

ARTICLE: God supplies the capability of action, but we bear the culpability for the action

Isn't the world evil! I often hear people say the end is nigh because the world has become so wicked and evil. Fair enough, but you only have to look at the history of the world to see that believers of all ages have thought the same thing. The inhabitants of this world have been evil ever since sin entered, way back in the Garden of Eden.

Such thinking may lead to the following thoughts: "If God gives a person the ability to think, act, and function, does God then bear some responsibility for the evil people do? Or perhaps is God totally responsible for the evil we do because we are mere pawns in His hand?" The Bible answers both questions with a *no*. The psalmist said of God, "*The LORD is upright; He is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in Him*" (Psalm 92:15). God is not responsible for the evil people do.

First, regarding the evil people perpetrate in this world, we see that, on occasion, God prevents it. When Abimelech took Sarah into his harem, it threatened God's promise that an ancestor of the Saviour would be born through Abraham and Sarah. Thus, God prevented Abimelech from having relations with Sarah (Gen. 20:6). God stopped the evil from happening. On occasion, God may *permit* evil to happen, but He will govern it so that it works out for good. God permitted Joseph to be sold into slavery. This took Joseph from slavery to prison to second-in-command in all of Egypt. What God permitted worked out for good, not only for Joseph but also for Jacob and his family, as well as for God's plan to save the entire world through the coming Messiah.

We need to note that God's permission of people's evil deeds is not a weakness in God, as though He could not prevent it. The same Lord who protected Israel from the Egyptians at the Red Sea is able to stop evil from happening. God's permission of evil is not apathy on His part, as though God does not care about evil. God is serious in His opposition to sin. Paul wrote, "*God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you*" (2 Thess. 1:6). When God permits sin, it is not an indulgent attitude on God's part, as when Eli did nothing to prevent his sons from sinning. The Lord clearly forbids sin and, just as clearly, spells out the penalty for disobedience (Rom. 6:23). God's permission of evil is not an abrogation of His will, as though His Ten Commandments were turned into ten suggestions. God's commandments are absolutes. They are applicable to all people of all ages.

We are responsible for the evil we do. God may give us the ability to act, but we are responsible for what we do with that ability.

In the first place, we are not mere pawns in the hands of God. God's governance of the world does not force people to act as they do. This was the view of philosophies such as Stoicism, Fatalism, and Determinism. All three of these views portray humans as helpless pawns who can only carry out what has been decreed for them. Jesus, however, warned Judas that his actions would bring about terrible consequences. From the perspective of human responsibility, Judas was accountable for his betrayal of Jesus (Matt. 26:23-24).

Second, God tells us that we are personally accountable for our actions. Before the fall into sin, Adam and Eve had the ability to obey God or to disobey Him. However, when they fell into sin, they lost the image of God. No longer can humans, by nature, obey God. In the state in which we come into this world, all we can do is disobey God. In spiritual matters (such as coming to faith, desiring to do God's will, and carrying out God's commandments), people by nature have no free will. We are spiritually blind when we enter this world. We don't think we need a Saviour, and we think we can save ourselves (1 Cor. 2:14). We are spiritually dead, unable to do anything to save ourselves (Eph. 2:1). We are enemies of God, actively hostile to God's will (Rom. 8:7). All we can do, according to our natural spiritual powers, is to sin. It is only after God converts us that we can, to a degree, cooperate with God in our sanctified lives. Even here, we cooperate with God in carrying out His will only because God has

enabled us to do so. Paul writes, “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*” (Eph. 2:10). For this reason, God gets the credit for the good that we do. “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

As we use our reason in earthly affairs, we do have free will. We can choose actions that benefit others in society. I can choose to help my neighbour, to be a good citizen, to drive within the speed limit, to stop at stop signs, to refrain from robbing a bank, and to say no to the abuse of drugs or alcohol. Such actions benefit society. We call this *civic righteousness*. However, apart from faith in Christ, these actions are still sin in the sight of a holy God. As I use my reason and will in earthly affairs, I am responsible for the decisions I make. If I decide to rob a bank, God may have supplied me with the capability to act, but I bear the culpability (blame, moral responsibility) for the action I chose.

God cannot be blamed for the evil that people do. He does not force anyone to do evil. God holds us personally accountable for the sins we commit (Ps 5:4-6). He cannot be charged with evil, for he is, in his essence, completely free of any wrongdoing and is unalterably opposed to evil (Ps 92:15). God may concur in the *material* portion of an act, in that he gives the ability to perform it. However, the *formal* (moral) responsibility for the act lies with the one who does it. Scripture teaches us: God supplies the capability of action, but we bear the blame for evil actions.