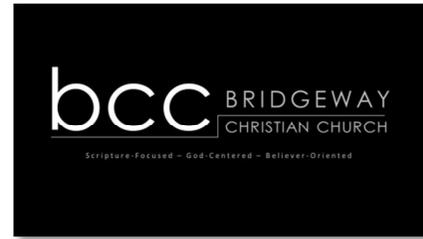


Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Questions & Answers

Is God's Sovereignty Responsible For Evil?

(Extracted From *The Scandal Of Sovereignty*; Ronald H. Gann [Aventine Press, 2012])

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Virtually all Christians give at least verbal assent to the doctrine of God's sovereignty. There are simply too many biblical passages which teach this truth to say nothing about the hundreds of scriptural references where the title "O Sovereign Lord" is ascribed to God. The Lord is utterly self-ruling and in control of all things (Prov. 16:4 cf. Rom. 8:28). Everything that exists in the universe exists because God sovereignly ordained it, decreed it, and called it into existence according to His good pleasure. The psalmist declared, "Our God is in heaven, he does whatever pleases him" (Psa. 115:3), and "The Lord does whatever pleases him in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Psa. 135:6). The Psalter summarizes God's exhaustive power as follows:

For he spoke, and [all creation] came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations (Psa. 33:9-11).

As is evident in the first chapter in Genesis, the God to whom we are introduced is showcased as a patently sovereign God. He speaks, and so it becomes. He decrees, "Let there be light," and there is light (Gen. 1:3). His Word does not fail to have its intended effect (cf. Isa. 55:11). He commands according to His will, and all creation leaps to do His bidding. His infinite power invades time and space in order that the finite world, His chosen people in particular, might revel in who He is.

Far more than simply a King who exercises His supremacy, God's controlling power is boundless, immeasurable, and inestimable. Nothing exists outside the ordination of God's will, including sheer happenstance (Prov. 16:33), human plans or mishaps (Exod. 21:12; James 4:13-15), the birth of children (Gen. 4:25; Deut. 10:22; Ruth 4:13), health, prosperity, and calamity (Exod. 4:11; Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; Eccl. 7:13-17; Isa. 45:5-7; Lam. 3:37-38; Amos 3:6-7), and the workings of nature (Matt. 5:45; 6:26, 30; 10:29-30). That God is in complete control over history and the affairs of mankind is the collective voice of both the Old and New Testament:

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are

strength and power to exalt and give strength to all (1 Chron. 29:11-12 cf. Acts 17:26; Psa. 33:10; 47:1-4).

The various scriptures that support God's exhaustive sovereignty, particularly His foreordination of events, are legion. To the point, we learn that the Lamb was slain *before* the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8), the Elect were chosen *before* the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), and all of God's works were in fact known *before* the foundation of the world (Acts 15:17-18).¹ Another way of expressing this truth is to say that long before creation ever came to be, God's plan of redemption was already sovereignly accomplished in principle under His foreordained decree.

God not only orchestrates but fulfills all of redemptive history by way of predetermined ordination. "Long ago I ordained it," He declared through His prophet, "In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass" (2 Kings 19:25 cf. Isa. 37:26). He declared elsewhere, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand" (Isa. 14:24). In Isaiah 46:11 we read, "What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned that will I do." And Jeremiah added, "The Lord has done what he planned; ... which he decreed long ago ... Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it" (Lam. 2:17; 3:37). From the earliest pages of the Bible to its final doxology in Revelation, the truth is everywhere proclaimed that *what* God accomplishes He also *foreordained*; that *whatsoever* comes to pass in the world He "planned it long ago" (Isa. 22:11).

But acceptance of this particular element to God's exhaustive sovereignty is not widely shared among free-will Christians. Notwithstanding the clear testimony of Scripture, the Reformed assertion that God foreordains everything that comes to pass, to include the evil rebellion of the wicked and the eternal destinies of the godly, is often met with contempt. The Arminian usually concludes: *If the Calvinist doctrine of God's sovereignty is correct then God is the ultimate cause behind Adam's sin. What is more, If God is the direct cause of all things, which He has supposedly foreordained, then He is not only responsible for Adam's sin but also for the sins of Adam's posterity.* To the Arminian way of thinking, the Calvinistic view of foreordination makes God out to be the architect of evil by virtue of the fact that it insists that God ordains *all things*.

