

God Intended It for Good: Re-forming Evil

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Abstract

The confession that God intends evil for good, which is one of the great conclusions of the cycle of Joseph (Gen 37–50), sheds light on the limited manner in which we have tried to answer the challenge of evil. Each generation faces anew the challenge of explaining the sovereign action of a benevolent God in a world where evil rages. This article explores the three key words of the sentence “God intended it for good”: *God*, *intended*, and *good*. Our aim is to reflect on a “re-formed” answer in emphasizing the need for a language that reclaims the richness, diversity, and incomprehensibility of the biblical language about God’s action in the world.

Keywords

Evil, theodicy, causality, anthropomorphism, incomprehensibility (of God), sovereignty (of God)

I. Introduction: The Reality of Evil

“**Y**ou intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20). With those memorable words, the story of Joseph comes to a close. This affirmation frames the direction of our reflection: God intended it for good.

In this post-Christian emotional age, the challenge of evil cannot be avoided. The common modern objection runs like this: If the God of the Bible exists, he is either good and impotent or evil and omnipotent, sadistic, or unpredictable. This objection is far from logical, but it carries emotional force. One could mistakenly believe that its shallow intellectual depth puts us in a favorable position, since the Christian believer, transformed by the Spirit, informed by the Scriptures, and with the benefit of centuries of Christian apologetics, is not left without answers. Dismissing the emotional objection, however, would be a mistake. We should not merely dismiss the current restatement of the problem of evil but strive to present a *re-formed* answer to what is and should remain a perennial question.

“God intended it for good,” is one of the most important answers that faith has given to the “problem” of evil and suffering in the battle against the monsters of evil. I propose to consider the three keywords—*God*, *intended*, and *good*—and point out how we must refine, or re-form, our understanding of God’s action in a sinful world in light of Scripture.

II. *God*

Serious philosophical arguments are immediately raised by the problem of evil in pastoral and apologetic contexts. Often the solutions offered rely more or less on an abstraction from the reality of God.

1. *Evil and the Abstraction of God*

One answer to the problem is to reduce and abstract God to one dimension of his nature, for instance by appealing to divine otherness and claiming that since God is so different from us, we should not question the wisdom of his actions. While there is some truth to that, it implies a partial—and consequently an abstract—view of God. The temptation is to reduce God to his will. Since God wills everything that happens, evil and suffering fall within the sphere of his will. There is some biblical truth to this perspective, but it is not the whole picture. God is likewise abstracted should he be reduced to his love: evil and suffering exist because God chose to love a “free” creature. The temptation to “abstract God” is the temptation to rely almost exclusively on one dimension of his person. When “God intended it for good” is affirmed in the context of evil and suffering, the question must first be asked: “Which God?” Further, deeper, and worshipful reflection must meditate on and consider this question.

The God who reveals himself in Scripture remains active in the history of his creation, cannot be completely understood, and at the same time acts in

love, compassion, and judgment. He sends rain and thunder; he disciplines his people, judges the nations, and orders the angel of death to Egypt. Scripture speaks of God's involvement in the world in active language—even when it comes to calamitous events. Psalm 105 goes so far as to say that no evil happens in a city that the Lord has not done and that he turned the Egyptians' hearts to hate his people (v. 25). Theologians as diverse as Tim Keller and David Hart have pointed out that God is active and personal; our problem is too often having an abstract view of God.¹ For John Swinton, theodicy has focused on a "general" god rather than the Trinitarian God.² To reform our answer to the problem of evil, a healthy doctrine of God should be the starting point; divine self-revelation is the only sure ground upon which one can meaningfully and humbly say, "God intended it for good."

2. *The Otherness of the Covenanted God*

Three crucial aspects of the biblical picture of God are to be underlined. First, a sound biblical doctrine of God must maintain the otherness of God. God is not totally and absolutely beyond our understanding. However, God and we humans are different beings, and consequently, God always escapes our intellectual and experiential "grasp." This ought not to lead to a passive view of our knowledge of God, but it should nourish a desire to know him better.

