God “and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,” which is immediately followed by the words of verse 10: “declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’” The fact that verse 10 is preceded by this declaration of God’s that there is none like him suggests or implies that God’s exhaustive foreknowledge is what theologians call a *differentium*—that is, a distinguishing feature, or something that sets him apart and makes him different from every other being. Here the New Living Translation captures the intent of these two verses nicely: “And do not forget the things I have done throughout history. For I am God—I alone! I am God, and there is no one else like me. Only I can tell you what is going to happen even before it happens. Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish.”

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(see [Ezra 1:1-4](#)). God here calls the pagan, unbelieving Cyrus “a man to fulfill my purpose” ([Isa. 46:11](#), NIV). From events as small as the fall of the tiniest sparrow (see [Matt. 10:29](#)) to the death, at the hands of lawless men, of his own dear Son (see [Acts 2:23](#) with 4:28), God speaks and then brings his word to pass; he purposes and then does what he has planned (see [Isa. 46:11](#)). Nothing that exists or occurs falls outside God’s ordaining will.<sup>8</sup>

*Nothing*, including no evil person or thing or event or deed. God’s foreordination is the ultimate reason why everything comes about, including the existence of all evil persons and things and the occurrence of any evil acts or events. And so it is not inappropriate to take God to be the creator, the sender, the permitter, and sometimes even the instigator of evil. This is what Scripture explicitly claims. For instance, [Isaiah 45:7](#) reports God to declare: “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things.” The word for “create” here is the Hebrew word *bara’*, which is the same word that is used for God’s creative work in [Genesis 1](#); and the word for “calamity” is *ra*, which is the word that is almost always translated “evil” in the

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<sup>8</sup> It is crucial to recognize, as Goodwin did, that Paul’s argument would not work if he could not assume that his fellow Jewish Christians would agree that God works all things according to the counsel of his will. If anything whatsoever could fall outside God’s will, then why not their eternal inheritance? This implies that neither Paul himself nor any of the godly Jews of his day would have considered open theism a biblical possibility. Open theists often claim that Scripture includes claims that can be taken to support their position as well as claims that support their opponents’ position. They then argue that the passages that seem to support their position ought to be taken to determine how we should interpret the passages that seem to oppose their position. But here we have an argument from Paul that clarifies what he and his Jewish brothers and sisters took to be beyond question: God works all things according to the counsel of his will. This establishes that we should not take the biblical texts that can be read as supporting open theism as determining our interpretation of the ones that cannot. We must take the biblical texts that contradict open theism as the determinative texts, and then interpret the supposedly “open” passages in their light, if we are to remain true to what God has intended us to understand from his word, given Paul’s argument. (In fact, one reason to interpret verses such as [Psalm 139:4](#) and [Proverbs 16:1](#) as I have in this argument, and thus we have reason to reject, e.g., David J. A. Clines’s interpretation of such verses in his “Predestination in the Old Testament,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), 116f.). It is curious that open theists like Boyd and John Sanders never even acknowledge [Ephesians 1:11](#), much less grapple with Paul’s argument. I explain the concepts of God’s *ordaining will* and his foreordination (as it is broached in the second sentence of the next paragraph) in the last paragraph of this section. What God ordains often differs from what he commands. For instance, God commands all human beings to worship his Son (see, e.g., [Phil. 2:9-11](#)), but he ordained that certain specific human beings would disobey that command and blaspheme against him instead (see, e.g., [2 Peter 2](#) and Jude, especially vv. 4, 8, 13-15). Again, he commands that all people everywhere repent (see [Acts 17:30](#)) and yet he has ordained that some will not (see [2 Peter 2](#), especially vv. 9 and 17). In Reformed circles, this distinction between what God ordains and what he commands is often marked as the distinction between his secret will—which is never frustrated—and his *revealed will*—which human beings violate regularly. For a nice summary of the distinction, see Grudem, *op. cit.*, 213-16.

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Old Testament, as we find in places like [Genesis 2–3; 6:5; 13:13](#); and 50:15, 20.<sup>9</sup> Again, Amos asks rhetorically; “When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (3:6, NIV).<sup>10</sup> Isaiah also says, “The Lord has mixed within [the leaders of the Egyptian cities of Zoan and Memphis] a spirit of distortion,”<sup>11</sup> and they have then “led Egypt astray in all that it does” (19:14, NASB).

