

Compatibilism: *Understanding Evil, Suffering and Prayer*

BT/RH; *Pain, Suffering and Evil; Repentance; Tags (Prayer, Haiti, Earthquake, Natural Disasters);

The Cross of Christ reveals the outworking of a deep mystery concerning God's providence; namely that God used human rebellion aimed to dethrone and kill the Divine Sovereign, realized in the death of His Son Jesus, as the means by which He delivers us from His righteous wrath and the eternal condemnation we deserve for such cosmic treason.

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D.A. Carson's 1990 book entitled "How Long, O Lord?" is highly recommended for Christians wanting to gain a deeper understanding of evil, pain and suffering in this world as a means for preparing them for the inevitable occasion they become afflicted with severe suffering. In addition, there are some helpful practical and compassionate guidelines for Christians to follow in comforting others who may be experiencing such pain or suffering. However, the aspect of Carson's book that I will be focusing on is his helpful means of illuminating a balanced understanding of evil, pain, and suffering through the biblical theological reality of Compatibilism. This review, containing primarily quotes from Carson's book, will also offer further insight regarding previous posts addressing concerns around Open Theism and Prayer.

First, Carson gives very helpful expositions of several passages in Scripture that deal with evil and suffering. His treatment of some of these passages will be quoted below as they pertain to biblical compatibilism. I suspect that we will come to some tentative conclusions regarding how we understand both natural disasters, and the pain and suffering they cause, along with the activity of celestial adversaries depicted in certain passages of the Old Testament (e.g. Job 1:6-12, 2:1-10; 1 Kings 22:19-23; 1 Chronicles 21:1 *cf.* 2 Samuel 24:1-25). Some tentative conclusions will be drawn as we reference Carson's treatment of these passages and topics below.

I agree with Dr. Carson when he emphasizes that the best way for Christians to help them in their suffering is to *preventatively* (before we actually encounter extreme trials and tribulations that result in pain and suffering) understand the nature of evil and suffering as they relate to human free will and the sovereignty of God; the One who is always in control. Therefore, I sincerely encourage readers to engage in such contemplation by reading Carson's book, reviewing this post and, most importantly, reading God's Word that you may be equipped to understand and endure suffering by God's grace for your growth to His glory and honor.

Next, let's define Compatibilism according to D.A. Carson (1990, p. 201).

"The Bible as a whole, and sometimes in specific texts, presupposes or teaches that both of the following propositions are true:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures-they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.

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In what follows, I shall argue that the Bible upholds the truth of both of these propositions simultaneously. The view that both of these propositions are true I shall call *compatibilism*. We could call this view anything we like, but for various historical reasons this seems like a good term to use. All I mean by it is that, so far as the Bible is concerned, the two propositions are taught and are mutually compatible.

I hasten to insist that this is not the imposition of a certain philosophical grid onto the biblical texts. That both of these propositions are true is based on an inductive reading of countless texts in the Bible itself, as we shall see.” [Genesis 50:19-20; Leviticus 20:7-8; 1 Kings 8:46ff; 1 Kings 11:11-13, 29-39, 12:1-15, *cf.* 2 Kings 10:15, 11:4; Isaiah 10:5ff; John 6:37-40; Acts 18:9-10; Philippians 2:12-13; and Acts 4:23-31]

Carson (1990), in exploring the biblical revelation of compatibilism, states further on pages 212-218,

"God was sovereignly at work in the death of Jesus; human beings were evil in putting Jesus to death, even as they accomplished the Father's will; and God himself was entirely good.

Perhaps the following reflections will help clarify the issues, or at least to specify a little more closely where the mystery lies...