Second, a biblical view of God underlines his incomprehensibility. As Herman Bavinck explains, while creatures cannot fathom the "unsearchable majesty and sovereign highness of God," knowledge of God can nevertheless be "true and pure": "what we know of God we know only of his revelation, and therefore only as much as he is pleased to make known to us concerning himself."³ God truly reveals himself in Scripture, but his person and actions remain a mystery to be embraced fully.⁴

Third, a sound doctrine of God goes hand in hand with a sound doctrine of creation. The God who is other comes down to us and makes himself accessible to our understanding, howbeit in a limited manner. God's incomprehensibility and accommodation are complementary. As N. T. Wright points out, "It ought to be clear that reemphasizing the doctrine of

¹ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Suffering* (London: Hodder, 2015), 87, and David B. Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

² John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 36.

³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 51.

⁴ A mystery that is, according to Bavinck, "the lifeblood of dogmatics." *Ibid.*, 2:29.

creation is indeed the foundation of all biblical answers to questions about who God is and what he's doing."⁵

Our first re-formed answer to the problem of evil is that the God we are talking about is the Trinitarian God revealed and "covenanted" in Scripture, a God who reveals what is sufficient to know him truly. The otherness of God does not deny that he is there and that he is not silent.⁶

3. Language about God and Evil

The God who personally reaches down from heaven in signs of thunder, shaking mountains, a whisper, and the cross, is a God of whom we can say, "He intended it for good." He is sovereign over everything, and all events manifest his glory. These are words, sentences, descriptions of who God is and what he does. Here lies the challenge of our language about God. If God is really other, and though he reveals himself in the Scriptures, how can we hope to adequately describe his will and active sovereignty over evil?

Here too the reference point is the doctrine of God. That God revealed himself in Scripture means not only that he can be truly known but also that in a limited but true manner, language is adequate to talk about him and describe his revelation of himself. We can meaningfully talk about God because he desired it to be so and he accommodated himself to us. We must learn to use everything the Bible reveals about God.

Among the things the Bible teaches is this great but short sentence: God is sovereign over evil. The only way to talk about God's sovereignty over everything is in terms of what the Bible says. We can lament with the words of Psalm 88:13–18, whose author knew there was no other way than to affirm faith in the sovereignty of God and to hope that suffering would end while recognizing God's mysterious hand. Wright says, "The psalmist will not suggest that what is happening to him is other than the strange and terrifying work of YHWH himself. He can't understand it; he knows it isn't what ought to be happening; but he holds on, almost one might think to the point of blasphemy, to the belief that YHWH remains sovereign."⁷

The "untamedness" of God must be recognized. He is the God who made Cyrus his "anointed king" (Isa 45:1). Even the violence of the Chaldeans is a work of God (Jer 1:15; 7:14). Jeremiah goes so far as to call Nebuchadnezzar a servant of God (Jer 25:9). God hardens Pharaoh's heart (Exod 9:12). Cruel nations are instruments of his judgment and wrath, and they manifest

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 70.

⁶ Cf. Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2001).

⁷ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 62.

the action of his will (Isa 10:5). God gives men up to the evil desires of their hearts (Rom 1:28).⁸

God is also the one who does not plan to harm us and gives hope “for the years to come” (Jer 29:11), who showed his goodness and faithfulness, and who “so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). James states, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one,” and “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas 1:13, 17).

The problem is overreliance on an ontological anthropomorphism. From anthropomorphic language we have adopted an anthropomorphic description of God’s nature. Hart, for example, writes,

The entire case is premised upon an inane anthropomorphism ... that reduces God to a finite ethical agent, a limited psychological personality, whose purposes are measurable upon the same scale as ours, and whose ultimate ends for his creatures do not transcend the cosmos as we perceive it.⁹

While as human beings we have no other choice but to use anthropomorphic language to talk about God, we must beware of *anthropomorphizing* his nature.

The biblical language about the acts of God should inspire awe because it makes us pause. There is something truly incomprehensible about the way the Bible talks about “God and evil.” While God cannot be tempted by evil, he sends judgments on his people. While God is good, he exercises his justice through acts that are, in themselves, evil and do not correspond to his character. Without *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *tota Scriptura* (all of Scripture), we risk not being faithful to the God who brought us out of the world of darkness and into the kingdom of his light (1 Pet 2:9). Everything the Bible says is to be affirmed if we are to invite our contemporaries to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8).

