

The Sovereignty of God - Adult SS - Lesson 4: The Problem of Evil

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[0 : 00] So if you're new to Sunday school or if you've missed a few weeks, we are thinking about God's sovereignty this term. And we've seen that God is sovereign over all things, every single detail in the universe.

And by sovereign, we mean God's kingly rule. It's his power and control and authority and plan over all things.

So in eternity, in eternity past, I haven't even written eternity. In eternity, God decreed all things. He had a plan and predestined all that would happen.

And that is how he is sovereign over all things, because he's spoken it all to be in eternity past. And last week, we saw that, well, that includes all things, and that includes sin and suffering and evil.

Sin and suffering and evil included. And that always raises the question, well, how is that possible?

[1 : 18] And so we establish three pillars of biblical truth that we must hold to when we think about God's sovereignty over evil. We need to establish that God cannot commit evil.

That's the first truth, the first pillar of the Bible. God is never morally responsible when evil or sin occurs. He's too holy for that to be the case. And the second pillar is man is always responsible for evil, for when we sin.

That is to say, when we sin, we sin. And the third pillar is God is sovereign over evil. It is all completely within his control and plan and purpose.

And so these are all just three fundamental biblical truths, three pillars we must hold to. But it isn't always clear how these three things hold together.

That there is mystery within this. How can God be sovereign, but not the author of evil or morally responsible? How can he decree it, but also not commit it?

[2 : 24] And we are forced to acknowledge that there is just mystery here. There's a great mystery of God's sovereignty over evil. He is both holy and totally sovereign, yet man is responsible.

And these are just simply truths we must hold to. From now on, as we thought about last week and as we go on ahead, these are just three truths. They are true and we must hold to them.

But we also saw God does shed some light on how these three pillars hold together. It is held together by a word beginning with P, purpose.

God's purpose. God has a holy and wise purpose and intention in ordaining evil, in decreeing it. God's sovereignty is deeper than that.

God has planned and intended all evil in this world for a good purpose. And the cross is the ultimate example of that.

[3 : 50] The cross is such a helpful first thing we should go to when we're kind of wrestling with questions about this. The crucifixion of the Son of God was the greatest sin to be committed.

Humans were entirely responsible for it. Yet God had planned and predestined it. Entirely sovereign over those events. Because he had a good purpose running throughout all of it.

The salvation of sinners. Look at Acts 2. We see the three pillars all together just in this one verse. This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

You crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. So do you see? God condemns this. They were lawless men. So God wasn't responsible. Man is responsible.

You crucified and killed him. Yet God was sovereign over the whole thing. It was all according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. Plan decreed from eternity.

[4 : 53] And so God, we can take that and we can expand that to all evil and sin in this world. God has a good purpose in planning all the evil and suffering in our lives.

But we can't always pinpoint what exactly that purpose is. It could be, we saw last week, for loving discipline. It could be to refine our faith.

It could be to protect us from greater evils. Or it could be as a good warning sign, pointing us to judgment day, saying that there is a greater suffering to come.

And so repent. That's what Jesus highlights for us in Luke 13. And so God's sovereignty over evil could be summed up as this. Confession 3.1.

Remember, this is our guide in Sunday school. God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.

[5 : 57] Yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures. God didn't commit the sin. He's not responsible of it.

And man is responsible. That their will isn't destroyed in this. Okay, that's a bit of a recap. But today, I want us to go even deeper into this.

It's probably about as deep as we can go. And I want us to think about the great problem of evil.

The problem of evil. And this is the big question that people have asked for centuries.

Philosophers have wondered about it. Theologians have discussed it. And we can even wonder about it in our own lives. How can God be good and sovereign over evil and yet not the author of evil?

Or maybe a bit more, a sharper question that we face is, if God is good and sovereign over evil, why is he allowing all this suffering to happen?

[7 : 06] Okay, that is the big problem of evil or the question about it. And so I want us to try and just at least approach that and help us to think about it in the right way.

And I want us to think about two things in particular. Okay, today. I want us to think about how God can harden hearts. And how God could know about the fall and still let it happen.

Okay. And there are three more Ps to help us think about. So we thought about purpose. And there are three more Ps. And the first two are this. Passive and passing by. This is how God hardens hearts.

And I want us to begin here. Because if we think about how God can harden hearts. In particular, how God can harden Pharaoh's heart in the Exodus.

We'll see that's the case. If we think about this, it can actually help us to think about the overall picture of God's sovereignty over evil. And the problem of evil.

