

Sermon 79: Romans 8:28: God's providence over evil

OUTLINE:

The teaching of the 1689

The teaching of the Bible

The teaching of theology

INTRODUCTION

God is in control of all things, and causes all things to work together for the good of those who love Him, this is the declaration of the Bible. Not only did He plan every inch of what would happen, He also upholds everything and causes everything to come to pass exactly how He willed it. Last week we looked at how God upholds nature, and that He is the source behind the mechanisms of nature. We looked at the implications of God's omnivolvement in the areas of science and a Christian's daily living. In this message we need to venture further into the implications of the Bible's assertions: If God is the author and controller of all things, does that include the fall, sin, and the devil? We might concede that He controls inanimate matter, but is He in control of willing beings like ourselves? Or are we to believe that God controls all inanimate objects, but has given over free reign to creatures like angels and humans with no interference from Himself, a deistic view? That He controls the stage but not the characters? No! Well then if God is in control over all things how does God's control over evil square with the free will of the creature?

Here are two questions people have often found themselves caught between. Is evil part of God's plan? Is God in control of evil or is He weak? Many have found themselves on the horns of this false dilemma, of God's ability and morality. If God wills evil, He may be strong but is unloving, and is not holy. And if He does not will evil, then He is loving but then evil is stronger than He is, as He cannot perform His will. Arminians and Open theists have erred on the side of God's morality, creating unbiblical doctrines like Free will, or of limiting God's omniscience. Hyper-calvinists have erred on the side of creating a God who is able, and sovereign, but who is arbitrary, where might is right. The Bible reveals this dilemma to be false because God wills and brings all things to pass, and He is loving and holy. The Scriptures affirm all these truths without working out the connections, or revealing the mechanisms. As we delve into this issue we are going to start where the confession starts, by speaking of mystery and the limits of human logic and information. Then we will let the Scriptures speak for themselves about this matter, and finally we will end with a look into the theological formulation called *concurrency* which has been used to address this issue.

The teaching of the 1689

First a summary of paragraph 4 of the confession: Paragraph 4 has three basic parts, an assertion, a qualification, and a clarification. **The assertion** is, "God's almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness are so far reaching, and all pervading, that both the fall of the first man into sin, and all other sinful actions of angels and men, proceed according to His sovereign purposes." The claim is clear, 'Of course God is in control of all

things including evil!’ And it is His power, wisdom and goodness that are pervasively working, without compromising their own integrity (in other words He never ceases to be good), that all things proceed according to His sovereign plan. **The qualification** is “It is not that He gives His bare permission, for in a variety of ways He wisely and powerfully limits, orders and governs sinful actions, so that they effect His holy designs.” The confession is telling us how He is in control. Firstly, with a type of permission, but not a bare permission. In other words, God’s permissive will, but this is defined as not being a bare permission. That is, there is never total and free permission, a hands off affair, but only as far as they affect God’s purposes. God is hands on. Secondly, God limits the sinful actions, and orders their arrangement. And we are also told that He governs these sinful actions that the damage, the consequences, every aspect of their working and effect is under His control. There are no unforeseen consequences, no unmanageable fallout or unfortunate collateral damage that is not ordained. And just in case you are getting the wrong idea, the confession adds **the clarification**, “Yet the sinfulness involved in the actions proceeds only from angels and men and not from God who, being holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.” Although part of His decree, He is not the author of sin, nor does He approve of it. It is obvious to see that the confession seems to be making some self-contradictory statements, that God works out things, including all sin according to His purposes, yet is not the author of it, and that only the creature is responsible for sin. This is supposed to be a summary of Scriptural teaching, lets turn there to check it.