## Does God Send or Permit?

Nor is maintaining that God never does evil equivalent to claiming that he does not send evil. Sometimes he sends evil spirits—one to torment King Saul (see [1 Sam. 16:14-23](#)), another which caused the leaders of Shechem to deal treacherously with King Abimelech (see [Judg. 9:23](#)), and a third to lie through King Ahab’s prophets and thus entice him to travel to Ramoth-gilead where he would be killed (see [1 Kings 22:13-40](#)). And sometimes he sends delusions, as Paul affirms when he says that, because the perishing refuse “to love the truth and so be saved, . . . God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” ([2 Thess. 2:11f.](#)).

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<sup>9</sup> God’s creative activity in [Isaiah 45:7](#) is stated in terms of his forming or making or creating whole *kinds* or *categories* of things. He is not represented in this verse as creating a *particular* light or a *particular* calamity; he creates light as such and evil as such. So this verse cuts off the possibility that God sometimes creates evil and sometimes does not.

<sup>10</sup> The New International Version’s translation of the second half of this verse seems to me to be preferable over other translations, such as the English Standard Version’s (which reads: “Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?”) because it avoids potentially confusing the reader with the possibility that God does evil. As Douglas Stuart notes in Hosea–Joel, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 31 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 324, the focus of verses 3–6 of chapter 3 is “on certain natural associations of a cause and effect variety”—and so rendering the Hebrew word *ʾasah* as “cause” rather than the much more common “do” is certainly not inappropriate. As Grudem points out regarding the interpretation of [Isaiah 45:7](#), while someone could try to restrict the kind of evil that God creates to nothing other than natural disaster, there is no reason why we should take it so restrictedly (see op. cit., 326, n. 7). In fact, the proper interpretation of [Amos 3:6](#) implies that such a restriction is improper. For warning trumpets were blown in ancient cities primarily to signal that those cities were facing or undergoing military attack (see Stuart, op. cit., 325: “Everyone knew the significance of blowing a [trumpet] in a city. It was the means of alarm (cf. [Hos. 5:8](#)) and usually warned of enemy attack.”). So [Amos 3:6](#) affirms that God is the ultimate cause of even those disasters that can be attributed to human choice. Grudem’s examination of the relationship between God and evil, as found on 322–30 of his book, is among the best.

<sup>11</sup> The translations of “confusion” and “dizziness” for the Hebrew *ʾavʾeh* seem too weak.

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In [Genesis 19](#), God sent angels to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (see especially v. 13). In [Exodus 7–12](#), he sent the ten plagues. In [Numbers 21:6](#), he sent poisonous snakes to bite the grumbling Israelites. In [2 Samuel 24](#), he sent a pestilence on Israel that killed seventy thousand men. In [2 Kings 24:2-4](#), after having vowed earlier that because of Manasseh’s sins he would bring upon Jerusalem and Judah “such evil [*ra*] that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle” (21:12, RSV), God sent marauding bands of foreign peoples against Judah to destroy it because of King Manasseh’s sins. All this came upon Judah by God’s word (see 24:3).<sup>12</sup> In [Isaiah 10](#), God vows to send Assyria against godless Judah, but then he also vows to “punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria” (v. 12) by sending a plague among his warriors (v. 16). When the Lord’s angel fulfilled this vow, 185,000 Assyrian warriors died (see [Isa. 37:36](#)).<sup>13</sup>



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*Nothing—no evil thing or person or event or deed—falls outside God’s ordaining will.*

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Scripture also establishes that God *permits* others to do evil, as when he permitted Satan to destroy all of Job’s property and children, so that it would be clear that even then Job would not curse God (see [Job 1:6-12](#)), and when he allowed foreign nations in Old Testament times each to walk in its own sinful way (see [Acts 14:16](#)). The idea that no one ever does evil to someone else unless God at least permits or allows it is suggested by other passages, such as [Genesis 31:7](#), where Jacob says to his wives that God did not allow

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<sup>12</sup> In order to avoid confusion with the distinction that I made in footnote 18 between what God ordains and what he commands, it is probably important to note that the phrase usually translated here as “at his command” is more literally translated as “from his mouth.” In other words, what this verse is claiming is that all of this came about because it was part of God’s all-powerful and ever-effectual word.

