

Providence (3): Providence and Evil

The Reformed confession of providence includes the confession that God is sovereign over evil. This is a particular emphasis of the Reformed confession of providence. The Belgic Confession in article 13 gives a general statement of the doctrine of providence and quickly moves to an extended treatment of the doctrine of providence and evil. The Heidelberg Catechism in its teaching of providence singles out “whatever evils he sends men, in this valley of tears” and speaks not only of “prosperity,” but also of “adversity.”

This brings up the problem of evil: if God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there evil in the world?

From one viewpoint the explanation of evil in the world is rather easy because of evil’s origin in Satan through his corruption of his glory and then through the sin of Adam; evil is in the universe. Often the statement of the problem of evil ignores the origin of sin: God made Adam in the garden on the sixth day and told him that in the day he ate of the forbidden tree he would surely die. God did not make men so evil or the creation so marred, but he made them very good, which at the very least means perfect and without sin or suffering. Evil is man’s fault, and ultimately every believer in his suffering in this world must confess his part in the existence of evil in the world because he is guilty of Adam’s sin.

This is the practical purpose of the penetratingly bold question regarding misery in the Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s day 3: “Did God, then, make man so wicked and perverse?” Man, every man, must confess his fault in the existence of evil, for in Adam all sinned. Over that fall God was sovereign, controlling and executing it.

From another viewpoint the explanation of evil, especially the suffering of the ungodly in this world, is not perplexing for the believer who knows the righteous and holy wrath of God against sin, and that God punishes sin “temporally and eternally,” as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches. Sometimes the punishment of sin is success and hardness in sin so that in the language of Psalm 73, God sets the wicked in slippery places by their earthly prosperity in order to cast them into destruction. The wicked lays his head on his silk and feather pillow and wakes up in hell, like the rich man in Jesus’ parable. Sometimes the punishment is such that the unbeliever and wicked suffer in this life.

The worst of suffering for the wicked in this life is nothing compared to hell. To suffer at man's hand is nothing in comparison to the presence of God in his wrath. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "Do not fear those who kill the body only, but fear him who kills body and soul in hell."

But that does not yet answer the question, why the fall and all that misery? Was it included in God's decree and controlled by his providence? Why? Further, what of the suffering of God's dear children, his friends and servants, those whose sins he has forgiven for Christ's sake and whom he blesses so that his favor rests on them all their days? How is the suffering of the elect to be explained?

So we must explain and we can explain the teaching of the Bible and the Reformed creeds that God in his providence is sovereign over all evil. God's sovereignty over evil means that God decreed evil in his counsel, that he controls and carries out in the world the execution of his counsel, yet in such a way that he is not the author of sin, and cannot be charged with the sins that are committed.

With regard to wicked men and devils, God upholds them in their wicked natures and rebellious lives. With regard to the sins of men and devils, God decreed these things as that which he hates and for which he has determined a good end. With regard to his government of sin, he does so in such a way that he cannot be charged with those sins or that wickedness.

With regard to the suffering of his people, nothing befalls them in this life except by his will; it comes from his own hand, and he turns it to their profit. By the confession of God's sovereignty over evil we mean that God governs and controls it all for a good purpose: he averts all evil or turns it to the profit of his people. All things work together for good to them that love God, who are the called according to his purpose. All things must serve Jesus Christ. That is, God has determined the utter defeat of evil and its just punishment too.

Whenever we say that, objectors immediately say that this doctrine makes God the author of sin.

First, we reply to these objectors that the burden of proof lies with them. They must prove that to say that because God decrees evil and controls it, since he is not a man and his relation to all things is not like a man's, that such a teaching makes him the author of sin. We also add what the apostle Paul said in reply to a pernicious comment of man, "Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God." Let the objectors establish that the teaching that God as God is sovereign

over evil makes him the author of it. The Reformed faith simply says in article 13 of the Belgic Confession: “His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible, that he orders and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner, even then, when devils and wicked men act unjustly.”

Second, we say to these objectors that the alternative is terrible. If God is not sovereign over evil so that he decreed it and carries it out, then who is sovereign? Is evil a power outside of God? Is the devil sovereign? Or are good and evil two equally sovereign forces dueling in and for the world, with the believer in the midst, and the outcome is in doubt? Is the relationship between God and evil dualistic? About such dualism the Reformed believer says in the Belgic Confession article 13, “We reject and abhor the error...of the Manichees.” The Manichees taught dualism. Rejecting that Manichean doctrine that evil has its origin of itself, the creeds also reject any denial of the sovereignty of God over evil.