The part that mystery plays:

It is very important for us as we start our look into this topic to view the part that mystery plays. Some have used the idea of mystery to cover up error or sneak some metaphysical constructions borrowed from philosophy into Christianity. But there is a legitimate place for mystery in our faith. God has not given us all of His thinking. We are clearly told this in Deut. 29:29 (ESV) “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” I volunteer that if God gave you a glimpse of all that goes into His thinking for just one second of time, your brain would explode. There is mercy in keeping these things hidden. But moreso there is also the Creator-creature relationship that we need to remember as well. God does not owe us an explanation for everything He does. He is the boss, and He is not answerable to us. It is a great mercy that He reveals even a little bit of what He does and why. He owes us no explanation, but the fact that He even speaks and reveals Himself to us is unimaginable grace. The attitude that holds God’s reputation ransom until He has satisfied all our intellectual demands is stupidity. Our very lives are sustained by Him at every moment, we are blinded if we think that He needs our approval. ‘Man is the measure of all things’ is the cry of the enlightenment. If God does not measure up to what we have determined are logical, rational, just principles or ways of working, then He doesn’t measure up. Beware, this is the type of thinking that the devil invited Adam and Eve to entertain towards God. A jaundiced eye towards God is the heart of the first sin, to not believe in His obvious goodness displayed in everything He had done for them, and to want more knowledge than God decided was good enough for them. We need to learn humility! Allow God not to reveal all His cards, and not accuse Him just because things appear not to

square with your puny and finite perspective. God has revealed Himself to us, and enough for us to know the real truth of who is in control, and be able to worship and have assurance that our lives are in His competent hands. It is not your lot to know all the mysteries of all God's workings but to worship, and He has revealed enough for this purpose.

In fact, He has given the whole world enough proof of His existence, His goodness, His power, His holiness, etc, that they are without excuse for their unbelief. There are those who will demand that we give all the answers otherwise people will have excuse not to believe. This however is a slanted view of man and faith. God opens people's hearts to believe the Gospel (Acts 16:14), He does not convert the soul by performing miracles, pulling back the curtain on the spiritual world, or offering perfectly complete and consistent intellectual arguments that satisfy any question that the unbeliever would think of asking. It is important to have as many answers as we can have, and not run from the hard questions, but a person's salvation is not determined by the arguing ability of the evangelist, or the ability to satisfy an unbeliever's questions. Don't get me wrong I am not saying that God does not use the means of our evangelism and apologetics to aid in bringing a person to salvation. Salvation is something that God does, not something that happens when we allow it because all our intellectual problems have been solved. It is a sovereign miracle performed by God, not merely a truth we need to learn. Therefore we do not need to feel pressurised into having all the answers in order to save souls, and therefore do not need to go beyond that which is revealed. In this instance of God's willing sin, controlling sin, and yet being without sin. It is affirmed but not explained, and that should be enough for us.

Paul is led to praise when He thinks of God's involvement in being sovereign over sin, and that is where we should be as well. God does nothing badly, everything He does is praiseworthy, and He can be worshipped for all that He does. Whether it is sending someone to hell, or decreeing time as we have it now with all its sin, angels, demons, and fallen humanity. Let's read Rom 11:32, and let me highlight what it doesn't say, and make one last comment before we move on to the rest of what Scripture affirms. V32 reads, 'For He has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on all'. It could have read like this, 'God killed all of humanity in judgement upon Adam after he fell, displaying His justice, and there was no display of mercy.' The best possible plan that can be thought was the one that God did. The plan that serves His purposes the best, part of which is displaying His glory, is what God has implemented, and continues to bring to pass. It is perfectly holy, good, wise, just, and no one can make a better one. Perhaps you think that creating a devil that couldn't fall, or a humanity that can't sin is better? Do you believe me when I tell you that you are wrong? That this is the best possible plan ever, and one day you will see that clearly? Reason or revelation, which will you allow to govern your worship? Here we are tested, do you live by every word of God, or do you require the forbidden fruit, to know like God?