III. *Intended It*

God works in mysterious ways: “His steadfast love endures forever” (Ps 136). This expression, which structures Psalm 136, points toward the next consideration: God’s intention expressed within a fallen, evil world. What is God doing in this world? How can he accomplish his purposes through the

⁸ In this verse of Romans, “gave up” might not refer to the will of God but to his “permission.”

⁹ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 13.

agency of evil acts? These questions are profoundly biblical and have serious pastoral implications.

The psalm begins with the picture of God, the great and bountiful Creator of the universe, the one “who alone does great wonders ... who by understanding made the heavens ... who made the great lights” (vv. 4, 5, 7). God, in his providence, takes care of his creation and acts with goodness and love toward it. At the same time, this psalm is also a hymn of praise for God’s actions for his people, a hymn that calls on them to give thanks “for his steadfast love endures forever” (vv. 10, 17–18).

God struck down the firstborn. He killed great kings. How can such acts be compatible with God’s nature? God is justified in acting based on the judgment we deserve as sinners. He acts on behalf of the people he “elected.” Correct as this might be, the danger is that this is too quick an answer. God’s judgment is justified because of sin. Does that automatically justify God “using” or “causing” evil as an expression of judgment? His actions are often incomprehensible, even though we confess that he is a God of love, grace, and compassion, who will make his justice shine through all the vicissitudes of history.

1. An Abstract View of Causality

The personal God of the Bible acts throughout history to bring about what he intends to accomplish. That is an integral part of “God intending it for good.” A temptation is to adopt an abstract view of causality. How can God “intend” something evil? How can the death of a newborn be the result of the intention of a good and providential God? One answer runs like this: nothing in this world escapes the reaches of God’s sovereignty and will; *therefore*, even the death of an infant must remain within God’s sovereignty and will. Even though the conclusion that nothing falls outside God’s sovereignty is correct, there is a question about the “therefore” in this sentence. God is sovereign; *therefore*, evil is an expression of his will.

The problem is not necessarily what this reasoning tries to say—that if God is sovereign, he is so over everything that happens—but the view of causation. This line of reasoning can lead to the entertaining of an abstract view of causation. God becomes a mechanistic causal instrument who acts in such a way because he is supposed to. The issue is not merely theological or speculative. It impacts pastoral practice. A “mechanistic causal” view of God’s intention might be a temptation in pastoral counseling to have one primary objective: that the person who lost a loved one recognize that in mysterious ways God’s intentional good will was at work.

This perspective will tempt us to identify the goodness that results from suffering. “God intended it for good,” *therefore*, let me show you that the death of your father was indeed for your good. That is a mechanical view of God’s intention that identifies the specific manner in which two realities are connected: first, the existence of evil and suffering in the experience; second, the good intention of God. A causal explanation leads to the identifying of a resulting good. By God’s grace, we might stumble on a correct answer. The danger is of being unfaithful to our calling to suffer alongside those who suffer.

Mechanistic causal explanations lose sight of God’s greatness and otherness, his inscrutable wisdom, and mysterious goodness. God’s wisdom is “manifold,” says John Calvin,¹⁰ and so is his will. Trying to explain the “causal relations” between God, evil, and the intended good diminishes God, obscuring the mystery, the awe-inspiring wonder of divine action. The God who reveals himself acting throughout history is lost, as is the empathic possibility of being a Christ-centered community for whom evil and suffering are unacceptable. Evil is really evil, and it should never be suggested that something makes it somehow acceptable. That is the problem of trying to identify the specifics of God’s intention: it somehow makes evil or suffering all right.

Can nothing be offered apart from empathic listening? To go further it is necessary to leave aside an abstract view of God and his will. Paul Helm helpfully notes that Calvin, while never shy of assigning the glory to God and confessing his sovereignty, is nevertheless content to emphasize *that* God acts in the ways that the Bible describes. God did intend that “good” should come out of evil. Helm continues that Calvin has little to say about *how* or *why* he acts in such a way.¹¹ That is the best path to practical wisdom since what the Bible says about how God intended good to come out of evil is scant.