1. ...it is possible to outline some of the ‘unknowns’ that are involved, and show that these ‘unknowns’ allow for both propositions [God’s sovereignty and human responsibility for their free-choice actions] to be true. But precisely because there are large “unknowns” at stake, we cannot show *how* the two propositions cohere. ..what it means is that I am still going to be left with mysteries when I am finished. All that I hope to achieve is to locate those mysteries more precisely, and to show that they are big enough to allow me to claim that when the Bible assumes compatibilism it is not adopting non-sensical positions.
2. If compatibilism is true and if God is good—all of which the Bible affirms—then it must be the case that God stands behind good and evil in somewhat different ways; that is, he stands behind good and evil *asymmetrically*. To put it bluntly, God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents, to secondary causes. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents. In other words, if I sin, I cannot possibly do so outside the bounds of God’s sovereignty..., but I alone am responsible for that sin—or perhaps I and those who tempted me, led me astray, and the like. God is not to be blamed. But if I do good, it is God working in me both to will and to act according to his good pleasure. God’s grace has been manifest in my case, and he is to be praised.
3. If compatibilism is true...then any Christian definition of freedom must lie within two constraints. First, human freedom cannot involve absolute power to the contrary; that is, it cannot include such liberal power that God himself becomes contingent. That

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- would deny the second of the two propositions that constitute compatibilism. That is why some of the best treatments of the will have argued that freedom (sometimes call ‘free agency’) should be related not to absolute power to contrary, but to voluntarism: that is; we do what we want to do, and that is why we are held accountable for what we do. Second, human freedom since the fall cannot be discussed without reference to the fall. Jesus insists that everyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). Our wills, then, are not truly [absolutely] free; they are enslaved by sin. Within this framework, real freedom is freedom to obey God without restraint or reserve. It is not absolute power to contrary; it is wanting to please God at every moment. In Jesus the divine determining and the perfection of human obedience come together in one person, since his very food is to do the will of him who sent him (John 4:34), and he always does what pleases the Father (John 8:29). Here we see “free will” operating at its best!
4. The real nub of the tension lies in the kind of God who presents himself to us in the Bible. This is best seen by reflecting a little more on the nature of human responsibility. For the Christian, virtually all of what we are held responsible for, all that we obey or disobey, all that we choose or disavow, is foundationally defined by what God has commanded or forbidden. What makes sin heinous is that it is defiance of what [God] prescribes or forbids. Our moral responsibility is tied to our accountability to *him*. ...God’s transcendence and sovereignty establish one of the poles in compatibilism. That he is a person is the presupposition behind my moral accountability; but that does not permit me to think of him as finite, for I know he is not. The problem of compatibilism, then, is tied to the fact that the God who discloses himself in the Bible and supremely in the person of his Son is himself both transcendent and personal, and not less than both. We have pursued the lines of thought that suggest themselves from the Bible’s straightforward adoption of compatibilism, and find they lead to the nature of God.
 5. I see that [God] has revealed himself to human beings *in* time and space, but I don’t have a clue how he manages it, or how it looks to him. I see that he presents himself as personal, but I have no idea how a personal God can also be transcendent. I see that the Bible ascribes everything to him in one way or another, that his sovereignty leaves nothing out. I see that the biblical descriptions of his causation of evil deeds insists that he is good, and that secondary agents are evil. I do not know how he uses secondary agents in this way. Transparently, how he does this is related to who he is, to his ‘domain’ outside or above space and time, to the nature of his sovereignty and his choices as a person; but I still do not see *how* he does it. So, I am driven to see not only that compatibilism is itself taught in the Bible, but that it is tied to the very nature of God; and on the other hand, I am driven to see that my ignorance about many aspects of God’s nature is precisely the same ignorance that instructs me not to follow the whims of many contemporary philosophers and deny that compatibilism is possible. The mystery of providence is in the first instance not located in debates about decrees, free will, the place of Satan, and the like. It is located in the doctrine of God.”

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Thus, Biblical Compatibilism, a concept used to defend against Open Theism and to articulate the biblical reality of God's sovereignty and human free-will, is the foundation by which we can better (more faithfully, more biblically) understand the reality of evil and suffering in the world.