The teaching of the Bible

2 Samuel 24:1 (ESV) "Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." 1 Chron. 21:1 (ESV) "Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel." From the context we can

clearly see that David sinned, (2 Sam 24:10), yet the language of the text is emphatic. God is said to have 'incited David', and even to have told him to do it. Yet as we turn to 1 Chronicles 21:1 we see that satan did it, so who did it, God or satan? And the answer is, both! We would describe it in terms of primary and secondary causes. However, this still puts God in the driving seat, let me read you a few comments others have made about these texts. Walter Kaiser an OT scholar says, "It is also true, according to Hebrew thinking that whatever God permits He commits. By allowing the census taking, God is viewed as having brought about the act. The Hebrews were not very concerned with determining secondary causes and properly attributing them to the exact cause. Under divine providence everything ultimately was attributed to Him; why not say He did it in the first place"¹ The Bible understands the devil's allowed actions as God's willed actions.

Dale Ralph Davis in his commentary on 2 Samuel says,

"Some appeal to the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 21:1 in order to tone down the suggestion of our present text. There we are told that 'satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel' (NIV). One can then put the two texts together, look at 2 Samuel 24:1 through 1 Chronicles 21:1, and hold that the latter implies that in the former we are dealing with God's permissive will; satan was the real villain; Yahweh only permitted it. I agree that both texts are true, but the appeal to God's permissive will solves nothing. It may sound better, but God must *decide* to permit. We cannot use satan to avoid God."²

God willed the action of judgement against Israel through satan tempting David to take a census. On the one hand God willed the sin, but on the other hand without willing the sin. All other constructions are impossible. It was not the devil who instigated this but we are told it was God's will. The devil is not presented as a free agent who God goes around tidying up after, but another angel employed in His service, even though unwillingly and unwittingly.

The book of Job reflects this same perspective. When it is satan who afflicts Job, Job teaches us a proper view of providence by telling us that it was the Lord who gave and took away (Job 2:10). He does not blame the weather (1:16,19), the people who robbed him (1:15, 17), or the devil, but sees the ultimate cause, the first cause as God, no matter the secondary causes. So far we have seen that God is ultimately responsible for evil, but this is stated by those in Scripture without a hint of blame or casting doubt on His character.

There is another event from David's life that is stated similarly, 2 Samuel 16:10 (ESV) "But the king said, 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'" Here we see the cursing of Shimei seen as possibly coming from God as an act of discipline. Now please note this is not a fatalistic version of providence that disqualifies all human responsibility, rather this is David owning his sin, recognising that if God is doing this as an act of discipline He has the right to, for He promised consequences for his sin with Bathsheba. David is able to patiently endure this false persecution because of the possibility

¹ Walter Kaiser quoted in Dale Ralph Davis' *2 Samuel* (Tain, Great Britain, CFP, 2007), 260.

² Ibid., 260.

that it is God appointed discipline. He is not excusing Shimei's sin, but putting it into theological perspective. He is not denying Shimei's responsibility but acknowledging God's sovereignty. Gordon Keddie in his commentary on this portion writes the following, "It is not to say that God inspired the sinful acts or in some way forced the sinner to commit them. God is never the author of sin, although sin, like everything else, falls within the scope of His eternal decree"³

1 Chron. 10:4 (ESV) "Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and mistreat me." But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it." 1 Chron. 10:13-14 (ESV) "So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse." Here we see Saul killing himself, but we are told that it was the Lord that killed him. God did not force his hand in suicide, yet his death is seen as God's doing.

Genesis 50:20 (ESV) "As for you, 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". This is the classic text used to show how God is in control of evil, and how in the very same action God has holy and good intentions, yet the brothers were motivated by jealousy and murder. Joseph does not untangle the theological or logical problems, he merely makes a theological assertion. He asserts the sovereignty of God over evil, and the triumph of His good purposes over the evil intentions of sin.

