

PSALM 139: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE LOVE OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 139 raises some important questions: does God lovingly plan all events (including evil, sin, & suffering)? Does God lovingly and unconditionally elect and predestine? Are the wills of human beings free to choose good or evil independent of all influences?

This paper supports the sermon. I will first review the biblical evidence and then, secondly, reflect on it. But the core of my faith is that God is Love in everything.

DOES GOD PLAN ALL EVENTS LOVINGLY (INCLUDING EVIL, SIN, & SUFFERING)?

Genesis 50:20 “As for you, **you meant evil** against me; but **God meant it for good**, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” *Here the action of Joseph’s brothers in selling him into slavery is called “evil” but God is involved in the same event to bring about good. God is Love in his planning of all events.*

Exodus 7:3 “**But I will harden Pharaoh's heart (= will)**, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt.” *God says that he will harden Pharaoh’s heart.*

Now, in biblical thinking, the heart is not the place of emotions but the place of the will (the emotions are located in Jewish thinking in the kidneys!). So whenever the Bible talks about the "heart" it is actually talking about the "will." *Here God says that He will make Pharaoh's will rebellious against God's command to free Israel from slavery in Egypt.*

Exodus 14:25 “**He made** the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The **LORD is fighting for them** against Egypt.”” *God further acts to frustrate the Egyptians in this text.*

Deuteronomy 2:30 “But Sihon king of Heshbon refused to let us pass through. For the **LORD your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart (= will) obstinate** in order to give him into your hands, as he has now done.” *God acts on Sihon's will so that he sins (cf. Psalm 95:8).*

Deuteronomy 32:8 “When the Most High divided the nations, when he separated the sons of Adam; **he set the bounds of the nations** according to the number of the sons of God.” *Here God allots the pagan nations with angelic beings so that they may worship them (cf. Deuteronomy 4:19; Daniel 10).*

Judges 9:23 “**God sent an evil spirit** between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech.” *God it seems uses an evil spirit in this text.*

1 Samuel 16:14 “Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, **and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.**” *As in Judges, God uses an evil spirit.*

Samuel 18:10 “The next day **an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul.** He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did.” *The evil spirit sent by God enslaves Saul.*

1 Samuel 24:1 “Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and **he incited** David against them, saying, “Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.”” *The context of the chapter makes clear that the census is sin and God punishes David for this sin, but God is still in control and plans David’s act of sin.*

Kings 22:19 Micaiah continued, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing round him on his right and on his left. 20 And the LORD said, ‘Who will **entice** Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?’ “One suggested this, and another that. 21 Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ 22 “‘By what means?’ the LORD asked. “‘I will go out and be **a lying spirit** in the mouths of all his prophets,’ he said. “‘You will succeed in **enticing him,**’ said the LORD. **‘Go and do it.’”** *Here God decides to use an evil/lying spirit to lure Ahab to his destruction in a war.*

2 Chronicles 10:15 “So the king did not listen to the people, **for this turn of events was from God,** to fulfil the word that the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat

through Elijah the Shilonite.” *King Rehoboam’s refusal to listen to the people’s reasonable request to lessen taxes is attributed to God’s will to destroy most of Rehoboam’s kingdom and give it to Jeroboam.*

2 Chronicles 22:7 “Through Ahaziah's visit to Joram, **God brought about Ahaziah's downfall.** When Ahaziah arrived, he went out with Joram to meet Jehu son of Nimshi, whom the LORD had anointed **to destroy the house of Ahab.**” *Jehu slaughters the entire ruling class of Ahaziah’s kingdom (an act called sinful in Hosea 1:4 for which God punishes Jehu’s family) but this act is planned by God.*

2 Chronicles 25:20 “Amaziah, however, would not listen, for **God so worked that he might hand them over to Jehoash,** because they sought the gods of Edom.” *God uses Jehoash to destroy Amaziah.*