The concluding discussion will simply illustrate logical conclusions based on Scriptural evidence to further illuminate certain aspects of this mystery of God's providence as it relates to evil and suffering in our fallen world. Continuing with further quotes from Carson (1990) on pages 42-45,

“All the other elements of the Bible’s very rich and nuanced story line...have to do with the problem set by human rebellion and the terrible consequences of that rebellion. Paul understood the point: ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom. 6:23). From this perspective, the distinction that many make between moral evils and natural evils needs careful qualification. At one level, of course, a useful distinction may be made: there is a difference between, say, a rape and a destructive tornado, between a war caused by human avarice and an earthquake that no human being could either start or stop. Yet from another perspective, both kinds of evil, and the suffering caused by both kinds of evil, are the result of sin, of rebellion-and therefore of moral evil.

The ultimate measure of evil is the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18ff.), and that wrath is so resolute that it issues in the cross. We are all ‘by nature objects of wrath’ (Eph. 2:3): apart from the cross, there is no hope for any of us. Some confusion arises from the fact that we commonly use the word ‘evil’ in two rather different ways. We may use it to refer to evil in the primal, moral sense [as] rebellion against God. Alternatively, we may use the word to refer to all suffering, pain, and adversity that is properly the consequence of evil in the first sense. This latter ‘evil’ is therefore part of the penalty of human rebellion. Is such penalty itself evil in the moral sense? From a biblical perspective, the answer must be ambivalent. Certainly such calamities are experienced by human beings as great evils. Death itself is the last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). War, worry, persecution, deprivation, famine, pillage, natural disasters-the Bible treats them as great afflictions, great evils. Yet, at least some of these things are not acts of rebellion; they are not evil in the primal sense. Moreover, from God’s perspective these things, insofar as they exact penalty and restore justice, must be assessed as good. We may go farther: In the peculiar way in which God’s sovereignty operates..., even morally evil things may not only have a good result but may be good in God’s intent even if evil in human intent. Apart from the cross itself, one of the clearest examples is the treatment in Joseph [Gen. 50:20].

At the most basic level, suffering is to moral evil what cause is to effect; yet suffering itself is so tied to the fallen order that it too is rightly thought of as evil, and experienced as such.”

Such a conclusion, therefore, challenges understanding natural disasters as distinct, or separate, from human moral evil. Michael S. Heiser leans toward such a distinction here:

“Natural disasters are therefore not aberrations. They are not an extension of humanity’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden story (though that made things worse). Chaos was

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present and accounted for (and held in place) in [Genesis 1:2](#). Natural disasters happen because there is nature. God didn't create a computer program incapable of system glitches so he could just watch it run. How boring would that be? He created a world—and a universe for that matter—with unpredictability built in. (Spoiler: This is why, in the book of Revelation, when all things are set right, the writer says, “and I saw a new heaven and earth . . . there was no more sea”; [Rev. 21:1](#).)”

“There are two causes of suffering in the world: natural disasters and human evil. The former is part of creation;...At the last day, there will be no more sea. The creation — which was formerly deemed “very good” ([Gen 1:31](#)) — will be made perfect. We'll go from “very good” nature, with unpredictability built in, to something better — an Edenic creation in total (not just that pocket of perfection called Eden, localized and distinct from the rest of creation). This means one cause of suffering — the one which is not inherently evil — will be gone.”

Instead, we understand, humanly speaking, events like the tragic earthquake of Haiti to be evil. We also see the suffering and death as a result of the earthquake's devastation as evil. The violent earthquake and the pain, suffering and death that accompany it, while evil, are consequences of the divine curse we are under due to our Fall; our rebellion against God's Word. This rebellion, which characterizes our human disposition, is the moral or primal evil that caused such pain, suffering, death and 'secondary' evil (Carson, 1990, pp. 43. 45-49).