[8 : 08] So I want you to break out. Answer these questions. One is about Exodus. And then I want you to look up Romans 9 and answer the rest of those questions. So I'll give you a good few minutes for that.

And on Exodus, who hardens Pharaoh's heart? Fernando. God. Sorry? The Lord.

Yeah, yeah. And is that it? It's his part of the Exodus. Ah, interesting, yeah. So God. So Exodus 9.

The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh. But also Exodus 8. Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

Right? It's interesting. Exodus says both.

It is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart. And God hardens his heart. And remember the context of this. This is so that Pharaoh did not let the people go.

[9 : 04] And he made their slavery even harsher. Right? Okay. But that raises a question, doesn't it? How can it be both? And also, well, first question is, how can it be both?

How can God harden Pharaoh's heart? And Pharaoh hardens his own heart. And also, how can, if it is God, if God is involved in this, how can God do that and not be the author of sin?

How can God harden Pharaoh's heart to cause his own people more suffering? Well, an answer to both those questions.

We're going to go through these questions slowly. So let's just think about this question for now. An answer to both those questions. How can it be both? How can God harden Pharaoh's heart? The answer to both those questions is found in the word passive.

Okay? So we can say God passively hardened Pharaoh's heart. Not that he actively implanted evil into Pharaoh's heart.

[10 : 12] But I want us to see that God removed his mercy from Pharaoh's heart. God left Pharaoh to his own sin. And in that way, Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

Okay? So I just want us to think about this for a moment. And just think about how are we naturally? How are our hearts naturally? Are we seeking sin or seeking God?

Do you remember the great chasm? All right. So if we are here, so this is without God's grace, how we are naturally. We are dead in sin, aren't we?

So how are we naturally? Are we naturally seeking God or are we naturally doing something else? Shout out. Going the other way, right? We, our hearts, are pulling towards sin.

We want to sin. That's where our desires are set. That's what it means to be dead in our trespasses. We are naturally, without God's intervention and his grace, we are all naturally not seeking God, but seeking sin.

[11 : 13] Therefore, we are all naturally also going to hell, aren't we? By nature. Right?

So we are not, do you remember what? We are not kind of like a neutral person here. And either heaven or hell. Right? That's not what the default is.

We are. So it's not that. Right? We are, by nature, dead in our sin, and naturally going to hell.

And it's only by God's grace that he elects sinners and brings them to eternal life. Right?

That's election. Right? And so, do we deserve, naturally, do we deserve God to do anything to us?

[12 : 21] To intervene into this state? Right? No. We deserve to be left in this state. We deserve to just run toward our sin. We deserve to be just, to be left down here and God to do nothing.

And so, it is only because of God's mercy that we aren't as bad as we could be. Okay?

So I want you to think of our hearts like a volatile nuclear reactor core. Okay? Right? That has the potential to explode outwards and cause all sorts of chaos and sin and destruction.

Right? So that's what our hearts are like, naturally. Right? They're pulling to sin. They're trying to explode out towards sin. And if we're honest with ourselves, we know that, don't we?

Right? If our desires were let loose, there would be monsters all over this world. But in God's mercy, God contains the reactor core of our hearts.

[13 : 31] Right? He doesn't let this world and our hearts get as bad as they possibly could be. They could, you know, if it was, if it, what is as bad as possibly could be?

It is exploding our sin without any restraint, just letting our desires loose. But God restrains that, pulls it in.

And so his mercy, it's like this protective restraint around our hearts and around the world. But sometimes God removes that mercy, okay?

Or he kind of lets it off a little bit. And he gives humans over to their sin. So that's the language of Romans 1, Romans 1 below.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. And when God does this, God is removing his mercy as a punishment on sinners.

[14 : 38] Right? That this isn't, this isn't kind of letting them indulge in a nice way. That this is letting them indulge in a judgment way. Letting them indulge in their own sin as, is punishment in itself.

It's like God says, right, you want that? Fine, have it. Let's see where that will take you. So when God does that, it's not making people sin.

It is righteously allowing them to do what they wanted to do anyway. Right? And so look how the confession sums it up. 5.6.

As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge for former sins, does blind and harden. Right? So the language of hardening. What does that mean?

He withholds his grace. Right? So he doesn't restrain as much. And gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world and the power of Satan.

[15 : 41] Whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves. And this is how we can understand the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh's heart was a reactor core of sin.