Psalm 115:3 “Our God is in heaven; **he does whatever pleases him.**” *God’s will is free and He can do whatever He wants to do.*

Psalm 139:16 “your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in your book they were **all written, the days that were ordained** *for me*, when as yet there was not one of them.” *All the days ordained for David in eternity by God and must include David’s adultery with Bathsheba, his murder of Nathan, and his sinful census (see above).*

Isaiah 14:24-27 “The LORD Almighty has sworn, “Surely, **as I have planned**, so it will be, and **as I have purposed**, so it will stand. I will crush the Assyrian in my land; on my mountains, I will trample him down. His yoke will be taken from my people, and his burden removed from their shoulders.” This is **the plan determined for the whole world**; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. **For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?**” *Again, here is the absolute free will of God.*

Isaiah 40:22-23 “He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. **He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.**” *God brings about the downfall of governments.*

Isaiah 41:25 “**I have stirred up** one from the north, and he comes--one from the rising sun who calls on my name. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a **potter treading the clay.**” *Isaiah says human beings are like “clay” and God the “potter” implying that God does whatever he wants to with human “clay.”*

Isaiah 45:7 “I form the light and create darkness, **I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.**” *God is ultimately in control of disaster.*

Isaiah 53:10 “Yet it was the **LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer**, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his

days, and **the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.**" *God wills the crushing of His Servant and his prosperity (the servant in the NT is Christ)*

Isaiah 63:17 "**Why, O LORD, do you make us** wander from your ways and **harden our hearts (= wills)** so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance." *Isaiah is puzzled as to why God "hardens" (makes obstinate) the human wills of Israel.*

Ezekiel 38:21 "**I will summon a sword** against Gog on all my mountains, declares the Sovereign LORD. Every man's sword will be against his brother." *God plans war.*

Hosea 5:6 "When they go with their flocks and herds to seek the LORD, they will not find him; **he has withdrawn himself from them.**" *God hides himself.*

Amos 3:6 "When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, **has not the LORD caused it?**" *God plans disaster.*

Job 1:11-12 "But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." The LORD said to Satan, "**Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands,** but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD." *God decides to place Job in Satan's hands, but Satan is in God's control.*

Job 1:21 "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the **LORD has taken away**; may the name of the LORD be praised." *Job attributes the loss of his possessions and the deaths of his family to God.*

Job 2:6 The LORD said to Satan, "**Very well, then, he is in your hands**; but you must spare his life." *God decides to place Job in Satan's hands, but Satan is in God's control.*

Proverbs 16:33 "The lot is cast into the lap, but its **every decision is from the LORD.**" *The roll of the dice is decided by God.*

Proverbs 19:21 "Many are the plans in a man's heart (=will), **but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.**" *God's will over-rules human will.*

Proverbs 21:1 "**The king's heart (= will) is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he please.**" *God directs the human will.*

Matthew 10:29 "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the **will** of your Father. 30 And even the very hairs of your head are **all numbered.**" *Jesus thinks that God controls every hair on the human head. The argument goes from the lesser-to-greater. If God controls even human hair, does He not control all things?*

John 3:8 “The wind blows wherever **it pleases**. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” *In Greek, the word for “spirit” and “wind” is the same. So to be born again is the total work of God according to Jesus.*

Acts 4:27-28 “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what **your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.**” *The sin of humans in putting Christ is death is the plan of God.*

Romans 5:19 “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were **declared sinners**, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be declared righteous.” *God declares humans to be sinners because of Adam.*

Romans 8:28 “And we know that in **all things God works** for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” *All things implicitly includes sin and suffering.*

DOES GOD LOVINGLY AND UNCONDITIONALLY ELECT AND PREDESTINE?