The objections raised by these Christians concerning exhaustive sovereignty are honest and reasonable. How can Reformed Theology insist that God ordains everything that comes to pass, including the *existence* of sin, yet still agree with The Westminster Confession of Faith that clearly affirms, "neither is God the author of sin ... nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away"? Also, why wouldn't a holy and sovereign God eradicate sin and evil if it is in His power to do so? These questions, ostensibly, are conundrums. But like the facet of an exquisite diamond, every angle of this profound puzzle adds new dimension and insight into the nature of God.

First, any effort to debunk exhaustive sovereignty on the grounds that God is made liable for sin is simply a red herring. Such a charge fails to take into consideration word meanings. The Calvinist does not teach that God *causes* all things to happen but instead argues that God *ordains* all things as they are and will be. The nuances behind these two words—*cause* and *ordain*—are different in definition and essential for fully grasping exhaustive sovereignty. Secondly, while many skeptics question why a holy God would permit evil to exist in the first place, the biblical evidence seems to suggest

that the very existence of evil is a concession that God allows by ordination for the purpose of His glory.

Regarding the accusation that Calvinism makes God the author of sin, the framers of the Westminster Confession rejected this charge outright. They clearly expressed the idea that the majority of what happens in the world, particularly with people, comes through *secondary causes*. While God is always the primary causation by virtue of his ordination of all things, the secondary causes are the natural actions of men—both sinful and honorable—which are willfully committed under His decree. It is at the feet of these secondary causes (i.e. the natural acts of men) where responsibility for sin is laid. The primary cause (God) only grants that they should occur (with a view to a greater good).

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), arguably the most revered philosophical theologian in American history, stated: “If by ‘the author of sin,’ be meant the sinner, the agent, or the actor of sin, or the doer of a wicked thing ... it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin.”² John Calvin (1509-1564) put it this way: “For the proper and genuine cause of sin is not God’s hidden counsel but the evident will of man,” although the fall of Adam was “not without God’s knowledge and ordination.”³

So what did Edwards and Calvin mean? Similar to temptation, God does not *cause* the sin of sinners. Rather, “by [a sinner’s] *own evil desire*, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (James 1:14-15, emphasis added). Sin, in other words, originates in the evil desires of men and is made manifest in the deeds of the flesh (cf. Gal. 5:19-21). The very fact that God *foreordains* the existence of sin and temptation, and even uses them to His own benefit, is not to be misconstrued as God *causing* them to happen (cf. Prov. 6:16-19; Psa. 5:4-6; Zec. 8:17; James 1:13). There is a line of demarcation between the two verbs that must be acknowledged. The act of ordaining in certain biblical contexts means “to put in place” or “to point in advance” whereas the act of causation means “to produce an effect.” While God appoints sin by sovereign ordination, He neither produces it nor induces it.

For example, the Bible teaches that God *ordained* the existence of Lucifer—“for so I ordained you,” (Ezek. 28:14, NIV)—but at no time did God *cause* His greatest cherub to sin. Instead the context of Ezekiel 28 clearly indicates that by “ordain” God simply *installed*—or “put in place”—Lucifer as His guardian cherub in the same way that God *ordained* the Aaronic priests in the Levitical order. (Thus, the NASB renders Lucifer’s appointment in Ezekiel 28:14 as “And I placed you there”). Furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that Lucifer conjured up from within his own heart the ambition to sin (vv. 15b, 18 cf. Isa. 14:12-15). His cosmic treason originated, or was caused, within himself.

God is not a provocateur of evil. He has established a world, says Edwards, where He permits iniquity but does not induce it by “positive agency.” Stated more clearly, God made evil *possible*, but it is men who make evil *actual*. God ordained the *fact* of evil, but it is men who willfully perform the *acts* of evil.

This truth begs more questions: Why would a holy and sovereign God permit evil and ungodliness to exist in His creation at all? Why would God plant in Eden a tree of knowledge adorned with forbidden fruit to begin with? One possible answer is that God allowed Lucifer’s sin to come to pass, as well as the proliferation of human iniquity in

the Garden, if for no other reason than the existence of unrighteousness reflects God's righteousness by way of contrast. Mankind cannot sing of God's holiness, moral rectitude, and perfection if they do not first understand what ungodliness, immorality, and imperfection look like. By decreeing sin and evil to exist, God shows Himself to be holy and righteous in contrast. His grace, love, perfection, mercy, and justice are magnified in juxtaposition.