God’s self-revelation emphasizes his nature and the result of his actions. What the Bible affirms and we should affirm is that God is actively working for the good and the salvation of those who believe in him. The specific manner in which he does so remains, in part, a mystery. We go back to the biblical language. While God is good and there is no evil in him, God nonetheless is described as sending death, plagues, and judgments on the world.

While God is the one without whom nothing can happen in the world, God never desires evil. This implies that the specific order of the causal

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:202 (1.18.3).

¹¹ Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113.

relationship that God ordered cannot often be identified. Calvin never implies that God would cease, at any point, to be sovereign or exercise his will. God is always active:

I say then, that though all things are ordered by the counsel and certain arrangement of God, to us, however, they are fortuitous,—not because we imagine that Fortune rules the world and mankind, and turns all things upside down at random (far be such a heartless thought from every Christian breast); but as the order, method, end, and necessity of events, are, for the most part, hidden in the counsel of God, though it is certain that they are produced by the will of God, they have the appearance of being fortuitous, such being the form under which they present themselves to us, whether considered in their own nature, or estimated according to our knowledge and judgment.¹²

2. *The Ever-Active God*

The sovereignty of God has always been a central element of Reformed theodicy. The faith of biblical believers is that no matter how much we do not understand about the manner of God’s action, he remains good, faithful, and sovereign. Vern Poythress notes that in Job nobody assumes that bad events “just happen.”¹³ All the “actors” assume God does indeed control the events that happen. This is the essence of God’s answer in the closing monologue. A balanced view of active providence over evil is hardly simple, and theology has therefore sought to explain how God accomplishes his will while not being the author of sinful and evil actions.

A common way to reach a balance is through the distinction between “permission” and “will.” Since God cannot “cause” something incompatible with his nature, he cannot cause or will something that is, in itself, evil. God’s “causal will” cannot result in the death of a newborn or the suffering of his people. Thus, some things he wills and others he merely permits. Superficially this seems to be a convincing and relevant distinction. God *wills* those things that are compatible with his nature but *permits* those incompatible with his moral nature.

This distinction comes from a mistaken premise. Because we think we understand the causal will of God, we need to identify something other than his will at work in the world to safeguard God’s sovereignty. Thus, the distinction between God “permitting” and God “willing.” The risk is an artificial distinction within the one will of God. However, when God acts, his will is at work—thus limiting the value of the distinction between “will” and “permission.”

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 180 (1.16.9).

¹³ Vern S. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 43.

Calvin himself warns about this distinction. In his usual direct way, he writes,

Yet from these it is more than evident that they babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God's providence, substitute bare permission—as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will.¹⁴

His concern is that this distinction seeks to justify God when the language of the Bible concretely tells us that God's actions are always a manifestation of his will. Therefore, even when God allows something to happen, his will is at work:

I will not hesitate, therefore, simply to confess with Augustine that the will of God is necessity, and that everything is necessary which he has willed; just as those things will certainly happen which he has foreseen.¹⁵

When God allows something to happen, he is active, and being active means that he exercises his will. God does indeed ordain everything that comes to pass.

While the distinction can be often problematic, Bavinck helpfully indicates that the notion of “permission” is not absent from Reformed theology.¹⁶ However, he states it in such a way as to avoid the implication that God's will could somehow be passive in the face of evil. In line with Reformed theologians, Bavinck concludes that “‘permission’ is no pure negation, no mere cessation of volition.”¹⁷ Even the permissive will of God is *efficacious*.

At this point, an important distinction can be made. Calvin's *Defense of the Secret Providence of God* replies to Sebastian Castellio's accusation that his view of God's providence makes God the author of sin and evil. Calvin notes that what God *wills* and what the person *committing* evil wills are neither identical nor to be confused. God's will for a parent going through the rape and murder of a child is not to be confused with the will of the rapist and murderer. That God wills to bring good out of evil never underplays the evilness of the act.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battle (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 231 (1.18.1).

