

Dear brother or sister in Christ,

Last month I outlined the predominate answer given by Bible believing Christians to the “problem of evil”. In brief that answer states that because God created human beings and angels with free will he cannot interfere with those free choices without making a mockery of their free will. Thus all the evil that exists in the world is due to those free choices of humans and demons and while God hates the evil and will one day punish those who do evil, he cannot stop evil or control it other than by coercive force, i.e. he can make the murderer sick before he murders.

My aim in this article and the next is simply to look at various stories and statements in the Bible to see if this is actually how the Bible addresses this “problem.” One of the earliest and most famous stories that emphasizes the relationship between God’s absolute sovereignty over all things and human responsibility is to be found in the story of Joseph (Genesis 35-50). Joseph is the victim of a whole range of evil actions carried out by human beings. His brothers sell him into slavery, he is falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and thrown into prison, he is forgotten by Pharaoh’s cupbearer for two years to name a few of the unjust, evil things that were done to him. If you will remember, at the end of all these indignities Joseph is made second in command to Pharaoh over all of Egypt in order to prepare the country for the 7 years of famine that will begin after seven years of abundant harvests (NOTE: Here is another example of God’s providence. These seven years of abundance and famine are sent by God. See Genesis 41:32).

After the famine begins and Joseph’s family back in the land of Canaan run out of food the 10 brothers who sold him into slavery come to Egypt to get food. They do not know that it is Joseph their brother whom they betrayed who is selling them food. He finally reveals himself to them and when he does this is what he says to them (Genesis 45:4-8): “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.”

Many years later, after Jacob, the father of Joseph and his brothers dies; the brothers come to Joseph, afraid that he will now, with their father dead, seek his revenge upon them. However, Joseph has no interest in revenge because he knows that while they were doing evil, God was doing good. Listen to what he says to them (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.” Here we find that in the same events human beings are choosing to do evil and, at the very same time, God is working for good. Notice carefully how Joseph’s answer does not say that his brothers did not do evil. They did evil by selling him into slavery and for which it would be just for him to harm them. They are truly guilty and it is only because Joseph chooses to forgive them that they are not punished. However, notice also that he says that God is the one who sent him to Egypt. God did this for a good purpose, in order to preserve the lives of many people, but especially the lives of his people, the children of Israel.

Notice how these statements do not say that God was standing helplessly by while the brothers did evil. Nor does it say that God forced them, against their wills to do evil. No, what it says is that the brothers of Joseph willingly chose to do evil **and** that the evil they chose to do is exactly

what God wanted them to do for his very good purposes. God does not do evil, the brothers do the evil and yet the evil they do perfectly fulfills God's perfect will to save his people and others.

A second example of this is found in the story of the Exodus. God tells Moses in Exodus 4:21 that he "will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go." Then seven more times in the following narrative we are told that God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not listen to God's command to release Israel but continued to hold them in their slavery. On three occasions in the narrative we are told that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Exodus 9:34 says it this way, "...he (Pharaoh) sinned again: he and his officials hardened their hearts." Another dozen times the narrative simply says, Pharaoh's heart was hard, just as the Lord said." Pharaoh has a hard heart because he wants to have a hard heart. And Pharaoh has a hard heart because God wants him to have a hard heart. Because his heart is hard, Pharaoh does evil and the evil that he willingly does serves God's good purposes. The Lord declares this good purpose in Exodus 9:16, "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Later in the story (14:17) God says this about the Egyptian army, "I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen." The great and good purpose of God being glorified is accomplished by the willing, sinful, evil actions of humans whose actions are ordained or decreed by God.

As we close let me tell you three things the Scriptures make clear about God's relationship to evil: God never directly does anything evil. God is never blamed for evil. God never takes pleasure in evil. Next month we will consider more examples of God's willing with a good will what humans will with an evil will.

Rejoicing in the Sovereign God,