Luke 10:21-22 “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because **you have hidden** these things from the wise

and learned, and **revealed them** to little children. Yes, Father, for this was **your good pleasure**. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son **chooses** to reveal him." *"Jesus believes that God chooses those who believe in Him and hides Himself from those who are not chosen.*

John 6:39 "And this is the **will** of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that **he has given me**, but raise them up at the last day." *Jesus believes that God's will must mean the salvation of believers.*

John 6:44 "No-one can come to me **unless the Father** who sent me **draws** him, and I will raise him up at the last day." *Jesus says that humans can only believe if God wills it.*

John 10:28 "**I give** them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand John My Father, who has **given** them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." *Jesus thinks that salvation is the absolute gift of God.*

John 9:39 "Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that **the blind will see and those who see will become blind.**" *Jesus' work leads to salvation and rejection.*

John 12:38 “This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" 39 For this reason **they could not believe, because,** as Isaiah says elsewhere: 40 "**He has blinded** their eyes and **deadened their hearts (= wills), so** they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn--and I would heal them."” *Jesus’ work is rejected by some because that it the will of God. Jesus affirms the Old Testament.*

John 17:2 “For you granted him authority over all people that he might **give** eternal life to all those **you have given** him.” *Jesus gives salvation.*

John 17:12 “While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you **gave** me. None has been lost except **the one doomed to destruction** so that Scripture would be fulfilled.” *Jesus believes that Judas is predestined for the destruction of hell.*

Acts 18:9 “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you, because **I have** many people in this city." *Jesus encourages Paul in evangelism by saying that there are believers chosen by him before Paul has brought them the message.*

Romans 8:29-30 “For those **God foreknew he also predestined** to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those **he predestined,** he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also

glorified.” *God foreknows. This foreknowledge is not merely intellectual understanding of facts both relational and elective (cf. Gen 4:1 “Adam knew Eve”; Gen 18:19; Amos 3:2 "You only have I chosen [or “known”] of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.”*

Romans 9:10-13 “Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that **God's purpose in election** might stand: not by works but by **him who calls**--she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "**Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.**" *God chooses Jacob for salvation but chooses to not to pass over Esau in eternity quite apart from any act of Jacob or Esau in history.*

Romans 9:18 “Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and **he hardens whom he wants to harden.**” *God’s will is free to choose and reject and is absolute.*

Romans 9:21-23 “Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, **choosing to show his wrath** and make his power known, bore with great patience **the objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction**? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—?” *God decided that some people would be prepared for destruction.*

Romans 11:5-11 “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling-block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent for ever." *Here Paul ties election and grace together, and adds that those not chosen had their will made obstinate.*

Ephesians 1:4, 11 “For **he chose us in him** before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. **In love 5 he predestined us** to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with **his pleasure and will--** ... 11 In him we were also **chosen**, having been **predestined** according to **the plan** of him who works out everything in conformity with **the purpose of his will.**” *God elects unconditionally.*

2 Thessalonians 2:11 “For this reason **God sends them a powerful delusion** so that they will believe the lie **and so that all will be condemned** who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.” *God sends a delusion so that some may be condemned.*

Revelation 20:15 “If anyone's name was not found **written in the book of life**, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” John takes up the concept of God’s book in Psalm 139.

Revelation 21:27 “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose **names are written in the Lamb's book of life.**” *John takes up the concept of God's book in Psalm 139.*

ARE THE WILLS OF HUMAN BEINGS ABSOLUTELY “FREE”?

Isaiah 45:9 "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does **the clay** say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?" *human beings are like clay in God's hands.*

Jeremiah 17:9 “**The heart (= will) is deceitful** above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” *The human will is bad.*

Jeremiah 18:5 “Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6 "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "**Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.**” *Israel is like clay in God's hands.*

Mark 4:11-12 “He [Jesus] told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables **so that**, "they may be ever seeing but **never perceiving**, and ever hearing but **never understanding**; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" *One reason why Jesus tells parables is to make His*

words unclear for unbelievers, otherwise they might be saved (presumably something Jesus does not want.)