¹⁵ See Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Beveridge, 2:232 (3.23.8).

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

While God ordains whatever comes to pass, what comes to pass is not of itself necessary but happens in virtue of his will.¹⁸ For example, God wills that we learn endurance. However, in its absolute sense, this does *not* necessitate the death of a newborn child, while this might be the mysterious instrument through which we do learn endurance and trust. As Helm points out, Calvin here uses the distinction between “the necessity of the consequence” and “the necessity of the consequent.”¹⁹ The first means that God necessarily brings about the goodness he wills. The necessity is the consequence, the result which corresponds to his goodness.²⁰ The second means that the instrumentality of evil is necessary in order for God to bring about the “good result.” What is here necessary is the consequent, the action itself.

Christians, like Calvin, must learn to make this biblical distinction: to affirm the former and deny the latter. When God intends that something good comes out of the death of a loved one, the suffering or the evil is not itself necessary, while my learning patience, endurance, trust, is the necessary action of God.²¹ God wills to exercise our patience and incorporates evil actions to that end. We do learn patience through suffering. God willed it to be the case: the consequence (the learning of endurance) is necessary, not the consequent (the death of the child). God would deny his own nature were it so. This distinction does not answer all our questions, and one remains: how can a good and faithful God allow evil and suffering to enter the world in the first place? While there are some clues in the Scriptures, the Bible’s silences and the boundaries of the mystery of the divine will and decree ought to be respected.

IV. For Good

While there is some mystery to God’s action in the world, his mysterious “intention” will eventually be fully accomplished. The final fruition of his

¹⁸ See Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.8.

¹⁹ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 117.

²⁰ Reformed scholastics use a similar distinction in their discussions about God’s decree and human freedom. Wilhelm van Asselt writes, “However great the creature’s freedom may be, these acts are still necessary from this perspective, otherwise God’s foreknowledge could be false and his decree changeable.” Wilhelm van Asselt, “Scholasticism in the Time of High Orthodoxy (ca. 1620–1700),” in *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, ed. Wilhelm van Asselt (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 162. He notes, “The necessity of an event or the existence of a thing. If a thing is, it is necessarily. This is an example of a necessity of the consequence. It is not an absolute necessity” (163).

²¹ What God permits, says Hart, “may be *in itself* contrary to what he wills.” Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 82.

goodness will be revealed. “God intended it for good,” but what is meant by “good”? We do not know what the resulting good is, therefore the best answer might be to remain silent before God. However, the God who reveals himself in Scripture communicates something about this.

1. *A Glorious Purpose*

One answer to the problem of evil is that God intends everything for his glory. That might be the only justification God would need. As Daniel Fuller writes,

Thus it is surely right for God to prepare vessels of wrath, for it is only by so doing that he is able to show the exceeding riches of his glory, the capstone of which is his mercy. For God not to prepare vessels of wrath would mean that he could not fully reveal himself as the merciful God. Thus creation could not honor him for what he really is, and God would then have been unrighteous, for in the act of creation he would have done something inconsistent with the full delight he has in his own glory.²²

While this has some truth, the problem with this account lies in the first sentence: “for it is *only* by so doing.” Only by revealing himself as the Redeemer could God be known as merciful. Because it is better to know him as Redeemer—rather than merely as Creator—it was somehow better that God prepared “vessels of wrath.” God would be more glorified by vessels of wrath who have been reconciled than by un-fallen creatures who know him solely as a bountiful Creator.

There are several problems here. First, by framing the issue in terms of *necessity*, this explanation makes the intrusion of *sin and evil* in the world necessary. Hart concludes, “That is why it is misleading even to say ... that the drama of the fall and redemption will make the final state of things more glorious than it might otherwise have been.”²³ It is true that through the story of the fall and redemption God demonstrates his glory. However, it is hardly necessary that this great statement of faith lead to the conclusion that, somehow, evil might be essential to the glorifying of God.