Arminians struggle a great deal with Romans 11:32. In that passage Paul reveals that "God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." If we understand Paul's words correctly, the inspired apostle seems to be placing the blame for man's disobedience on the shoulders of God's sovereign will. But isn't such a notion sacrilegious? Why would a holy God who hates the sin of disobedience bind *all men* to it? Paul does not leave us without an answer. Behind every act that God ordains—whether righteous or apparently unseemly—there is a greater good that He has in mind; namely, that it might glorify Him in return (either at the present time or in eternity to come). On this point Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III does us a great service. He writes:

Paul is saying that our sovereign God forced even the entrance of sin into the world and the preterition of the lost to serve the interests of the display of his glory in the display of his mercy and grace. Paul is saying that original sin, and all the actual sin that flows from it, and God's just condemnation of the wicked have been made (in the inscrutable wisdom of God) to show, demonstrate, display, evidence, and magnify his grace to the objects of his mercy. In other words, God has used spectacular sins and relentless judgment to display the glory of his grace.⁴

It's no doubt difficult for Christians to fathom that a holy God, who is allergic to sin, in point of fact "forced ... the entrance of sin into the world." Yet it's nevertheless the brutal truth of Scripture, as Paul clearly implies in Romans 11:32 and Dr. Duncan accurately elucidates. Thus, in one sense God wills that which He hates to come to pass (to contrast His glory), as well as that which He loves (to showcase His glory). By foreordaining Lucifer's existence and appointing him as guardian cherub, including removing him from office on account of his willful sin, God is ultimately glorified as sovereign, holy, and just. Moreover, by decreeing the very existence of sin and evil, to include the disobedience of our federal parents in Eden, the glory of God is more clearly seen in contrast.

Lastly, according to Edwards, God is "the permitter ... of sin [not the committer]; and at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, *for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes*, that sin, if it be permitted ... will most certainly and infallibly follow" (emphasis added). To paraphrase Edwards, God routinely ordains that which He hates to accomplish that which He loves.

Nowhere is this paradoxical reality more clearly seen than in the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion (Matt. 27:33-44; Mark 15:22-32; Luke 23:33-43; John 19:17-30), the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers (Gen. 37:19-22 cf. 50:20), and the rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire (Isa. 7:1-10:5). In each of these stories we witness a holy God who reverses the sinful acts of men and Satan, which the Lord Himself ordained, "for [His]

wise, holy and most excellent ends.” This is an unsettling truth that confounded many prophets, particularly Habakkuk (cf. Hab. ch. 1).

There is no question that in His exhaustive sovereignty God foreordained the atonement of Christ for the *propitiation* of human sin (i.e. the satisfaction of God’s wrath). Moreover, evangelical scholarship stands with Scripture when it states that God ordained the sordid events which led Joseph to Egypt as well as the demise of Israel at the hands of Assyria. But the larger questions in view here are: Did God cause the Romans and Jews to murder Jesus? Did God provoke Joseph’s brothers to throw him into a pit and to leave him there to die? And did God punish Assyria for the very wrongdoing that He allegedly purposed them to do?

Without question, at the root of each of these events were unspeakable atrocities committed by evil men. If God preordained that these events should come to pass then it stands to reason that, contrary to Edwards, Calvin, and The Westminster Confession of Faith, God is indeed a purveyor of iniquity and the author of sin. But a closer look at each of these accounts reveals, rather than conceals, how God’s exhaustive sovereignty works in harmony with man’s self-will. It is to each of these paradoxical examples that we now turn.

In eternity past God foreordained that Jesus would die an atoning death as part of His predetermined plan in the drama of redemption. To the Jews, Peter made this point clear: “This man was handed over to you by *God’s set purpose and foreknowledge*; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23, emphasis added). Peter testified later: “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate ... [conspired] against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen*” (Acts 4:27-28, emphasis added).