Luke 11:13 “If you then, though you are **evil**”. *A throw away comment from Jesus which reveals what he thinks about Israel.*

John 8:34 “Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a **slave** to sin.” *Jesus says that those who claim to be free are in reality slaves.*

John 8:44 “**You belong to your father, the devil**, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” *Jesus says that those who profess to believe in Him are really the children of the Devil.*

John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” *Jesus maintains that the apostles cannot do good “free” of Jesus.*

John 15:16 “You did **not choose** me, but **I chose** you and **appointed** you.” *Jesus says he chooses primarily the apostles, they did not choose Him initially.*

Galatians 4:8 “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God--or rather are **known by God**-- how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” *Paul believes, like Jesus, that believers choose God because God chose believers first.*

Romans 7:18-19 “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have **the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do;** no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.” *Paul thinks that his will is not free because he cannot do good.*

Ephesians 2:1-3 2As for you, you were **dead** in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when **you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air**, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by **nature objects of wrath.**” *Humans are spiritually dead and the dead do not choose.*

Ephesians 2:8 “For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the **gift** of God-.” *Faith (human belief in Christ) is God’s gift.*

REFLECTIONS ON THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Some of the above texts may be disputable, but the overwhelming quantity and cumulative weight in its totality is undeniable and conclusive. The themes are seen in the Old and New Testaments. The prophets and apostles agree. Importantly, *Jesus supports the view*. These themes are central and important because they focus on the character of God, the person and work of Christ, and salvation. How should we respond to the Biblical view? In six ways:

1. *Modern* notions of "free will" (i.e. the view that "the human will has the ability to make decisions of right or wrong absolutely freely without any influences on it") actually go against human responsibility (despite what some may believe). While there have been ancient discussions about choice, today many believe that we are free to do whatever we want do and nobody should stop us. So, we say, as in Frank Sinatra's song, "I did it my way." Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber who killed hundreds of people, did not explain his actions except to say that he was free.

However, God says that this type of "freedom" where humans decide and are in charge is sinful. Humans are told in the bible we are slaves to sin and our hearts are corrupt. Now, in biblical thinking, the heart is not the place of emotions but the place of the will (the emotions are located in Jewish thinking in the kidneys!). So whenever the Bible talks about the "heart" it is actually talking about the "will." Thus, Jeremiah 17:9 says "the heart (= will) is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" We have not so much a free will but a bad will, see also Ps 51 and Romans 5:12-21.

Modern notions of "free will" insist that we can choose independently of God and all influences to do good or wrong. However, Jesus says we are slaves to sin (John 8:34).

That means our wills are in bondage to sin. As a drug addict cannot stop taking drugs, so we (outside Christ) are addicted to sin, we cannot stop doing it. Sin, as one theologian has defined it, is "cosmic treason" - a rebellion against the Master and Lord of the universe and is an attempt to be the masters of our own destinies.

Human responsibility means that we are not robots but act as persons according to our human nature (i.e. if we are in Christ we act according to our new nature, if outside Christ we act according to the sinful nature - see Ephesians 2:1-3) without anybody forcing us to do it (e.g. by putting a gun to our heads). Thus, God cannot do evil because His nature is totally good and holy. Yet the fact that God cannot do evil does not mean He is "not free"; quite the opposite, He is totally free to act according to His nature in all things. Christians in the heavenly new creation will not sin because our natures will become utterly good, but this does not mean we will be "not free," rather we will be free to serve God fully according to renewed nature.