Second, this view entertains an imprecise or improper view of God’s glory. It tends to reduce God’s glory to something God has or acquires. God is “more glorified” in a sinful world. This expression is dubious. God cannot have “more” glory. Glory is not an abstract quantity that God more

²² Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 447.

²³ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 74.

or less “possesses” but a summation of all his perfections.²⁴ He can be “more glorified” through the recognition of the glory he always fully possessed. Indeed, he is glorified when sinners come to recognize his saving grace. In this limited sense, maybe it could be said that the more people are saved, the more God is glorified.

How then should we consider evil within the larger picture of God’s actions? Certainly, “God’s overarching purpose in all he does, then, is the manifestation of his glory and the delight of his creatures in his divine splendor.”²⁵ Thus, “God intended evil for good.” God brings everything into the awe-inspiring orbit of his glory. But God is also incomprehensible. Although every act of God and everything in the world participates in the manifestation of his glory, we should pause before trying to define the specific manner in which evil manifests God’s glory. Otherwise a causal relationship is made about which the Bible often remains silent. Everything glorifies God, including his great act of salvation. Can it be said *therefore* that a world in which evil rages is preferable to a world without sin? According to Bavinck, this is doubtful for several reasons. First, it robs evil of its ethical character. Evil cannot remain evil but becomes acceptable. Second, “not only is the good necessary to evil, but conversely, evil is necessary to the good.”²⁶ Third, evil ceases to be antithetical to the goodness of God, and becomes a lesser degree of the good, a necessary part of history. Fourth, it tends to make God the author of evil. Of course, this is the one implication that is explicitly rejected by all Reformed theologians—more or less consistently. Fifth, it leads to a “horrible effect on the practice of life” by placing the blame for all evils in the world on God.²⁷ With such a view, it is not surprising that our contemporaries blame God for earthly suffering or doubt his existence in the face of evil.

2. *The Glory of His Salvation*

Everything in the world brings glory to God, including, in a mysterious and awe-inspiring manner, evil and suffering. While this is part of faith in the sovereign God of Scripture, the Bible itself remains silent on the specific manner in which this happens. Scripture talks more abundantly about the

²⁴ According to Wolfgang Musculus, as quoted in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 541.

²⁵ James N. Anderson, “Why Did God Allow the Fall?,” *The Gospel Coalition*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-did-god-allow-the-fall/>.

²⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:59.

glory that God brings himself through the salvation of his people. In doing so, he freely uses evil and the suffering of the world. John Flavel explains that “sometimes God makes use of instruments for good to His people, who designed nothing but evil and mischief to them. Thus, Joseph’s brethren were instrumental to his advancement in that very thing in which they designed his ruin (Genesis 50:20).”²⁸ God glorifies himself in doing good for his people—when others are trying to destroy them. This has two consequences that bring suffering into a new light.

First, by acting for the salvation of his people, God displays the radical nature of sin. He does so because evil and suffering are an integral part of how he brings about salvation, not only through deliverance, which is certainly an essential part of it, but also by judging his people—for God is not partial (Deut 10:17; Job 32:21; Jer 9:25). Through his impartiality God works out salvation by unveiling the sinfulness, not only of nonbelievers but also of his people (Ps 34:16). The radical nature of the holiness, justice, and goodness of God will not leave any evil or sin hidden.

This has another implication. By using evil and suffering as instruments of his salvation and agents of his goodness, God demonstrates the hopelessness of human life apart from salvation. Everything is revealed as vain for happiness in this life. This, according to Ecclesiastes, is a great evil (Eccl 5:13). If God were not to reveal the radical nature of sin, humans would remain blind to the effects of evil and their sinful nature. God uses evil and suffering to reveal the nature of sin and evil to nonbelievers in order to bring them to himself (Ps 34:8).

Second, one of the most common effects of suffering is its sanctifying dimension, as Peter repeatedly writes (1 Pet 1:6b–7a; 4:12). God uses suffering and evil to produce godly character. As Flavel writes, “by these rebukes of sin the evil of sin is revealed more apparent to us, and we are made to see more clearly the evil of it in these glasses of affliction which Providence at such times sets before us, than we ever saw formerly.”²⁹ The evil and sufferings we go through are not necessary *consequents*, but what God intends for our sanctification. We can indeed say with Dan McCartney that “suffering administered by the Holy Spirit purges our old sinful nature” and that “suffering enables a Christian to see his own evil clearly and equip him to purge it. It also enables him to see his connection to Christ more

²⁸ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1963), 120. See also, Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God*, 45.