In these passages Peter reveals that the execution of the Savior was due not only to the wicked intentions of men but also to the sovereign will of God, each of which worked in cooperation to bring about God’s ultimate “set purpose.” In their determination to punish Jesus for what they perceived as blasphemy and treason, the Messiah was sentenced to death by the Jews and eventually executed by the Romans (Mark 3:6; Luke 13:31). Yet the prophet Isaiah confirms that the true Puppeteer pulling the strings was God, for “it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” in order “to make his life a guilt offering” (Isa. 53:10).

The Lord’s executioners conducted themselves in a manner that was in keeping with their own sinful depravity and at no time were they tempted, induced, prompted, baited, or hypnotized by God to sin against their wills (cf. James 1:13). They acted from their own voluntary choice. Sinners stand guilty as charged for doing only that which they are naturally enslaved to do (cf. Rom. 6:20). We can therefore agree with the apostle Peter that the Jews and Romans, like all mankind, stand culpable for the homicide of the Holy of Holies. Indeed, each and every one of us, as Paul put it differently in another context, “are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20; 9:19-20).

Mysteriously, God ordains the means as well as the ends without violating human freedom or promoting evil. This is an inexplicable tension in Scripture that fallen men are incapable of fully understanding. While never authorizing sin, God uses the sinful acts committed freely by wicked men to accomplish His ordained purposes, to include

turning the greatest sin in history into the greatest victory ever to premiere in the theater of redemption.

Thus, in the atonement of Christ we witness the fusion of independent wills working in tandem to fulfill God's eternal decree. God's motivation to send "his Son as an atoning sacrifice" was the primary cause (1 John. 4:10 cf. John 3:16; Isa. 53:10) and man's impulse to "put him to death by nailing him to the cross" served as the secondary cause (Acts 2:23b cf. Matt. 27:22-23). In one sweeping statement in Acts 2:23 Peter presents the total sovereignty of God alongside the complete responsibility of man.

This same startling truth is evident in the Genesis account of Joseph and his rise to prominence. As a seventeen year-old, Joseph's brothers were jealous of him (Gen. 37:11), hated him (vv. 4-5, 8) and then sold him into slavery to Midianite merchants on route to Egypt (v. 28). And if that wasn't egregious enough, Joseph was then wrongfully imprisoned for two years, having been falsely accused of attempted rape (ch. 39). Yet a little over a decade later, when a severe famine reunited him with his brothers in Egypt, a reinstated Joseph could say to them with theological sincerity, "God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5, ESV), and "you meant evil against me, *but God meant it for good*" (50:20, emphasis added).

Here we once again see the evil deeds perpetrated by sinful men stage-managed by God's providential control. God used the sinful behavior of Joseph's brothers—who were rightly held accountable for their betrayal of their brother—to accomplish His foreordained purposes. God oversaw the actions of Joseph's brothers in accord with His overarching plan to save Israel from starvation, but at no time did He induce the brothers to attempt premeditated murder. They acted freely and in accord with their own sinful natures.

God ruled against the immoral motivations of Joseph's brothers and turned the unfortunate events of Joseph's life—the very events which God Himself had predetermined—into the very means by which He would fulfill His greater purpose—namely, "the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20b)! Had Joseph *not* been betrayed by his brothers, Israel would have never entered Egypt and escaped the fatal effects of the famine. Joseph's famous words "but God meant it for good" form the theological heart of divine providence in the Old Testament. A person's heart may be filled with evil intent, as was the case with Joseph's siblings, yet God will often use such evil to accomplish His good purposes. Thus, both Paul and Solomon could mysteriously conclude, "[W]e know that *in all things* God works *for the good* of those who love him ... *according to his purpose*" (Rom. 8:28 cf. Prov. 16:4; emphasis added).

This same principle is found in 1 Chronicles 5:25-26 and Isaiah 10:5-12 where God used Assyria as an instrument of judgment against the rebellious house of Israel. Ultimately it was God who had commissioned the barbarian Assyrians to rise up in opposition to Israel. God gave Assyria marching orders to "to seize loot and snatch plunder," and, in general, to do what the Assyrian army naturally did best—to pillage and to trample their enemies underfoot (Isa. 10:6). Even the king of Assyria recognized God's providence in his conquests and admitted "The Lord himself told me to march against this country and destroy it" (2 Kings 8:25; Isa. 36:10). The drama unfolds in 1 Chronicles 5:25-26:

But [the Israelites] were unfaithful to the God of their fathers and prostituted themselves to the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them. *So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria* (that is, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria), who took the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh into exile (emphasis added).

