

Editorial: Reflections on Living in Light of Sin and Evil

Stephen J. Wellum

Living in this fallen world, we all face suffering and evil. One of the most common questions asked by non-Christians is how we, as Christians, explain the existence of evil and cope with it. Christians also are not immune to these questions and it is for this reason we have devoted an entire issue of *SBJT* to the topic. Our goal is to think through what Scripture says on the subject and how we, as God's people, are to live in this fallen world between the comings of Christ. In this expanded editorial I offer five reflections on what we call the problem of evil which will serve as an entrée into the other articles and forum pieces.

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First, as an important apologetic point, it is not only Christian theology which must wrestle with the problem of evil; every worldview, Christian and non-Christian alike, must also wrestled with it, albeit for different reasons depending upon the specific view in question. For example, naturalistic/atheistic

viewpoints must first explain, given their overall view, how they can even *account* for the distinction between good and evil. What is the basis for objective, universal moral standards if, for sake of argument, naturalism is true? Naturalists will often raise the problem of evil against Christians, but in so doing, they *assume* a clear distinction between good and evil and that objective evil exists, which their own view cannot explain. Thus, in order to get their argument off the ground, naturalists, ironically, have to borrow parasitically from Christianity which can account for the distinction between good and evil tied to God as the standard. In this way, as a number of Christian thinkers have pointed out, many non-Christian worldviews, including naturalism, have a "problem of the good" since without the God of the Bible there is neither good nor evil in an objective and universal sense. The same could be said about other non-Christian views but my point is simply this: everyone must wrestle with the problem of evil in light of their own worldview claims. For Christians, our problem is not *accounting* for the

distinction between good and evil. We can make sense of our moral revulsion and condemnation of wicked actions. Our challenge is to make sense of why God plans and allows sin and evil, pain and misery. In answering these questions, we are driven back to Scripture and its entire storyline which unfolds God's plan of redemption in Christ.

Second, the Bible's storyline takes seriously the distinction between "creation" and the "fall" and thus the present abnormality of this world. A helpful and common way of thinking through the storyline of Scripture is by the grid: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. When thinking about the problem of evil, and specifically the thorny question of the origin of evil and its relationship to God's plan, the distinction between "creation" and the "fall" is utterly essential to maintain. Scripture is clear that God created the universe "good" (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) and that everything from his creative hand was good. No doubt, Scripture teaches that sin and evil are part of God's plan, but Scripture *never* concludes that God is responsible for evil, nor does it conclude that a strong view of God's sovereign rule entails this conclusion.

Instead, Scripture distinguishes "creation" and "fall" and it roots this distinction *in history*. Sin entered the world by our creaturely act of rebellion, first in the angelic realm and then in the human world. Sin is *not* here because it is a metaphysical necessity tied to our finitude, nor is it here because that is just the way things are. Instead, sin and evil are a reality due to our moral rebellion against God in space-time history, and Scripture nowhere minimizes this fact. In fact, Scripture takes sin and evil so seriously that the entire plan of redemption is to destroy it and to remove it from God's universe! And, thankfully, because sin and evil are not metaphysically necessary, in removing sin and evil, he does not have to scrap us and start all over again. Instead, God must remove our sin by paying for it in full in Christ's cross, and then transform us by the power of the Spirit, thus restoring us to our state of good-

ness even in a greater way in Christ. All of this is to say that the God of the Bible stands absolutely opposed to sin and evil. The same Scripture which teaches that God foreordains all things, including sin and evil, also teaches that sin and evil are an abnormality, an intrusion and a distortion of his good world, which God alone can remedy by the incarnate Son, his cross work on our behalf, and the power of the Spirit to transform us. Furthermore, even though it is true that God makes use of evil in order to bring about his good purposes, Scripture never concludes that evil and sin are less than what Scripture says they are. Evil remains evil: totally, radically, and absolutely, and God stands completely against it as the entire storyline of Scripture makes abundantly clear.

Many application points could be drawn from this point, especially when we confront the reality of evil and suffering in this world. However, the main point is that since Eden and this side of the consummation, all of us live in an abnormal and fallen world, and none of us escape this abnormality. Ultimately, when we suffer it is due to the present condition of this world. This is why all suffering is *not* related to a specific sin, as the book of Job makes abundantly clear. Yes, it is true that some suffering may be due to our sin (e.g., Acts 5; 1 Cor 11; cf. Heb 12), but it is not always the case. Suffering first is part of the present condition of this world, now awaiting the consummation, which requires that we have realistic expectations when we face suffering. No doubt, we do not often know why specific suffering comes our way; that is tied to the sovereign plan of God. Yet we do know that we will face sin and evil, and when we do, God is not to blame; all blame is first placed back in Genesis 3, and thereafter with every creature who chooses to act contrary to the good commands and purposes of God.