While Heiser's conclusions may not provide a satisfying reasoning behind the postlapsarian curse indicated in [Genesis 3:17-19](#), which seems to describe enmity with creation (the ground) resulting from the Fall, he provides valuable insights with his ANE cultural background. Heiser, however, should help us avoid the error of Job's three friends. While there is a relationship of some sorts between natural disasters and the evil of human suffering as a result, we do not want to become calculating in assigning personal human sinfulness as their cause for someone suffering whether by natural disaster or any other means.

Sickness and suffering are addressed in the Wisdom literature of the Bible (i.e., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, etc.). We must avoid putting ourselves in the place of God by answering the question of 'why' certain people suffer certain things. This was the error of Job's friends who wrongly insisted Job suffered as a direct result of sin he committed. Jesus cautions the disciples against this form of "retribution" theology by stating that a blind man's condition was so God's works would be revealed through him (John 9). Suffering reveals the condemnation we are under which the Lord uses to stimulate the faith of those who trust Him and His promises. Biblical Wisdom shifts us from the 'why' questions of suffering to the comfort and assurance of knowing 'Who' is in control. God uses suffering for His good purposes. While there is mystery here, God's use of suffering for good is most clearly revealed in the Cross of Christ Who suffered for our salvation.

As a side, free-will agents (earthly and heavenly) do not operate in a neutral capacity within this post-Fall cosmos. We are either servants of God or of Satan. Human and celestial beings are never morally neutral. We either seek to glorify God or rebel against Him; either way, His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Heiser has highlighted in his work that celestial,

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heavenly beings are not static but can rebel, even in the present. Therefore, when he concludes that the satan in the Book of Job is “not evil [but] just doing his job”, I think it is a reasonable conclusion that this ‘satan’, at some level, desires to discredit God, or prove that God’s assessment of Job is incorrect. Here is Heiser’s comment below:

“Basically, ‘the satan’ in Job is an officer of the divine council (sort of like a prosecutor). His job is to ‘run to and fro throughout the earth’ to see who is and who is not obeying Yahweh. When he finds someone who isn’t and is therefore under Yahweh’s wrath, he ‘accuses’ that person. This is what we see in Job — and it actually has a distinct New Testament flavor. (We also see it in Zechariah 3). But the point here is that this satan is not evil; he’s doing his job.”

While this is a fair and objective statement about the role of the ‘satan’ here, it still begs the question of whether or not this being is accusing God, Job or both. If we consider later depictions in the Book of Job of Leviathan and connect the portrayal of this mythical creature of chaos to the satan, as some have (Fyall, Ash), there seems to be the potential for this member of God’s divine council to reject and rebel against the verdict of the Most High.

Additional reference to Carson (1990) on pages 47-49 will illustrate more precisely the implications of our current understanding.

“Yet Christians undergoing pain and suffering will be well served by contemplating the Bible’s story line and meditating on the price of sin. We live in an age where everyone is concerned about their ‘rights.’ But there is a profound sense in which our ‘rights’ before God have been sacrificed by our sin. If in fact we believe that our sin properly deserves the wrath of God, then when we experience the sufferings of this world, all of them the consequences of human rebellion, we will be less quick to blame God and a lot quicker to recognize that we have no fundamental right to expect a life of unbroken ease and comfort. From the biblical perspective, it is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed.

Most emphatically, this does not mean that every bit of suffering is the immediate consequence of a particular sin. That is a hideous piece of heresy, capable of inflicting untold mental anguish. It would mean that the people who suffer the most in this world must be those who have sinned the most in this world; and that is demonstrably untrue, both in the Bible and in experience.

Indeed, one of the functions of biblical teaching about rewards in heaven and degrees of punishment in hell [ref. Matthew 11:20-24 as an example]...is that it explains in part why there is no equitable distribution of punishments *here* [ref. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43].