God sovereignly used to His advantage the intrinsic wickedness of the Assyrians. He didn't cause them to be more evil than they actually were nor did He force them to behave in a manner that was not already in keeping with their sinful depravity. He merely used for His sovereign purposes their existing sinfulness to mete out His retribution against an apostate Israel.

Later, however, God held Assyria accountable. While the Lord had ordained their rise in military might and sanctioned their victory over the Northern Kingdom of Israel, He did not approve of Assyria's arrogance. By the time the pagan nation had encroached upon the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Assyria had forgotten the exhaustive sovereignty of God that had been surreptitiously at work behind the scenes. They became proud conquerors rather than humble servants. Therefore, owing to their failure to give credit to God for their amassed victories, God brought into account the Assyrian Empire for defeating His people; an act which He originally ordained them to do. In the words of Ezekiel, "because [Assyria] was proud ... I cast it aside" (Ezek. 31:10-11). Isaiah said elsewhere:

"Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me ...

When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the *willful* pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes" (Isa. 10:5-6a, 12, emphasis added).

In addition to her pride, God judged Assyria on the basis of her *intentions*, as Scripture teaches, *not* her God-ordained actions. "But this is not what [Tiglath Pileser III, the King of Assyria] intends, this is not what he has in mind;" said the Lord in Isaiah 10:7, "his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations." In other words, since Assyria came against Israel with a haughty attitude, malice aforethought, and an insatiable lust to lay waste to the nations—all the while refusing to recognize God's providence in her victories—Assyria too was judged. God held the Gentile army responsible for its sin—which Isaiah depicts as willful rather than divinely induced (Isa. 10:13)—regardless of the fact that God used it for His divine purposes. What Assyria did obediently God had sovereignly predetermined, and what she did sinfully God sovereignly judged.

As limited human beings, when attempting to reconcile the relationship between the willful actions of sinful men and the sovereign actions of a sinless God, we must admit to a lack of full disclosure in Scripture. We plead ignorance with Solomon who

said: “A person’s steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand their own way?” (Prov. 20:24). But our human limitations remind us that, rather than take an existential approach to doctrine, we dare not go beyond the written page of Scripture and into the valley of presupposition simply to make God more pliable to our personal theology.

That the Romans and Jews stood guilty before God for willfully crucifying Christ (but whose actions were in accord with His predetermined plan) is a biblical fact. That Joseph’s brothers were guilty of wickedly betraying him (yet behaved in a manner in keeping with God’s will to preserve His people in Egypt) is irrefutable. And that King Tiglath-Pileser was guilty of arrogantly raging against the nations (but whose actions were in accord with God’s decree to judge those pagan societies through him) is ironclad. In all three instances, we see sinful men perpetrate heinous crimes of their own free-will and for which they bore responsibility and were rightly judged, while at the same time who acted in a way that fulfilled God’s sovereign will. These truths go beyond the scope of our comprehension. Nevertheless, as Christians, we must prostrate ourselves before Scripture and submit to Proverbs 19:21 as the final verdict: “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Prov. 19:21).⁵

God is most glorified when He overturns sin for His holy and righteous purposes. It was God’s *permissive will* (i.e. He permits things that are otherwise contrary to His liking, etc.) which tolerated the willful sin of Joseph’s brothers. However, His *decretive will* (i.e. His eternal, foreordained decrees, which will not change and cannot be thwarted, etc.), was to overturn their transgression and use it as the very means by which to preserve His elect people from famine. Similarly, it was God’s *permissive will* which allowed for the Roman government and the Jewish religious establishment to willfully crucify Christ. While certainly the most horrific atrocity ever committed by men, God allowed the murder of His Son because it was ultimately His *decretive will* to ransom the Elect from the penalty of sin through blood atonement. It was God’s *permissive will* that ordained the defeat of the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians, while at the same time it was his *decretive will* to judge Assyria for her superfluous barbarism and arrogance. And lastly, it was God’s *permissive will* that allowed Adam and Eve to willfully sin in the Garden of Eden and tolerated the rebellion of Lucifer in heaven. But behind God’s *permissive will* in both catastrophes was His *decretive will* to put on display the glory of His majesty by restoring His creation from evil and redeeming His creatures from sin.