Certainly the Bible commands us that we ought to do good and shun sin and evil. But, does "ought" imply "can"? That is, since the Bible tells us that we "ought" to trust and believe in God at all times does the Bible command imply that we "can" (without God's grace) believe? Jesus says that the unbelieving world cannot believe in the work of the Holy Spirit in John 14:17: "The world *cannot* accept him [the Holy Spirit], because it neither sees him nor knows him." In Jesus' great analogy of Him as the vine and the believers being the branches he says in John 15:5 "apart from me you *can do nothing*" which implies that while ought to live godly lives we cannot do so with Jesus. This

means that we cannot do good without Jesus i.e. we are not “free” of Jesus, we depend on him, and therefore our wills are not “free” of Jesus. Paul agrees with Jesus when says in Romans 7:18: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I *cannot* carry it out.” Thus, the Bible tells us what we ought to do and holds us responsible for our failures and sins but also asserts that we human beings without God’s power and grace are unable and cannot carry out his commands.

We may find the teaching of God's sovereignty and election depressing and we may think that it implies that we should give up and do nothing or even that it implies that sin in our lives does not matter, but the Bible writers find the sovereignty and predestination of God a comfort, a joy, a spur to holy living, prayer, and evangelism (see Psalm 139:18; Acts 18:18-19; Romans 6:1-2). Notice what Paul says in Romans 6:1-2: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” For Paul, God’s absolute grace (Rom 5:12-21) does not mean we can continue live in sin. Rather, precisely because God has rescued us from sin, we now must and can by grace and the Spirit alone be slaves to righteousness (the rest of chapter 6).

So, the God of the Bible is a personal God who relates in personal way with human beings. His plan is shaped by His supreme and loving concern for his own glory (the ultimate good and love in the universe).

2. *Modern* notions of "free will" go against God's love and grace. I believe God is total love and this extends to the planning of all events (good and evil.) God is love. God

is lovingly free. God is good and not to be blamed of evil, even if he is the ultimate planner. How this can be is a very great mystery which we accept and gives us comfort. But spiritual truths are spiritually discerned. Perhaps an illustration may help illuminate. The play "Macbeth" was written by Shakespeare. In "Macbeth", the character Macbeth is an evil murderer, but Shakespeare cannot be blamed for murder, even though he wrote the whole play. In a comparable way, God writes everything in His book (Ps 139:16), but nevertheless we, the actors in God's play, are responsible for sin.

While we "choose" God when we come to faith, Jesus asserts that in terms of ultimate reality that He chose us first, that is, in eternity (John 15:16). God chooses in eternity but in time he uses prayer and evangelism as the instruments of His will. Faith too is not a human "choice" independent of God's will but human come to faith because they are born again of the Holy Spirit. If we choose God independently (in the modern sense of "free will") of his unconditional election and predestination then (in terms of pure theological logic) we are committed to rejecting the idea that faith is God's gift, that we need to be born again, and the work by his Spirit. It implies (in terms of logic) that then we make a contribution to our own salvation and it is not by *grace alone* (see Ephesians 1-2). One aspect of the manifold love of God is election; for to love is to choose.

3. I believe in the comfort and love of God in all things. I also believe very strongly in one sort of "free will" - the absolute and unconditional loving free will of God. While God inspires all good and love in a very direct way, and all good is solely to his credit, he "stands behind" evil in a different and way to his plan for good. God plans events that are evil in an indirect way since, while he is the ultimate planner, others (the

Devil and demons and sinful humans) are the ones to be blamed as the immediate causes of evil.

Further, God is the creator. As creator He has “rights” over everything He has made, just we have rights over a painting we have painted or a pot we have made (cf. Isa 28:16; 45:9; Jeremiah 18; Romans 9:19-21). As Revelation 4:11 says: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” As the Creator with full rights, we cannot demand why He has chosen us or rejected us. He is free.

4. I use the term "human responsibility" not "free will" because of the problems in the modern concept of “free will.” I also affirm God's loving planning in all events. One example is 2 Sam 24:1 which says: "Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and **he incited** David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah." the census is sin for which God punishes David but nevertheless God plans this act of David which is a sin (see also 1 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 10:15; 22:7; 25:20;).