Meanwhile, the consequences of human sin infest many of our experiences with some measure of pain. Such afflictions may be splashed onto the canvas of human history with a very broad brush. Thus God says to Jerusalem, ‘I am against you. I will draw my sword from its scabbard and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked’ (Ezek. 21:3). In one sense, of course, no one is righteous (Rom. 3:10ff.); but that is not what the

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prophet means here. He means that when devastation descends on Jerusalem, the people who will suffer will include both those whose immediate sins have brought the city to this horrible punishment, and those who have not participated in the sins that have brought about the destruction of the nation.

War, plague, congenital birth defects, and many other afflictions are like that: they are not very discriminating. Therefore if we see them only as retaliation or retribution for specific sins, we shall be terribly confused when people who have not indulged in such sins suffer along with those who have. But if instead we see such suffering as, in the first place, the effluent of the fall, the result of a fallen world, the consequence of evil that is really evil and in which we ourselves all too frequently indulge, then however much we may grieve when we suffer, we will not be taken by surprise. ...the biblical writers are surprised, not by punishment, but by the Lord's patience and forbearance. Jonah's flight from his assignment to preach in Nineveh is prompted by his confidence that God is more forgiving than the prophet could ever be. Jonah wanted the barbaric city of Nineveh destroyed (Jon. 4:2).

All the blessings that we enjoy are signs of God's patience and forbearance. Small wonder Paul can ask the rhetorical question, 'Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?' (Rom. 2:4).

I suspect that the reason why it is so hard for many of us to live out these implications of our theology is that we do not deeply feel the truths we formally espouse. My creed may tell me I am a miserable sinner; that I deserve hell, that all that I enjoy in life is a gracious gift from God, that I am in no position to expect to escape suffering. But when it comes right down to it, I simply feel my own suffering is unfair.

That truly means that I have not really taken aboard the Bible's picture of my own guilt. It was the display of who God is that finally helped to settle Job's mind; it was the vision of God in the temple that prompted Isaiah to cry out, 'Woe to me!...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty' (Isa. 6:5).

If we grasp a little better where we fit into the Bible's story line, how God looks at our sin, what our rebellion rightly deserves, then although not all our questions about evil and suffering are answered, we are likely to face the wounding times with less resentment and indignation, and with more gratitude and trust, than would otherwise be the case."

In attempting to train our minds in how to biblically understand wars and disasters such as that experienced in Haiti years ago, Carson comments on Luke 13:1-5 (1990, pp. 66-67),

"First, Jesus does not assume that those who suffered under Pilate, or those who were killed in the collapse of the tower, did not deserve their fate. Indeed, the fact that he can tell his contemporaries that unless *they* repent they too will perish shows that Jesus assumes that all death is in one way or another the result of sin, and therefore deserved.

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Second, Jesus does insist that death by such means is no evidence whatsoever that those who suffer in this way are any more wicked than those who escape such a fate. The assumption seems to be that all deserve to die. If some die under a barbarous governor; and others in a tragic accident, it is no more than they deserve. But that does not mean that others deserve any less. Rather, the implication is that it is only God's mercy that has kept them alive. There is certainly no moral superiority on their part.

Third, Jesus treats wars and natural disasters not as agenda items in a discussion of the mysterious ways of God, but as incentives to repentance. It is as if he is saying that God uses disaster as a megaphone to call attention to our guilt and destination, to the imminence of his righteous judgment if he sees no repentance. This is an argument developed at great length in Amos 4. Disaster is a call to repentance. Jesus might have added (as he does elsewhere) that peace and tranquility, which we do not deserve, show us God's goodness and forbearance. It is a mark of our lostness that we invert these two. We think we deserve the times of blessing and prosperity, and that the times of war and disaster are not only unfair but come perilously close to calling into question God's goodness or his power—even, perhaps, his very existence.”

How contrary is this understanding from those professing Christians that promote the prosperity “gospel” of health and wealth in this life. Nothing could be further from the biblical evidence.