Third, in God's plan of redemption, God not only demonstrates that he is sovereign over sin and evil, but also that in his sovereignty, holiness, justice, and grace he is rooting out sin and evil in the cross work of Christ, thus demonstrating that

he is perfectly good and trustworthy. Scripture teaches that in redemption, God is not indifferent to our suffering and plight. Even though we do not deserve anything from him but judgment, God has displayed his grace and has acted to defeat sin and evil. In fact, it is precisely because he is the sovereign and gracious Lord that we can have real hope, help, and comfort since he is able to sympathize with us and powerfully to save us. Is this not what Scripture teaches? In the coming of Christ, the promised “age to come” has dawned and in his death and resurrection he has defeated sin, death, and the evil one and won for us our salvation (e.g. Rom 3:21-25; Col 2:13-15; Heb 2:14-15; 1 Cor 15:56-57; Rev 5). In so doing, God has demonstrated that he is utterly trustworthy, just, and good. We might not know all the mysteries of his ways, yet we do know that the truth of God’s sovereignty and goodness is beyond question. In our redemption, God is not sitting idly by, without care or concern for his people. In the cross and resurrection we have the greatest demonstration imaginable of God’s sovereignty over evil and his willingness to identify with us in order to save us from sin, evil, and death. In our facing suffering there are many questions. But as we think of our sufferings in light of Christ and his cross, we learn how to trust. God the Son has suffered unjust suffering and when we remember this, we learn that God is for us and not against us, and that he stands opposed to sin and evil in a far greater way than we can even imagine. After all, what does the incarnation of God’s Son, his life, death, and resurrection teach us if not that God hates sin and evil and that he powerfully acts to destroy it, even though it is part of his foreordained plan (Acts 2:23). Thus, if we can trust God in using evil for good purposes in Christ, we can certainly trust him in all other events, including our lives.

Fourth, given the biblical balance between God’s sovereignty over sin and evil, creaturely responsibility for it, and God’s goodness and utter determination to defeat and destroy it, we must also fight with all of our might against sin

and evil, in line with what God himself is doing. A strong view of divine sovereignty does not negate this conclusion. Scripture teaches both God’s sovereignty over evil *and* his complete opposition to it and we must hold both together simultaneously without ever letting them go. In this regard, John 11:33-35 is a very important text. As Jesus approaches the tomb of Lazarus in sovereign power to raise him, he is literally “outraged in spirit, and troubled.” Jesus, as God the Son incarnate, is outraged at the death of his friend, and thus sin which has brought death into this world. He is not outraged with himself as the Lord, even though sin, evil, and death are part of God’s eternal plan and why he is going to the cross in the first place. Rather, he is outraged by what sin has wrought by creaturely actions, which he has come to defeat and destroy. Jesus in all of his sovereignty stands in complete opposition to sin and evil, and we must do likewise. When moral evil takes place, we do not blame God or respond in a *laissez faire* way. Rather, we fight sin and evil by proclaiming the Gospel, and by God’s grace, seeing people made new; by standing for justice and righteousness and punishing evildoers, through the appropriate authorities, for their responsible actions. We never justify sin and wrong actions by appealing to divine sovereignty at the expense of human responsibility, nor do we reduce God’s sovereignty in light of human choices. We hold the depth and breadth of biblical teaching together as we fight with all our might against sin and evil, in line with what God himself is doing.

Fifth, what about specific suffering in our lives? Often when we go through suffering we wish that God would have allowed us to go through something else. Why do we experience specific suffering? Why do some escape specific tragedies and others do not? There are many points that could be noted, but I finish with these thoughts. John 21:15-23 reminds us that God calls all of us to different callings in life. When Peter asked about John’s future, Jesus never answered him directly but instead said, “Follow me.” Our lives are part of God’s sov-

ereign plan and most of the time we do not know what the Lord has ordained for our lives. For us, as Christians, we are assured that even in our suffering in this life, which is part of the fallenness of this world order, God never allows us to experience anything we cannot bear by his grace and power (1 Cor 10:12-13). Sometimes the suffering we experience is due to persecution for the Lord's name, which we should consider joy (Mk 8:34-38; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 4:12-16). Other times it may be due to the discipline of the Lord (Heb 12:1ff). Yet in many cases, we experience difficulties related to the abnormality of this world and we do not know why the specific events have occurred. However, what we are assured of is this: our God is sovereign and the defeat of sin and evil is accomplished in Christ. We live our lives in full conviction that in Christ, we have every assurance that God is sovereign over evil and that until he returns, we can live confidently, trusting God's promises and Word.

It is no doubt the case that questions related to the relationship of God to sin and evil are difficult. Even though many questions remain, one thing

is sure: our sovereign and gracious triune God is worthy of all of our confidence and trust. The entire storyline of Scripture gives us confidence that our sovereign God is working out all things in this world for his glory and our good (Rom 8:28). We only have knowledge of God's plan and actions as creatures, but in light of God's actions in creation and redemption; in light of God's incredible plan of redemption centered in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and his incredible triumphant cross work for us; we have every reason to trust what God has said and to live in confident expectation for our great and gracious God to consummate what has already begun in Christ in a glorious new heaven and new earth (see Rev 21-22). While we continue to live between the ages, as we await the second coming of our Lord, may we live as those who trust God's promises no matter what we experience, proclaim Christ as our only hope and salvation, and stand with our great God against sin and evil as we long for Christ's appearing. It is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will help toward this end, for God's glory and the good of the church.