²⁹ Flavel, *Mystery of Providence*, 173.

clearly.”³⁰ So we become more Christ-like, learning, like him, obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8).

Sufferings also bring glory to God “by showing the quality of our faith,” including resistance and victory over the attacks of the adversary. Satan afflicts us with diseases because of our faith in Christ (Luke 13:16), but we nonetheless move forward, demonstrating to the world that Christ is the divinely appointed answer to evil. The exhortation to endure suffering and evils is a call to manifest the victory over Satan that Christ has already acquired for us.

3. Practical Reformed Theodicy

How does faith in this God who has revealed himself in Scripture transform and inform the way we live before a watching world? What Swinton calls “practical theodicy” can be described in three ways.

First, it is learning to live with evil and suffering in our relationship with God. This implies learning to live in a transparent and humble way by God’s revelation. For example, lamenting about sorrows and suffering, crying out to God, “How long, O Lord? will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” This is not an expression of doubt and rejection but of putting words to troubles that are too heavy for us: “With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD” (Ps 142:1). We identify with the psalmist in his darkest hours: “Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me” (Ps 88:16).

We learn to read and pray the psalms. Sometimes, only the words of biblical lament are available to our exhausted minds. We must recognize the profound and radical effects of evil and suffering, whether physical, psychological, or emotional. As Swinton remarks, suffering can be numbing. Living with the God of Scripture will help us give voice to our suffering when we are without words. In a world where suffering is often silenced, this attitude can serve as a demonstration that our God is a living God who hears the cries of his people.

Enduring evil and suffering in our relationship with God is a form of resistance against the ideologies, philosophical or political, that justify evil as an unfortunate but necessary part of this world.³¹ The biblical presentation of God is that of a living, personal, transcendent Creator who commits himself—or “binds” himself, to use directly covenantal language—to his

³⁰ Dan G. McCartney, *Why Does It Have to Hurt? The Meaning of Christian Suffering* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 95, 63.

³¹ Swinton talks about “practical theodicy as resistance” (Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 85)—I adapted this insight for this article.

creation. After the fall, God “covenants” himself to his people in order to remove the roots of evil. Living in faith and perseverance through suffering in Christ, we try to “reveal the goodness and power of God and the nature and reality of God’s continuing response to evil and suffering.”³² In doing so, we demonstrate our faith in a living personal God.

Second, enduring suffering by living with God demands that we rely on the union we have with Christ. God’s gracious providence over evil is nowhere more clearly seen than in the cross, the most intense act of divine power.³³ The sacrifice of Christ is central to all of human history—which lies in subjection to evil and vanity. In the crucifixion of his Son, God weaves together for us the two sides of this “evil re-formed”: nothing escapes his intentional will, and evil is, and remains, evil. Here, we must think in a concrete and christological manner. Christ is the recapitulation of all the Bible says about God, suffering, and how he brings about his good intention through an evil world. He does so in Christ. In fact, “Jesus suffers the full consequences of evil: evil from the political, social, cultural, personal, moral, religious and spiritual angles all rolled into one.”³⁴ Because he was subjected to evil and suffering, our union with him will have radical implications.

A crucial implication is that because we are being transformed in his image, our sufferings participate in this process, bringing us into fellowship with Christ’s suffering and helping us appreciate how he suffered for us (Phil 3:10; 1 Pet 2:19–24). As McCartney writes, “the point is that the suffering and dying of Christ were the means used to connect Christ to his people.”³⁵ Not only are our sufferings under the sovereign will of God, they are also an integral part of our calling, summarized by the apostle Peter: “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (1 Pet 4:1). In other words, if we suffer with or in Christ, we are outside sin’s dominion because we demonstrate that we are under Christ’s dominion.