In exploring the mystery of God's providence, Carson summarizes,

“A sovereign and omniscient God who knows that, if he permits such and such an evil to occur it will surely occur, and then goes ahead and grants permission, is surely decreeing the evil. But the language of permission is retained because it is part of the biblical pattern insisting that God stands behind good and evil asymmetrically...

That God's permission of evil does not in any way allow evil to escape the outermost bounds of God's sovereignty is presupposed when we are told, for instance, that the Lord persuades the false prophet what to say (Ezek. 14:9), or that his wrath incites David to sin by taking a census (2 Sam. 24:1). When the Chronicler describes the same incident and ascribes the effective temptation to Satan (1 Chron. 21:1), this is not a contradiction of the passage in 2 Samuel..., but in complementary explanation. One can say that God sends the strong delusion, or one can say that Satan is the great deceiver: it depends on whether the sovereign transcendence of God is in view, or his use of secondary agents” (p. 224).

In essence, God's permission of evil, the root of which lies within the rebelliousness of responsible free-agents, is the means by which God providentially delivers us from His righteous wrath. This is a divine dichotomy; a providential paradox; a mystery that resides within the nature of God ultimately revealed in the death of His only-begotten Son on the Cross.

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“How do the poles in the tension between God the transcendent and God the person function in the prayers of the characters of Scripture? In other words, compatibilism must be applied in our prayers in the same way it is applied in the prayers of Scripture.

In his prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus...prays *in line with* God’s sovereign plan. The logic is: ‘The sovereignly determined time for the glorification of the Son [upon the Cross] is here, so glorify your Son.’ This is not anomalous. To pray in Jesus’ name is to pray...in accord with all that Jesus’ name represents; it is to pray in accord with Jesus’ will. When the persecuted church cries, ‘Even so, come, Lord Jesus!’ it is not talking Jesus into something he does not plan to do. When the church prays after the first whiff of persecution (Acts 4:23ff.), the believers address God as ‘Sovereign Lord,’... they see their persecution as of a piece with the opposition and suffering their Master endured-suffering which was predicted by Scripture and brought about through evil men by the hand of a sovereign God working out his plan of redemption. [How different is this expectation of Christian living than what is understood today in the Western world; an expectation of suffering instead of ease and comfort? Our suffering and its intensity can, in many cases, be attributed to our false expectations as Christians; thinking we are entitled to health and wealth instead of the punishment we truly deserve.]

One of the most remarkable prayers in Scripture is the intercession of Moses after the idolatry of the golden calf (Exodus 32: 9-13). ...Moses appeals to the faithfulness of God, the immutability of his own declared purposes... In other words, God is never less than personal, and never less than sovereign. Both the poles of the biblical presentation of God are appealed to by Moses-never to reduce the one by the other, but only in mutual reinforcement.

Above all, it is the cross of Jesus Christ where all the elements of these mysteries coalesce. The cross was nothing less than God’s sovereign plan,... Yet, Jesus went to the cross voluntarily: he *chose* to obey the Father.

If God is the God of the Bible, then for him there are no surprises, no insuperable problems. Far from breeding fatalism, in the Scriptures that truth breeds confidence and faith. It teaches us to trust. It teaches us to read and reread Hebrews 11. The degree of our peace of mind is tied to our prayer life. And we learn, with time, that if God in this or that instance does not choose to take away the suffering, or utterly remove the evil, *he does send grace and power*. The result is praise; and that, of course, is itself enjoyable, in exactly the same way that lovers enjoy giving compliments. [ref. Phil. 4:6-7; 2 Cor. 12:7-10]

What is clear is that it is in extremity that many Christians drink most deeply of the grace of God, revel in his presence, and glory in whatever it is-suffering included-that has brought them this heightened awareness of the majesty of God” (Carson, 1990, pp. 232-244).

Pastor Marc Wilson
Romans 8:28