<sup>13</sup> In [2 Kings 17:23-25](#) we are told that God sent lions among the foreign peoples that the king of Assyria had sent to Samaria to replace the Israelites whom he had exiled. Many of us probably put ourselves in the place of the exiled Israelites instead of the foreigners and so we may not readily recognize that to the foreigners this was a real evil, even if it was an evil by which God was redressing the evil done to his people. The same point must be kept in mind when reading about, e.g., God’s sending hail against the Egyptians in the seventh plague ([Ex. 9:23-26](#)), which to the Egyptians was a very great evil, as is clear from the fact that Pharaoh then said, “This time I have sinned; the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with the Lord, for there has been enough of God’s thunder and hail” (v. 27f.). This is the only time that the Pharaoh was so affected by one of the plagues that he admitted that he had sinned. (At [Deut. 6:22](#), Moses says, “And the Lord showed signs and wonders, *great and grievous*, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes”.)

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their father Laban to do *ra* to him; and [Exodus 12:23](#), where Moses states that God will not allow the destroyer to enter the Jewish homes and kill their firstborn; and [Luke 22:31](#), where the use of the Greek *exaiteo* seems to imply that Satan had to ask God permission before he could sift Simon.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, some biblical passages, such as [Isaiah 19:2](#), portray God as *moving others* to do evil: “I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, each against another and each against his neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom” (see also 9:11). [Second Samuel 24:1](#) states that “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel” and so “he incited David against them” by inciting David to count the Israelites.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, reading [Job 1:6-12](#) prompts the conclusion that when God said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” in verse 8, he was actually putting Job in Satan’s gunsights.

I have belabored the Scriptures in order to drive home this point: as one of my students said rather wonderfully in responding to open theism, “Open theists are trying to let God off the hook for evil. But God doesn’t want to be let off the hook.” The verses that I have cited establish that Scripture repudiates the claim that God does evil while at the same time everywhere implying that God *ordains* any evil there is. To say that God “ordains” something is to say that he has planned and purposed and willed it from before the creation of the world—that is, from before time began.<sup>16</sup>

And whatever God has eternally planned and purposed and willed—whatever he has in that sense foreordained—inevitably takes place; to say that God has ordained (or

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<sup>14</sup> This is the interpretation of [Luke 22:31](#) in versions such as the NIV and the NASB. This claim can ultimately be expanded into the claim that no evil—whether or not it is perpetrated by another person—can befall God’s people without God’s permission. Thus [Psalm 16:10](#) claims that God will not allow David to see corruption. Similarly, [Psalm 55:22](#) claims that God “will never permit the righteous to be moved.” [Psalms 66:9](#) and 121:3 and [1 Corinthians 10:13](#) further confirm the claim that God protects his people and will not allow any ultimate spiritual harm to befall them. In each of these cases the NASB gives what I think is the more felicitous translation by translating the appropriate terms as “allow” instead of the English Standard Version’s “let.” I leave it to my readers to work out from Scripture the implication that no evil befalls anyone—not even the wicked—without God’s permitting it.

<sup>15</sup> The parallel passage found at [1 Chronicles 21:1](#) tells us that it was Satan who incited David to commit this evil, which suggests that God incited David to this evil through permitting Satan to incite him.

<sup>16</sup> For the general concept of God’s ordaining things before time began and then bringing them to pass in history, see (e.g.) [1 Corinthians 2:7](#) with [Ephesians 1:7-10](#). Even Boyd admits that God has predestined some events from before creation and then brought them about in time, including the incarnation and the crucifixion (see his *God of the Possible*, 45).

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foreordained) something is to say that he has determined that it will take place.<sup>17</sup> As Isaiah puts it, “The Lord of hosts has sworn, ‘As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand’. . . . For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it?” (14:24, 27). Nothing—no evil thing or person or event or deed—falls outside God’s ordaining will. Nothing arises, exists, or endures independently of God’s will. So when even the worst of evils befall us, they do not ultimately come from anywhere other than God’s hand.

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*This article is by Mark R. Talbot and is adapted from [Suffering and the Sovereignty of God](#) edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor.*



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<sup>17</sup> This comes out clearly in comparing various translations of [Isaiah 37:26](#). In the NIV it reads like this: “Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass, that you [Sennacherib, king of Assyria] have turned fortified cities into piles of stone.” In the ESV it reads like this: “Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins.” The Hebrew word that gets translated here as either “ordained” or “determined” is *‘asah*, which means to *make* or *do*.