Isaiah 10:6-7 (ESV) "Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few;..." V12 "When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes." These verses are describing God using the Assyrians as an instrument of judgement against Judah. Notice that they are Godless, and are doing it not because God said so, but because they want the plunder and are driven by sinful considerations. God wills that they do what they are doing, in order to judge the guilty, but then He turns around and punishes them for the sinful thing they just did. Once again we are not shown how this works so that God is innocent and sovereign at the same time, and how the sinner is obedient and responsible at the same time. The confession does give something of an answer in paragraph 6 where it discusses God's hardening by withdrawing the good influence of His Spirit. But even that explanation does not delve into a moment by moment commentary to satisfy our curiosity of seeing how He influences without forcing or violating the freedom of the creature.

Judas is a classic example of God being the author of a situation where sin was a necessary cog. Judas was prophesied as the one who would betray Christ (Acts 1:16-20), yet God did not force him to do it. The certainty of the fact that it was prophesied did not impinge on

³ Gordon Keddie, *The Triumph of the King*, (Durham, UK, Evangelical Press, 1990), 154.

Judas's responsibility. God was in control and Judas was guilty. Luke 22:22 (ESV) "For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" Judas's sin was part of God's will, but He did not inspire him, force him, directly cause him, or have any other involvement that would make God the author or approver of Judas' actions. The fact that God prophesied it means that He willed it. Remember the future is only rendered certain by God willing it into being. If God does not write the future, and will it into being sustaining it at every point, it would not happen. Time is not a machine that God has no part in, something apart from and independent from His will and power that He learns from and reacts to. We do not believe in an Epicurean or Deistic universe where God has created a machine that runs itself. No He is intimately involved in it, yet when it comes to sin, even prophesied sin we need to affirm that God is holy, and good, and not the author or approver of sin. How? That is where the mystery comes in. We dare not create false doctrine just to satisfy our intellectual curiosity or a false need to have an answer for every question. Here is where Arminians, Open theists, and others have failed to submit to revelation and exalted reason as a principle God must submit to, make sense to, and answer to.

I have saved the most important example till the end. A greater sin than the fall of man, or satan is the killing of Jesus Christ. Who ordered this sin, exerted His power and ensured that it came to pass? Acts 2:23 (ESV) "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Acts 4:27-28 (ESV) "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." God planned the death of the most innocent man. When those sinful rulers murdered Christ, they did all that God wanted. Yet if we continue to look into this topic you will see that Pilate and his co-conspirators are viewed as having sinned, Jesus in discussion with Pilate says, John 19:11 (ESV) "Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."" This greatest of sins was planned before the foundation of the world, it was prophesied in the OT, and was brought to pass by God's enabling. But let me ask you, is God the author of the sin, and the approver of the sins involved? I bet that you have a knee jerk and instinctive, 'No!', in response. Even those who do not view God's sovereignty in the Reformed tradition would believe that God willed the unjust death of Christ. And so it lies upon me then to highlight that the death of Christ was the greatest sin ever committed, and God willed it, and brought it to pass. And so how does God's involvement in this act differ from all the others under discussion? There is no difference, God willed it, brought it to pass, did not sin, nor approve the sin in willing it, and wrought His good purposes through it all.

The knowledge of God's control over evil is not a rock given to you to throw at Him in accusation. But a firm foundation to stand assured upon. Let me turn our attention now away from the apparent problem of God's controlling evil, to the glorious truth of God controlling evil. This is not a doctrine that we embrace with shame, but one that we exalt in and cling to in our darkest moments. Look at the good God has brought out of some of the sins mentioned. From David's census we see David offering sacrifice on Araunah's threshing