He wanted to enslave the Hebrews. Right? And God let loose Pharaoh's reactor core heart. And Pharaoh did what he wanted to do anyway.

He, that is the hardening of his heart. And that is how Pharaoh hardened his own heart. And God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Right? In this sense, it was a passive hardening. Right? God was completely sovereign over it. He removed the restraint. But it was Pharaoh's own heart that wanted all that.

And so actually, if you think about it in this way, the three pillars remain intact. Right? God doesn't commit the evil. He doesn't implant evil into Pharaoh's heart.

[16:43] Pharaoh commits the evil. Yet God is sovereign over his heart the whole time. And while we're here, we're going to stop for questions in a moment.

But while we're here, this is also how we can understand the idea of God not saving people, but sending people to hell, yet still being good and sovereign.

Right? So think about this diagram here. This one here. Where are we naturally heading to? We're naturally heading to hell. This is what we're choosing in our sin.

This is what our reactor core hearts naturally pull towards. And so when we think about God sending people to heaven and sending people to hell, or electing and sending people to hell, he doesn't do that in exactly the same way.

Right? There's an asymmetry to how God handles the destinies of his elect and his non-elect. God graciously intervenes and predestines with his elect.

[17:55] But God passes by those whom he has not elected. His hands lay off them. He's sovereign over both. Right?

Let's be 100% clear about it. He's sovereign over both, but in different ways. So just look at the language of the confession again. 3.7. I think the confession is just, this is a really thorny area. And the confession is just really good at navigating this area of the zoo that we're in at the moment. Chapter 3.7. The rest of mankind. So it's spoken about the elect.

So God predestines the elect and saves them, gives them eternal life. Now he's speaking of the rest of mankind. God was pleased according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extends or withholds mercy.

Remember the reactor core? As he pleases. As he pleases. For the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, he has chosen to pass by the rest of mankind.

[18:56] And to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin. To the praise of his glorious justice. That's how we can think about it in terms of heaven and hell.

And it's how we can understand what's going on with Pharaoh. And the fact that this is how we can understand his sovereignty over all evil and sin in this world.

The world deserves to be plunged into sin and misery. It doesn't deserve any restraint if you think about it.

The reactor core rightly should just be let off. And we should just be let to live in chaos. Ever since the fall that this world is naturally a monster.

But in God's mercy, he restrains the evil of this world. And so there are good things remaining in this world.

[19:57] Things aren't as bad as they can be. You can enjoy this world. But sometimes he lets it loose. And that doesn't mean God is guilty of those things.

The evil in this world wanted to do that anyway. But it means, in those instances, God righteously gives evil over to evil.

You wanted that? Fine, you have it. And that is all a part of his righteous judgment against this world. And I realise that these words are hard to hear, aren't they?

But it's true. And they're hard to hear because it does a lot of harm to our pride, doesn't it? We think we deserve so much.

But the reality is, as sinners, we don't deserve anything. But thinking this way, it sheds some light on how God can be both sovereign over evil and good at the same time.

[21:02] And so there are two Ps to remember here. God passively hardens and he passes by the non-elect. But of course, this now raises questions of why.

So that's kind of how that can happen. But why? Why would God let evil loose? Why have evil in the first place?

Well, to answer that, let's look at Romans 9. But let's just pause for any questions at this moment. Any questions just on that stuff?

Good question.

Yeah, no, I should clarify that. Yeah, I don't want. So let me just give the actual answer. He does. He does ordain who was going to hell. Right. So he he ultimately he knows and says and decrees.

[22:14] Decrees all things. Right. Who is going to heaven? Who is going to hell? In fact, it's there in the confession. OK, so look at the final sentence of three point seven.

He ordains them to dishonor. Right. He decrees. He determines them to dishonor and wrath for their sin. Right. So you could say he predestines both, but he predestines them in different ways.

Right. His hands are on them in different ways. That isn't to say, like, he's a little bit less sovereign over those who go to hell. Because, yeah, he's kind of like, you know, he's 100 percent sovereign over both. But I'm just trying to emphasize in different ways.

And we want to emphasize in different ways so that we maintain God is not the author of evil. We're just trying to clarify their sin is their sin. Right.

And I realize that that raises question. That's a mystery. But how can he predestine both and ordain both except just one of them? He's not really morally.

[23 : 13] He's not morally responsible. And that's that's that's the mystery. That's the mystery that we highlighted last week. It's about how we don't know. And so what we're doing here, just the language of passive and passing by, it's not getting it's not getting sovereignty.