Third, the creeds are perfectly clear on the doctrine. No one who claims to be Reformed can deny this teaching that God is sovereign over evil. The Heidelberg Catechism in its treatment of providence in Lord’s day 10 teaches that God sends not only herbs, grass, meat, drink, health, and fruitful years, which are certainly good, but also that he sends adversity, drought, barren years, sickness, and poverty. The Belgic Confession, teaching about providence in article 13 that “nothing happens in this world without his appointment” goes on to apply this to the greatest evil—the devil’s and wicked men’s persecution of the church. The Reformed faith says, “God neither is the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed.”

Fourth, the Reformed faith teaches this on the basis of scripture. The reason that many deny God’s sovereignty over evil is not because scripture is unclear. To deny it is to deny some of the clearest and most pointed scriptural passages about the sovereignty of God. In Moses God says that according to his decree to destroy Pharaoh God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Amos teaches in Amos 3:6: “Shall there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it?” This teaching the Bible makes abundantly clear in Job. Job would not have had a problem if he would have said that the devil had done it. That would have been end of the book of Job. But Job’s problem came—and he gave it the most poignant expression—when he said, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” And for forty-one more chapters the book explains that theme.

The Bible teaches with regard to one of the most wicked things done in the whole Old Testament—the cursing of David: “So let him curse, because the LORD hath said unto him, curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so?” (2 Sam. 16:10).

At the heart and as the key to unlock the truth of providence in God’s sovereignty over evil stands the cross of Jesus Christ. The most wicked and most perplexing suffering in the world is not that some human suffers. It is not even that one of God’s elect people suffers, or that I suffer, but it is that the Son of God suffered so at the cross. About all Christ’s suffering the Bible says that God did it. Preaching the cross of Jesus Christ on Pentecost morning, Peter said, “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). Again, explaining its own suffering of the evil of persecution, the church looks again at the cross of Jesus Christ in Acts 4:27–28: “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.”

The cross unlocks the sovereignty of God over evil. Only by faith in the Christ of the cross, the cross at which God bruised Jesus Christ for our sins, does one also confess about all evil that God is sovereign and for that evil works the good end. By the greatest evil—the cross—God worked the greatest good—salvation. We see there too the particularity of his dealings with men, for the cross was for his sheep, as Christ said, and not for the reprobate.

Also, by implication, to deny that God is sovereign over evil is to deny that he was likewise sovereign at the cross and thus to deny the cross and to deny salvation in the cross. For if the cross in every detail was not of God, the cross is worthless to accomplish salvation.

Further, in my suffering evil in this world, the cross is the ground of my hope that I stand immovably in God’s favor. God in his providence is not favorable to all, but only to those who are in Christ Jesus by election, redemption, and faith. In the cross of Jesus Christ I believe by faith that I am righteous before God; therefore whether he sends me good or evil, he sends it to me for my profit, and especially any evil that he sends to me in this valley of tears cannot come as a punishment for sin, because he has already judged the believer in the cross.

The cross is also the power to sanctify me in the midst of evil so that that evil works patience, experience, and hope. The cross is God’s testimony to me in the midst of evil that God

is favorable toward me and working my salvation. Christ and his cross are the gifts of grace that abound over and above all that was lost in Adam.

In Christ Jesus and his cross we also see the sweeping scale of the scope of providence as it comprehends evil within it. The scope of providence includes all things and brings all things to the goal through the cross, that is, through the way of redemption, through the way of death, darkness, sin, the curse, through resurrection to glory.

In Jesus Christ we see that the purpose of God in the creation of the world never was Adam, but that Adam and his fall and everything that happens after it serve Jesus Christ and the revelation of the glory of God in Jesus Christ, by whom and for whom God made all things and in whom he is determined to wrap up all in a new heaven and a new earth as the eternal habitation of God, Jesus Christ, and just men, women, and children made perfect, and from which all the wicked are disinherited.

In God's sovereignty over evil we have particularly the comfort of the doctrine of providence, which is why the Reformed confess it with such relish. To that comfort we turn next time.