

THINKING ABOUT GOD'S WILL

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Asking whether something that happened was God's will, depends on what the question means. There are two possibilities:

- (a) what God causes/what he makes happen (prescriptive will) and
- (b) what he allows to happen (permissive will).

What he causes starts with him; he initiates it.

What he allows starts outside of him; something/someone else initiates it.

There is also a difference between supernatural intervention and natural cause. In the first case, God directly does what occurs; in the second case, he allows built-in laws to carry things forward; he is working "indirectly."

There is a difference between God's supernatural involvement and Satan's supernatural involvement.

The comments below deal with these three distinctions.

God's Will and Bad Things That Happen

Since God knows all things (all-knowing/omniscient) and can do all things—all things consistent with his nature and purpose (all-powerful/ omnipotent), nothing happens that he does not know about, and nothing happens that he cannot prevent. So, everything that does happen—good or bad—is his will, but it is not always his will in the same sense. This is part of the more basic question, "*Why is there any evil at all in a holy, omnipotent, omniscient God's universe?*"

Job 1-2 illustrates the difference between the two meanings of the question about God's will.

(1) God did not bring the evils on Job; he allowed Satan to bring them on him.
 (2) God put limits on the evils Satan could bring on Job. Compare 1 Corinthians 10:35: "*He will not let you be tempted more than you can handle.*"

(3) The evils were not caused or allowed because of some sin Job had committed. That is what his three friends were trying to make him believe and admit. But Jesus told his disciples that Pilate's killing some Galileans during their sacrificing did not show that they were sinful (moral evil). The same applied to the ones the tower of Siloam fell on (natural evil). Jesus also told his disciples that the man born blind was not blind because of some sin he or his parents had committed (John 9:1-3).

The idea that calamities happen because of some sin is an idea there is no way to verify and no way to disprove. Since "*We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23), we could always suppose that a misfortune was because of a sin; we all have many sins. The fact that we cannot disprove the idea does not make it true, but

Jesus' comments show that the idea is false. We can agree that there is natural evil, because there was moral evil; in the beginning, God built limitations and fixed negative consequences for sin to restrain sin and force us to recognize our dependent position. But the general rule is that natural calamities (evil) do not come from our moral evil.

We can make a couple additional observations beyond what Job teaches.

(4) Doing bad things has bad consequences; that is why we call them bad. But the bad things are natural consequences of that bad behavior, not something unrelated like having a storm destroy our crops because we told a lie.

(5) God may enter the picture in a supernatural way, not just to limit evil but to punish the evil doer. But his intervention will be clearly a supernatural intervention, or it could not have its desired effect—punishment for sin. Supernatural intervention can happen even invisibly to limit evil so it would not be worse than what his purposes would tolerate.

More basic than whether some bad experience is God's will, is why God allows evil at all. There are two general reasons for allowing it:

- (a) good can come from evil;
- (b) lesser degrees of evil do not frustrate God's purposes.

Those points may be elaborated as follows:

(1) Bad experiences provide opportunities to develop virtues and degrees of virtues that would otherwise not be needed or possible (patience, forgiveness).

(2) Evil reminds us of our dependent position (our insecurity); we are not in control, which means we are impelled to reach out to him who is in control.

(3) Doing evil results from God's creating beings with free will. If we were allowed only to carry out choices among good possibilities, we would not be good by choice, but by necessity. God would be keeping us from doing anything wrong by intervening between bad choices and their fulfillment.

(4) It avoids the charge that God plays favorites with his own. What would people suppose if those who love and serve him never got cancer or had rain ruin their hay? They might try to serve God for selfish reasons. That is one answer to the question, "*Why do good people suffer?*" So, evil helps keep our motives pure for serving God—that our motives are not selfish ones. Satan tried to use that ploy when he told God, "*Does Job serve you for nothing?*" He claimed that if God took away Job's favored condition, Job would turn away from him; he would do as Job's wife suggested, "*Curse God and die.*" We serve God anyhow, regardless of "*persecution, nakedness, peril, or the sword*" (Romans 8:35).

(5) We can see in the bad results of other people's bad behavior that those behaviors are, in fact, bad—at least in the long term. That becomes especially clear when their evil takes aim at us.

(6) God allows evil because he is more glorified by our commitment to him, his will, and his purposes despite serving him to our own disadvantage (temporary).

Along with trying to read God's will in given experiences, is the distinction between supernatural intervention (direct operation) and natural cause (indirect operation). Some pagan cultures suppose direct operation in all actions. The stone rolls down the hill because god (a god) made it roll down the hill (occasionalism) or because the stone decided to roll down the hill (animism). In the last case, all things that act are thought of as being like us—as having a will to act, as being “personal” in that way.

NOTE: We distinguish between things (impersonal) and persons (personal). Among things, we include chemical processes (inorganic) and most organic (plants and animal) forms. Animals and humans are considered distinct even though some “higher animals” exhibit rudimentary choice and degrees of thought, transcendence, and creativity. Some animals seem to live in some ways above a sheer stimulus-response existence. Some people seem to exhibit a mere stimulus-response existence; they simply respond to the strongest physical, social, or psychological stimulus!

Finally, do we interpret an evil experience as being from God as punishment or from Satan as persecution? That relates to the more fundamental question of whether it needs to be interpreted as caused supernaturally either by God or Satan. Unless there is a reason to think otherwise, we should probably suppose it is caused naturally by built-in natural law or unprevented natural choice to sin against us. Supposing God's indirect operation makes it easier to deal with the problem of evil, especially with extreme evil.

God's Will and Divine Guidance

One further thought about reading God's will. Sometimes it is not a matter of figuring out why something bad has happened. We suggest that we not read occurrences as signs unless there is some reason to do so; we do not consider it a sign if we cannot tell the difference. If we can read what happens in more than one way, we do not take it as a sign about either way. God is not going to hold us responsible for something that is not clear; if he wants to make a point of something we have missed, he will see that things happen more clearly later. Besides, we do not have to know that he is guiding us; we just need to make sensible choices from what happens. And we need not God wants us to do one specific thing; many good things fit within his intentions.

In addition, we do well not to read providence for each other; it is better to let people interpret providence for themselves. If we cannot tell the difference between natural and supernatural cause, we should not suppose that God is trying to tell us something. What is happening is part of the way God set up the world to run. We must decide for ourselves whether resistance to our good intentions means we should try harder (to conquer the opposition) or back off and let what happens guide our next choices.