It's not kind of lessening your sovereignty. There's like a just on the wall. So not in the black box, but on the wall. You see the wall. Yeah, perfect. Thank you. We're not trying to lessen God's sovereignty here.

We're just trying to in the as best language as we can, because these are big, heavenly, eternal things in the best language. Just guarding God from committing evil, but maintaining his sovereignty.

And yeah, there's mystery to that. Yeah. Yeah, Katia. So if God elects a few, or elects people to return alive and are saved, is it possible to fall away again?

Once he elects a few, is it possible to still fall away from God's grace? Good question. All right. So let me be flipping this over.

[24 : 28] Here we go. So if God has elected, this is your question. So if God has elected people to eternal life, can those people ever kind of fall away and come back down here?

That's your question. All right. Can, if God has decreed something from eternity, sovereignly, can anything break that decree?

Can anything undo it or say, oh, no, I know you said that from eternity, God, but no, that's not going to happen, actually. Let's just think about it for all things. No, right? A dice is going to roll exactly how God says.

A storm is going to happen exactly as God says. And so when God saves someone, they absolutely will be saved. He's elected. Their name is written in the book of life and can't be rubbed out.

Not our own sin. We can't rub it out ourselves. Satan can't rub it out. No one can. And that also links to just Christ's work on the cross that we thought about last term, right? When Christ said, it is finished.

[25 : 28] He took his people, his elect to the cross, paid for their sins. And he said, it is finished. That there's no more payment to be made. You can't add sin back into their account.

You can't undo what I've done. No, it is certain. Right. Yeah. Hold on. Any more questions? Yeah. If you have friends in the lockdowns who are disabled, how do you, in order to solve it, do you feel about praying for them? How would it be?

Yeah. Good question. Yeah. Yeah. I want to think about this more in two weeks time. We're going to think about evangelism and prayer in all of this. The short answer is that this should spur our prayers for them because God is sovereign over salvation, right?

If God isn't sovereign over salvation, then there's no point praying because who can save them? No one because he's not truly sovereign. But God knows who are his.

[26 : 38] He can raise the dead. And so we can pray. But then you might be asking, but if God has his elect and that those who are ordained to hell and those who are elect to eternal life, well, then what's the point in praying?

Short answer is these aren't things for us to look into. Like we don't know who's on that list, but God calls us to pray. He calls us to evangelize. We'll think about that more in a couple of weeks.

But if anything, this spurs us on in our evangelism and prayers. Any more before we look at Romans 9?

Great. Yeah, let's. So let's look at the next few questions. Again, we're going through these slowly. So according to Paul, who hardens Pharaoh's heart and anyone's heart? It's not a trick question.

Verse 18. Yeah, Katya. God. God. Right. Yeah. Yeah. So thankfully, Paul says the same thing as Exodus. Right. God. Right. God hardens Pharaoh's heart.

[27 : 42] OK. But we can now think, OK, well, how does God harden his heart? Right. Passive hardening. Reacting core. Restraint. OK. Question C. For what purpose is Pharaoh's heart

hardened?

Right. So we're now thinking why. So we thought about the how. Now here's the why. What purpose? Hands up. OK. OK.

I'll come back to you if no one else said. Noah. Sorry? Sorry. I might have a different letter. C. For what purpose is Pharaoh's heart hardened? To show his wrath and power.

Yeah. Do you see that? Verse 17. For this very purpose, I've raised you up, Pharaoh. I've made you Pharaoh. And I've hardened your heart as well. Why?

That I might show my power in you. And that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Verse 18. Right. That this now expands to kind of more than Pharaoh. For all those whom God hardens hearts.

[28 : 42] It's to show his wrath and to make known his power. All right. OK. So that's what he says. Why? Now let's just think.

Question D. How does hardening Pharaoh's heart achieve that purpose of displaying God's power and his wrath? How does it do that? Think about the Exodus. Yeah, Rory.

Otherwise it's not a rescue. So Rory just says they can go. And God is not actually rescued and taking the land off. Okay. OK. So it's a part of the rescue. But how does.

So you're absolutely right. Let's probe into that further. How does God display his wrath and his power in that rescue? By.

In the past it rather was by judging. By judging those who reject. Yeah. By judging Pharaoh in Egypt. Right. The power on Pharaoh by the plagues.

[29 : 40] And ultimately his death in the Red Sea. Right. That was God displaying his power in that moment. And in fact it shows his judgment and wrath too doesn't it?