Another example is the cross. The Romans and some Jewish leaders planned the death of Jesus. Their intention was sinful and wicked. But God planned the death of Jesus as the wonderful place of His love, our salvation and His glory. So Acts 4:27-29 says, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what **your power and will had decided beforehand** should happen." Note here that what Herod and Pontius Pilate do is very wrong, but the act is planned by God in eternity. What human beings intend for evil, God intends for the good, the salvation of all believers (Gen 50:20).

5. The Devil has a big hand in evil but he is under God's control (Job 1-2). Indeed, he was created by God but he and his evil angels rebelled against God (Isaiah 14; Ezekiel 28; Rev 12:7-9; Genesis 6:1-4). Jesus says in John 8 that he disagrees that the Jews are free because in fact they are slaves to sin and the Devil (verses 31-47). Slaves = not free. See also Mark 5 the demon-possessed man is not free; his will is chained by the evil one. Jesus (the Truth) sets free us from sin to be a slave to righteousness (he is the boss) see Romans 6. Note also in Colossians 1:16 Paul says: "For by him [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." The language of powers and rulers is Paul's language for evil supernatural powers (see Ephesians 3:10). So it says that sin and suffering is planned by the Devil and demons does not really mean that evil is outside God's ultimate will because God created all things and all persons, natural and supernatural, and God foreknew that the Devil would rebel.

6. God's sovereign loving plan has great pastoral benefits. When we pray for unbelievers to be converted and saved we are praying that God so influences them that he gives them the gift of salvation so that the Holy Spirit gives them the gift of faith and they believe. If we believe in modern notions of "free will" then, in terms of pure logic, one should stop praying for unbelievers because to pray for their conversion is to infringe their free will. Of course, we must pray for unbelievers to be converted because that is the instrument God chooses to exercise his purpose in election.

When we suffer, it is a wonderful comfort to know that God is in loving charge and control, that God can bring the most wonderful love and good out of evil and

suffering. An example will illustrate. On Good Friday, when Jesus died, the apostles gave up hope. They thought that sin and evil had won (Luke 24:20-21). But, when on Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead; the apostles realized that the death of Christ was not the triumph of evil, but, rather, was the triumph of the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18). In a comparable way, when we suffer we may not know why yet but when Jesus returns we will truly understand that all things work for the loving good of believers and to God's glory (Romans 8:28).

7. The great virtue in the world is love. The greatest aspects of love are choice and mercy. God chooses some sinners for salvation through faith in Christ to the glory of His choosing/electing love. Therefore, God's election is about God's grace and love, for to love is to choose. God in love chooses Christians those who had been rebels and sinners to have grace (unmerited mercy on the undeserving) so that Christians may love Him. What could be more loving?

Further, God's plan permits sin, so that his merciful love may triumph over sin. No sin, no mercy, no grace, no cross, no Christ, no love. Imagine it this way: Where is the greatest place of love? For Christians: the cross of Christ. If there was no sin, would Christ have come into the world? No, there would be no need. Would Christ have died if no one sinned? No, there would be no need. In this type of world we would miss out on mercy, grace, salvation to sinners (since there would be no sinners), and Christ (since he would not need to come down from heaven). Therefore we would miss out on God's real and true and best love - Jesus Christ! But God is Love.

CONCLUSION

The debate on “free will” is a world view clash. The modern world insists that the human will is free and love is defined a tolerant and accepting attitude to the behaviour of all. The Bible insists on the absolute free will of God, the bondage of the human will, and where love is defined (at least in part) as God’s choosing grace given to the elect and as gracious unmerited merciful love given as a total gift to corrupt and evil sinners who then believe in Christ the only saviour of the world. **God is Love absolutely and in everything.**

You may find the following website useful since it has a very good discussion of these questions: http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/786_does_god_emauthorem_sin/. The following books will be helpful: D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*; *How Long O Lord?*; J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*; W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapters 16, 19, 32-33; J. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*; P. Helm, *The Providence of God*. Please do come back to me if you have any further points.