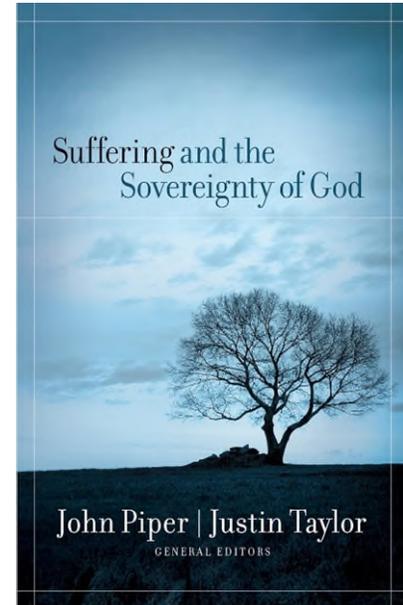


First, we need to know what Scripture says in general about God’s relationship to evil. Scripture declares that the Judge of all the earth will always do what is right (see Gen. 18:25). God is, as Moses sings, “the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just.” He is a “faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (Deut. 32:4, NIV). God never *does* evil.

Yet this is not to say that God does not *create, send, permit,* or even *move others* to do evil,¹ for Scripture is clear that *nothing* arises, exists, or endures independently of God’s will. Thus, when the writer of Hebrews states that Christ “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (1:3), he is claiming that God the Son is providentially governing everything through sustaining all of the universe’s objects and events as he carries each of them to its appointed end by his all-powerful word.² This follows from the fact that the Greek word for “upholds” is *pherō*, which means to bring or bear or produce or carry. As Wayne Grudem notes, *pherō* “is commonly used in the New Testament for carrying something from one place to another, such as bringing a paralyzed man on a bed to Jesus (Luke 5:18), bringing wine to the steward of the feast (John 2:8), or bringing a cloak and books to Paul (2 Tim. 4:13).” Consequently, in our verse’s context it “does not mean simply ‘sustain,’ but has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another,” especially since *pherō* appears in our verse as a present participle, which “indicates that Jesus is ‘continually carrying along all things’ in the universe by his word of power.”³ So here is the picture: God the Son holds each and every aspect of creation, including all of its evil aspects, in his “hands”—that is, within his all-powerful and ever-effectual word—and carries it by that word to where it accomplishes exactly what he wants it to do.

Ephesians 1:11 goes even further by declaring that God in Christ “works all things according to the counsel of his will.” Here the Greek word for “works” is *energeō*, which indicates that God not merely carries all of the universe’s objects and events to their appointed ends but that he actually *brings about* all things in accordance with his will. In other words, it isn’t just



¹ To move someone to do evil is not the same as tempting that person to do evil. Scripture tells us that God tempts no one (see James 1:13). For how moving someone to do evil and tempting that person to do evil differ, see the passages from W. G. T. Shedd cited in n. 56, and especially 318-22.

² See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47A (Dallas: Word, 1991), *loc. cit.*: “The . . . clause ascribes to the Son the providential government of all created existence, which is the function of God himself. As the pre-creational Wisdom of God, the Son not only embodies God’s glory but also reveals this to the universe as he sustains all things and bears them to their appointed end by his omnipotent word.”

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 316.

that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those who love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects for his glory (see Ex. 9:13-16; John 9:3) and his people's good (see Heb. 12:3-11; James 1:2-4). This includes—as incredible and as unacceptable as it may currently seem—God's having even brought about the Nazis' brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz as well as the terrible killings of Dennis Rader and even the sexual abuse of a young child: "The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil" (Prov. 16:4, NASB).⁴ "When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other" (Eccl. 7:14, NIV).

As Thomas Goodwin noted, in this passage from Ephesians Paul wants to assure his Jewish Christian brothers and sisters that God has worked grace in their hearts as the consequence of his having predestined them before all time for salvation in Christ so that they will be confident of their eternal inheritance.⁵ So how does Paul proceed? He argues from the general principle to the specific case. God "works *all things* after the counsel of his own will; he plotted *every thing* beforehand, therefore certainly this [particular thing]."⁶ In thus arguing from the general to the specific, Paul is arguing from what would be obvious to his biblically literate Jewish brothers and sisters to what would be less obvious for them as relatively new converts to Christ. These Jewish Christians would know that God—the God of the Old Testament whom they now recognized as the Father of Jesus Christ—declares "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10)—and, by implication, knows and has ordered everything in-between, even down to foreseeing and ordering the words we will speak (see Ps. 139:4 with Prov. 16:1).⁷ They would know that the One who said, "My counsel shall stand, and I will

⁴ The Hebrew word for "evil" in this verse is *ra*>, as is the word for "bad" in Ecclesiastes 7:14. *Ra*>, as I point out below regarding Isaiah 45:7, is the primary Hebrew term for evil.

⁵ Verses 11 and 12 read: "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory." Verse 13 then starts with the words, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth." Goodwin, F. F. Bruce, Gordon Fee, Peter O'Brien, and others argue from the "you also" that verses 11 and 12 are referring to the first Jewish Christians and that verse 13 then brings in the later Gentile Christians. This reading seems to be corroborated by Acts 18:24–19:20.