floor. This became the very place the temple would be built. Saul's death made way for David. Joseph's kidnapping saved the lives of the infant nation of Israel and many others as well. And from Judas' betrayal and the work of Pilate and the other leaders, we have a saviour from sin, victory over death, and a defeated devil. To trouble ourselves over the issue of God's controlling evil is hitting our heads against a brick wall. You do not have enough info or ability to make a judgement. God has revealed His involvement for you to marvel at His power, His wisdom, His justice, His grace. He has revealed enough that we might be assured of His control and know the sure footing of our salvation. And so I am jealous that your thoughts should be on what God intended them to be on. His good purposes through these terrible deeds. Submit reverently and worshipfully at the mystery, but offer tear filled, and broken hearted praise at the unimaginable victory that makes us more than conquerors in Christ. For not only are we saved, we are saved to the uttermost. Not only is the devil judged, but he is judged with the most righteous humiliation, the most wise irony, the most decisive self-destruction ever imagined. Where satan was an instrument in God's hands and killed himself in that event he thought was his greatest victory. And God wrought His greatest victory in what appeared to be the greatest sin, and the greatest defeat. Look at your lives, your sins, your failures, your tragedies, and remember your victorious God. One who controls all things and works all things out for the good of those who love Him. Patiently embrace your suffering, tearfully accept the portion He has given you, and offer unexpected praise for what is not yet apparent but you know to be true, God's good purposes. He is the master craftsmen who is able to take the apparently unredeemable piece of clay and turn it into a work of art.

Does this mean I can just go and sin and expect God to make things better, with no view to any consequences? No, God's providence does not licence you to sin. Even though He is gracious and does bring good out of bad. God commands us to live our lives by what His word reveals not a logical extrapolation derived from what we learn of His secret ways. We live by His revealed will, not His secret will. God brought good out of David's adultery with Bathsheba, the birth of Solomon who is part of the blood line of Christ, but God also disciplined David for his sin. God's ability to bring good out of bad, does not give us an excuse to do bad and not good. God's control over evil should not give us incentive to sin, but an impulse to worship. 'But, surely if God wills the sins, then how can man be responsible for them?' I am very tempted to merely read Romans 9:19-24

"You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?"

This would be a biblical reply, but we simply need to stress what the Bible asserts. Man is still responsible. We may not be able to see how it all fits together, so we simply need to

say what the Scriptures say. God's wills it, brings it to pass, but man is responsible and God is good. Once again let me stress we live our lives by what God's word reveals not by what reason tells us we can do from logical deductions. The clear teachings of the Scriptures not the possible abuses deduced from forced logic determine whether something is right.

The teaching of theology

The mystery between God's will and man's responsibility is one that the Church has been aware of for many years. I am not introducing a novelty, nor is the confession. As when we were discussing the problem of God's providence over nature we encountered a wrong way of thinking that set up God for a fall to become the God-of-the-gaps. The issue was, either something in nature is explained by God doing it, or a mechanism of nature doing it. Either/or thinking. Once again we have shown that there is a mystery and that it is both/and that the Scriptures teach. If we err on the side of making God the only agent, we compromise His holiness and goodness. If we push the agency of man into the prime position we deny Scripture and violate God's power. The only solution is to affirm both truths, in their correct order, as the confession lays it out for us. All things are planned by God, overseen and upheld by God and there is nothing that escapes His oversight, even sin. Man is the second cause of sin, and is responsible, he is not coerced or forced, ensuring that God does not create sin, nor approve of it. The theological word that sums up this view is called *concurrence/ concursus*.

This view teaches double agency in the matter of sin. However, God and man are acting differently in the event. We cannot say that God is everywhere sovereign except over sin, and everywhere sustaining except in sin. Yet we cannot say that God sins, is the author, or approver of sin. God's activity includes willing, directing, sustaining His creation, enabling the mechanism of second causes, controlling the damaging effects of sin; but He is not sinning, forcing the will of the creature to sin, or approving of the sin. Man's activity includes freely willing and doing the sin. Both are active, but their activity differs. Their activity runs concurrently, side by side, yet the nature of what they do is altogether different. God is holy and good and acts in accordance with His nature, man is sinful and acts out of his nature. We cannot say more than this. It does not satisfy all our questions, but there are things regarding God's working that are beyond our ability to conceive and understand, and so we once again rest content with affirming what the Scriptures affirms. This is the God we worship and this is the God who we can trust to make His good purposes stand towards us.