Third, how we suffer the consequences of evil and suffering has implications for the world in which we live. Suffering in union with Christ teaches us Christlike empathy. The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes this when he writes, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to

³² Ibid., 88. Swinton talks about God “taking responsibility” for evil to describe his commitment to opposing evil. While that might not be the most helpful expression, he correctly points out that this relates to the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of his Son. Ibid., 87–88.

³³ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 80.

³⁴ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 92.

³⁵ McCartney, *Why Does It Have to Hurt?*, 64.

sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15). Christ did learn obedience through suffering, and in doing so, he became like us—except for sin. Renewed by the Spirit in the image of Christ, we are also rendered able to empathize with our fellow image-bearers. United to Christ the Mediator, we should not become less sensitive to the evil and suffering of this world but rather develop an acute sense of their radical presence in the lives of our fellows.

Furthermore, we should consider the sufferings that come with living in an evil world part of the great cosmic battle in which we are engaged. As James Boice notes, that is precisely what happened to Job: his trials are a direct consequence of the cosmic opposition between God and Satan.³⁶ Job’s affirmation of faith is crucial to the book’s teaching about what is happening in our world. Because evil and suffering are not entirely “natural,” there is something “spiritual” about the way Christians live through them. Learning to read the psalms of lament goes hand in hand with the hopeful words of the apostle Paul: “For I consider that the suffering of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). The next verse includes all of creation in the cosmic dimension of this warfare and in hopeful anticipation.

Suffering can be an occasion for witness to eschatological hope in Christ. It is a demonstration that one day, the cosmic battle will end. Then, on this wonderful day, at the sound of the trumpet, the divine Mediator and conqueror will appear. All things will be transformed. Evil and suffering will melt away. We will see the coming of a world in which there will be no mourning, crying, or pain (Rev 21:4).

Conclusion

What does “evil re-formed” mean then? First, following the biblical language used to describe God’s action and nature, it means that God is good, just, and faithful and that he does not act contrary to his nature. He nonetheless sends judgments and evils against nations and individuals. Our rational understanding cannot resolve this tension but has to recognize it and learn to live with it and through it, being careful not to explain it away but maintaining that God is good and that his faithfulness endures forever. The tension at the heart of the Christian life acknowledges that there are many things we cannot know because of the “epistemic distance,” to use Helm’s words,

³⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, vol. 2, *The Reign of Grace, Romans 5–8* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 530–31.

between the Creator and the creatures that comes with being sinners.³⁷

Second, answers to the problem of evil seek ways of affirming the good intention of God in bringing about the fullness of his plan, even though the specific manner in which he acts remains unseen. The mystery flowing out from believing in a transcendent personal God at work in the world remains. People around us ask, “Why did God let this tsunami [or earthquake or flood] happen?” We should not be ashamed to answer that we do not know because “our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Ps 115:3).

Third, the answer to the question of what God is doing in an evil world must never forget the goodness of his purpose and character. Hart sums it up:

Indeed we must say this: as God did not will the fall, and yet always wills all things toward himself, the entire history of sin and death is in an ultimate sense a pure contingency, one that is not as such desired by God, but that is nevertheless constrained by providence to serve his transcendent purpose. God does not will evil in the sinner.³⁸

God’s intention is good, and because he is faithful and sovereign, he will accomplish the objective revealed in the cross. God intends to restore people’s communion with him through their conformity to the image of Christ. We live through evil and suffering, exhibiting the same patience and faith Christ confessed during his earthly ministry, “learning obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). The best way to move forward is to keep our eyes fixed on what God has done in Christ and what he intends to do for us and in us through this same Christ. Only in him who learned obedience through suffering can the “purposes” to our own suffering be discovered. A practical theodicy must be Christ centered.

“Evil” is not to be made a remote philosophical problem but an occasion for practical and faithful engagement.³⁹ Living faithfully in a world where evil rages is itself an apologetic. It is crucial to reform our understanding of God, who reveals himself in the Scriptures, covenantally bonding himself to his people, and acting for their good.

³⁷ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 112.

³⁸ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 83.

³⁹ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 85.