⁶ Thomas Goodwin, *An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians in The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 1 (Eureka, Calif.: Tanski Publications, 1996), *loc. cit.*; my emphasis. Goodwin lived from 1600–1680. His Ephesians commentary was published the year after his death. Goodwin was one of the greatest of the English Puritans.

Ordinarily, if we were to say that someone did something according to the counsel of his own will, what we would mean is that the person first thought through on his own what he was going to do and then carried out what he had determined to do without having to take account of anything other than what he had determined to do. In other words, what he had determined to do was all that he took account of in acting as he did; he did not have to adjust what he did to anything beyond what he had determined to do. So if we interpret this part of Ephesians 1:11 according to its plain sense, then we will affirm with the Scriptures that "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Ps. 115:3; see also 135:6; Dan. 4:35; and Isa. 46:10, which is quoted below). At this point, open theists may seem to have one more move available to them. It seems that they could retort that what God has been pleased to do is to give human beings the sort of freedom that involves our deciding what we will do rather than his determining what we will do. But this move is not really a biblical option, given the fact that God would not then be working all things "after the counsel of *his own* will." For he would then be taking into account not only what he willed but what we will.

⁷ In Isaiah 46:9, God declares that he is God "and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me," which is immediately followed by the words of verse 10: "declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'" The fact that verse 10 is preceded by this declaration of God's that there is none like him suggests or implies that God's exhaustive foreknowledge is what theologians call a *differ-entium*—that is, a

accomplish all my purpose,” is the One who ensures this by bringing everything about, including, in the immediate context of Isaiah’s words, “calling a bird of prey from the east, . . . from afar country” (Isa. 46:10f.)—that is, Cyrus the Great, king of Persia from 559–530 B.C., who would conquer Babylon in 539 B.C. and then allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem so that they could rebuild the temple (see Ezra 1:1-4). God here calls the pagan, unbelieving Cyrus “a man to fulfill my purpose” (Isa. 46:11, NIV). From events as small as the fall of the tiniest sparrow (see Matt. 10:29) to the death, at the hands of lawless men, of his own dear Son (see Acts 2:23 with 4:28), God speaks and then brings his word to pass; he purposes and then does what he has planned (see Isa. 46:11). Nothing that exists or occurs falls outside God’s ordaining will.⁸

Nothing, including no evil person or thing or event or deed.⁹

distinguishing feature, or something that sets him apart and makes him different from every other being. Here the New Living Translation captures the intent of these two verses nicely: “And do not forget the things I have done throughout history. For I am God—I alone! I am God, and there is no one else like me. Only I can tell you what is going to happen even before it happens. Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish.”

⁸ It is crucial to recognize, as Goodwin did, that Paul’s argument would not work if he could not assume that his fellow Jewish Christians would agree that God works *all* things according to the counsel of his will. If anything whatsoever could fall outside God’s will, then why not their eternal inheritance? *This implies that neither Paul himself nor any of the godly Jews of his day would have considered open theism a biblical possibility.*

Open theists often claim that Scripture includes claims that can be taken to support their position as well as claims that support their opponents’ position. They then argue that the passages that seem to support their position ought to be taken to determine how we should interpret the passages that seem to oppose their position. But here we have an argument from Paul that clarifies what he and his Jewish brothers and sisters took to be beyond question: God works *all things* according to the counsel of his will. This establishes that we should *not* take the biblical texts that can be read as supporting open theism as determining our interpretation of the ones that cannot. We must take the biblical texts that contradict open theism as the determinative texts, and then interpret the supposedly “open” passages in their light, if we are to remain true to what God has intended us to understand from his word, given Paul’s argument. (In fact, one reason to interpret verses such as Psalm 139:4 and Proverbs 16:1 as I have in this argument, and thus we have reason to reject, e.g., David J. A. Clines’s interpretation of such verses in his “Predestination in the Old Testament,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), 116f.). It is curious that open theists like Boyd and John Sanders never even acknowledge Ephesians 1:11, much less grapple with Paul’s argument.

I explain the concepts of *God’s ordaining will* and his *foreordination* (as it is broached in the second sentence of the next paragraph) in the last paragraph of this section. What God *ordains* often differs from what he *commands*. For instance, God commands all human beings to worship his Son (see, e.g., Phil. 2:9-11), but he ordained that certain specific human beings would disobey that command and blaspheme against him instead (see, e.g., 2 Peter 2 and Jude, especially vv. 4, 8, 13-15). Again, he commands that all people everywhere repent (see Acts 17:30) and yet he has ordained that some will not (see 2 Peter 2, especially vv. 9 and 17). In Reformed circles, this distinction between what God ordains and what he commands is often marked as the distinction between his *secret* will— which is never frustrated—and his *revealed* will—which human beings violate regularly. For a nice summary of the distinction, see Grudem, *op. cit.*, 213-16.

⁹ John Piper and Justin Taylor (general editors), *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006). From Mark R. Talbot’s chapter, 42-44. (The original footnotes are numbered 11-18 in the book.)