Calvinism’s case for exhaustive sovereignty is biblical. It exonerates God, rather than indicts Him, of any wrongdoing. Although human sin is allowed by God (His permissive will), it is not His desire that we sin. God is keenly aware that sinners will always live up to their reputations by living down to their base natures. Thus, there is no need for God to persuade, trick, coerce, force, manipulate, induce, or cause a sinner to do what comes naturally to him. Sin begins and ends in the heart of fallen man. Accordingly, the guilt of transgression is rightly credited to the perpetrator of the sin—the secondary cause—not to the One who ordained that it should come to pass (with a view to a greater good). For this reason, Reformed Theology can stand with the Westminster Confession and say in good conscience that God is neither “the author of sin ... nor is the liberty ... of second causes taken away.”

Furthermore, exhaustive sovereignty is in no way antithetical to the imperialistic definition contained in the Greek word *dunastes*. It simply goes beyond the Arminian view by taking into account the compendium of Scripture on the subject. It reveals to us a God who sovereignly determines the destiny of cast lots, ordains the very steps of men, manipulates the hearts of kings, presets the boundaries of nations, and decrees the number of days a person will live (cf. Prov. 16:33; 19:21; 20:24; 21:1; Job 14:5). In short, “My purpose will stand,” says the Lord, “and I will do all that I please” (Isa. 46:10). More than just a governing King, the Lord foreordained all that is, including those who would make up His Church. And He did so “before the creation of the world” (Eph. 1:4).

In summary, God’s sovereignty is unquestionably comprehensive. His confluent involvement in all that occurs does not violate the natural order, ongoing causal processes, or the free, responsible agency of human beings. God’s sovereign control does not take away the responsibility and power of secondary causes; on the contrary, they are created willfully by man and have their roles by appointment. God does not cause the sinful acts of His creatures inasmuch as He *ordains* that their sin should exist in order that He is glorified when He accomplishes His holy legislation through it and redeems sinners from it. And lastly, God inexplicably upends the evil actions committed by wicked men—actions that He Himself ordained or “put in place”—for the express purpose of accomplishing good and showcasing His grace, mercy, power, and glory.

The doctrine of exhaustive sovereignty, notwithstanding its perplexities, teaches Christians that they are never in the grip of blind fortune, chance, luck, or fate. All that happens to them is divinely planned, and each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey, and rejoice, knowing that “The Lord works out everything to its proper end” (Prov. 16:4a) and “in all things God works for the good ... according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). This truth is captured most superbly by Isaac Watts (1674-1748) in his poetical hymn *Let the Whole Race of Creatures Lie*:

*Ten thousand ages ere the skies, Were into motion brought,
All the long years and worlds to come, Stood present to His thought;
There's not a sparrow or a worm, But's found in His decrees,
He raises monarchs to their throne, and sinks them as He pleases*

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ The Byzantine manuscripts of Acts 15:18 read, “Known unto God are all his works from the age [i.e., from the beginning]”; but, the critical text of Nestle/Aland (27th edition), following codex *Sinaiticus* and others, reads simply, “the Lord who makes these things known from the age [i.e. the beginning]”. However, in either variant, the point remains that the plan of redemption was designed long before its actual accomplishment in history; it was not a series of responses to mere happenstance created by human rebellion, but unfolded in time according to a previously existing master plan. This is the same point that is made in Isaiah 45:21, from which Acts 15:18 is taken (for additional study, see: www.reformationtheology.com/2009/07/the_sovereignty_of_god_and_the.php).

² Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will, Vol. 1 of The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Paul Ramsey; (Yale University Press; 2009)

³ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (James Clarke and Co., 1961), pp. 121-22

⁴ J. Ligon Duncan III, *Sound Doctrine; Proclaiming A Cross-Centered Theology*; (Crossway; 2009); p. 53

⁵ When asked how he reconciled the tension between God’s sovereignty and man’s self-will, Charles Surgeon concluded, “You do not have to reconcile friends.”