Right. That was Pharaoh's reactical rebellious heart. And what does God do with it? He judges it. And he reveals his wrath on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. And God does all that he does in that to display his glory.

Right. So we are now getting on why he hardens Pharaoh's heart. He does it to display his glory. Display the majesty of who he is. And Paul applies this to all people.

Do you see? There are vessels of mercy. That's his elect. That's his elect. Whom God displays his glory and his grace and mercy and kindness towards.

Right. So when he does this. He displays his grace. And he displays all of that in our lives when he saves us doesn't he?

[30 : 49] But for those who remain in sin. This isn't a stain on God's character. No. Something else is revealed about God. The glory of his wrath and his power.

Is displayed in his hardening of hearts. As he judges them. And this sheds more light on how God can allow evil and be sovereign over it.

Yes. There is. As we thought last week. There's the immediate purpose of God disciplines or refines our faith or points towards judgment day. Right. So there are those purposes.

But overall, there is a grander purpose. God is sovereign over evil in that his glory is displayed in it. And we see that in the cross.

Right. Always think back to the cross. We and we thought about the last last term when we thought about the the atonement. The cross is the greatest sin in history.

[31 : 52] But at the same time, it was the ultimate display of God's glory. Right. You look at the cross and you see with greatest clarity, God's wrath, his mercy, his love, his holiness, his faithfulness.

It is displayed in that evil of the crucifixion. And so that is the case for all evil and sin. God has purposed it to display his glory.

Now, there is mystery to all of this. We don't always immediately see how the suffering in my life or that atrocity that we read in the news.

We don't always see how that exactly displays God's glory and why God has planned that of all things to display his glory.

But there is a comfort and reassurance in this. Evil is not random. Evil is not pointless, aimless suffering. There is a good reason why evil exists and why God has sovereignly decreed it to happen.

[32 : 56] We can be sure we know that God will get glory from it. Therefore, there is a good and meaningful reason behind it.

And we will see that in the end, won't we? In the age to come, all of his elect, what will we be doing in eternity? Glorifying God for his grace.

That's why he elected us to the praise of his glorious grace. And when evil is judged in that time, what will be seen about God? His perfect power and justice. But some may still answer, but how is all this fair?

So God electing some but passing by others. Or more broadly, how is it fair God ordaining evil here but not there? In my life but not her life?

Well, how does Paul answer that question? We're now on E. How does Paul answer the question of how is it fair to show compassion on some but not others? Yeah, Rory.

[34 : 12] Rory, you go for it. Yeah. It's an interesting answer, right?

Paul actually raises the question that's all on our lips when we come to all this, right? You will say to me then, why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But he doesn't give a neat philosophical answer, does he?

Verse 20. What's his answer? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Well, what is molded? Say to his molder, why have you made me like this? He simply leaves us with the fact that God is sovereign, God is wise, God is perfect, God is our creator, God has decreed all of this.

And his ways of predestination and how he is sovereign over evil, we simply aren't meant to neatly understand it. We are simply meant to trust God and be humbled under the mystery of his sovereignty.

These are heavenly, eternal things we're dealing with here. And so God just wants us to humbly acknowledge him and praise him in this mystery.

[35 : 30] And this is basically the message of Job 2 as well. Well, this is kind of the conclusion you get as to the why of Job's suffering. It's on the back of your page. After all his suffering and wondering why God allowed it, what his plan was?

Look at Job 40. And the Lord said to Job, shall a fault finder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.

Then Job answered the Lord and said, behold, I'm of small account. What shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. Sometimes when we are just hit with mystery and the wonders of God like this, we just need to just cover our mouths and stand in awe.

And so if you leave some of these Sunday schools kind of scratching your head or you're just not satisfied with a neat answer, sometimes that's the way it should be.

And just use that kind of mystery to be humbled under God. I wanted to end this by thinking about how God can then permit the fall.

[36 : 44] Because there is a lingering question, isn't there? Okay, so you have the three pillars. God doesn't commit evil. Man is responsible for evil. God is sovereign over evil. And all these three hold together because God purposes evil.

And we can explain it by passive hardening and passing by. God has wisely decreed all that from eternity. But then there's a lingering question. Okay, but why did there need to be evil at all?

If God is sovereign over all things and decreed and planned all things, then that must include the fall, surely. And that triggered all other evil after it.

So how could God be good and yet sovereign over that? I wanted to go on to that today. We'll look at that next week. Are there any more questions?

Thank you.