

Despair Amidst Suffering and Pain: A Practical Outworking of Open Theism's Diminished View of God

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Responding to Suffering in Open Theism

When human tragedy, injustice, suffering, or pain occurs, open theists stand ready with their words of comfort and pastoral counsel: God is as grieved as you are about the difficulties and heartache you are experiencing, and he, too, wishes that things had worked out differently. Because God does not (and cannot) know, much less control, much of what the future holds, and because many things occur that are contrary to his good and loving desires, we must not blame God for the evil things that happen in our lives. Instead, we can be assured of his love for us and know that he feels the pain we feel. Also, he stands with us to provide strength to rebuild our lives out of whatever unpredictable and unforeseen tragic events that may have occurred. God is love; never doubt this. Suffering often is pointless; learn to accept this. And be consoled with the realization that God cares deeply about our pain even as he watches tragic actions and events unfold, helpless and unable to prevent the suffering he so deeply bemoans and regrets.

Two accounts from openness advocates will be sufficient to illustrate the basic lines of response offered in open theism to much of human suffering. First, Greg Boyd tells of being approached by an angry young woman after having preached a sermon on how God directs our paths.¹ In brief, this woman (whom

he calls “Suzanne”) was a committed single Christian with a zeal for missions. She prayed fervently for God to bring to her a missions-minded young man who shared her burden, in particular, for Taiwan. In college, she met such a man, spent rich times of prayer and fellowship together with him over three and a half years, and after a prolonged period of seeking God’s will—including a lengthy period of fasting and seeking much godly counsel—they married, fully confident that God had brought them together. Following college, and two years into their missionary training, Suzanne learned that her husband was involved in an adulterous relationship. He repented (or so it appeared), but several months later he returned to his involvement in this affair, began treating Suzanne very badly, and eventually divorced her to move in with his lover. Within weeks of the divorce, Suzanne learned she was pregnant, leaving her, now at the end of this horrible ordeal, emotionally and spiritually empty. Boyd writes,

Understandably, Suzanne could not fathom how the Lord could respond to her lifelong prayers by setting her up with a man he *knew* would do this to her and her child. Some Christian friends had suggested that perhaps she hadn’t heard God correctly. But if it wasn’t God’s voice that she and everyone else had heard regarding this marriage, she concluded, then no one could ever be sure they heard God’s voice.²

Confronted with this agonizing situation, and seeking to help this hurting and angry woman deal with her pain, loss, and sense of divine betrayal, Boyd explains the pastoral counsel he offered to her:

Initially, I tried to help Suzanne understand that this was her ex-husband's fault, not God's, but her reply was more than adequate to invalidate my encouragement: If God *knew* exactly what her husband would do, then he bears all the responsibility for setting her up the way he did. I could not argue against her point, but I could offer an alternative way of understanding the situation.

I suggested to her that God felt as much regret over the confirmation he had given Suzanne as he did about his decision to make Saul king of Israel (1 Sam. 15:11, 35; see also Gen. 6:5-6). Not that it was a bad decision—at the time, her ex-husband was a good man with a godly character. The prospects that he and Suzanne would have a happy marriage and fruitful ministry were, at the time, very good. Indeed, I strongly suspect that he had influenced Suzanne and her ex-husband toward this college with their marriage in mind.

Because her ex-husband was a free agent, however, even the best decisions can have sad results. Over time, and through a series of choices, Suzanne's ex-husband had opened himself up to the enemy's influence and became involved in an immoral relationship. Initially, all was not lost, and God and others tried to restore him, but he chose to resist the prompting of the Spirit, and consequently his heart grew darker. Suzanne's ex-husband had become a very different person from the man God had confirmed to Suzanne to be a good candidate for marriage. This, I assured Suzanne, grieved God's heart at least as deeply as it grieved hers.

By framing the ordeal within the context of an open future, Suzanne was able to understand the tragedy of her life in a new way. She didn't have to abandon all confidence in

her ability to hear God and didn't have to accept that somehow God intended this ordeal "for her own good." Her faith in God's character and her love toward God were eventually restored and she was finally able to move on with her life. . . . This isn't a testimony to his [God's] exhaustive definite foreknowledge; it's a testimony to his unfathomable wisdom.³

A second pair of related stories comes from John Sanders. In the "Introduction" to *The God Who Risks*, Sanders begins his book telling the stories of two tragic deaths, first of his brother.⁴ As Sanders relates it, he was driving home one evening when he saw a terrible accident. A semitrailer blocked the road and a motorcycle lay on its side. A white sheet covered what he later learned was the body of his brother, Dick. After arriving home, Sanders says he went to his room and prayed, "God, why did you kill my brother?" Now, skip forward to about fifteen years later. Sanders tells of attending the funeral service of the young child of his close friends. When a few weeks had passed, he spoke with them about their grief. They asked him a question very similar to his own question some fifteen years earlier. "Why did God kill our baby girl?" they inquired. As Sanders recalls the incident, he tells us the counsel he gave these grieving parents as set within the context of his overall view of the openness of God. Sanders writes:

They were angry with God but did not feel safe enough to cry out in lamentation at church. They had always been told that God's ways are best and that questioning God is a sin. In answering their question, I sought to provide them with a different model of God—the one that is explained in this book. Many people, both churchgoers and non-churchgoers, feel anger and even

hatred toward God. But their anger is directed at a particular model of God.⁵

And for Sanders, the model of God he commended to these parents and now, through this book, commends to his readers is the “risk model of providence.” Sanders explains:

[I]f God is in some respects conditioned by his creatures, then God takes risks in bringing about this particular type of world. According to the risk model of providence, God has established certain boundaries within which creatures operate. But God sovereignly decides not to control each and every event, and some things go contrary to what God intends and may not turn out completely as God desires. Hence, God takes risks in creating this sort of world.⁶

For Sanders, such a view of God’s relation to the world does not mean that God exercises no providential control whatsoever. Rather, it simply means that God’s providential control is general and broad, not comprehensive and meticulous. That is, he providentially chooses to grant moral creatures freedom but he does not control the specific uses they make of that freedom. As this relates to tragedy and suffering in human life, Sanders explains:

The overarching structures of creation are purposed by God, but not every single detail that occurs within them. Within general providence it makes sense to say that God intends an overall purpose for the creation and that God does not specifically intend each and every action within the creation. Thus God does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil. The “greater good” of establishing the conditions of fellowship between God and creatures does not mean that gratuitous evil has a point. Rather, the possibility of gra-

tuitous evil has a point but its actuality does not. . . . When a two-month-old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil. The accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences.⁷

Here we have, then, a fair sampling of the openness response to human tragedy, suffering, and pain. Consider this listing of the most important facets of open theism’s approach.

1. God does not know in advance the future free actions of his moral creatures.
2. God cannot control the future free actions of his moral creatures.
3. Tragic events occur over which God has no control.
4. When such tragedies occur, God should not be blamed, because he was not able to prevent them from occurring, and he certainly did not will or cause them to occur.
5. When such tragic events occur, God feels the pain of those who endure its suffering.
6. God is love, and he may be trusted always to do his best to offer guidance that is intended to serve the well-being of others.
7. At times, God realizes that the guidance he gave may have inadvertently and unexpectedly led to unwanted hardship and suffering.
8. At times, God may repent of his own past actions, realizing that his own choices have not worked out well and may have led to unexpected hardship (e.g., 1 Sam 15:11).
9. Some suffering is gratuitous and pointless, i.e., some suffering has no positive or redeeming quality to it at all, so that even God is unable to bring some good from it.
10. Regardless of whether our suffering was gratuitous, or whether God may have contributed inadvertently to our suffering, God always stands ready to help rebuild our lives and offers us further grace,

strength, direction, and counsel.

Not all of the above points can be examined critically in this article. Clearly, one of the crucial commitments of openness proponents is their rejection of God's knowledge of the future free actions of moral creatures (point 1, above), which is tied closely to God's inability to control such future free actions (point 2), and the admission that tragic events occur over which God has no control (point 3). Since I have dealt elsewhere with the questions of God's comprehensive knowledge of the future and meticulous providence,⁸ I want here to assess the remaining openness claims, particularly as these might be summarized by these three notions: 1) While God feels the pain of our suffering, he often is unable to prevent it (points 4 and 5); 2) while God intends to give us perfect counsel, he sometimes realizes that his counsel proves in fact not to be best, and he even regrets some of his choices (points 6, 7, 8); and 3) while God always stands ready to offer grace to direct and rebuild our lives, some suffering must be understood as gratuitous and pointless (points 9, 10). Rather than taking these items one at a time, I propose to examine these three summary claims under the headings of biblical adequacy and practical Christian living. How do these three central tenets of open theism's response to suffering stand up when examined in these two arenas?

Biblical Adequacy of Open Theism's Response to Suffering *Romans 8:28-32*

Consider first a passage of Scripture that has brought great comfort and strength to Christians throughout the centuries.⁹ In Romans 8:28-32, Paul writes,

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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

The staggering promise of Rom 8:28, that *in all things God works for the good* of those who love him, has three aspects, each of which is crucial in assessing the openness proposal. First, *God works* in all things. For the believer, there simply are no accidents or tragedies in which God is, as it were, a passive bystander. He never helplessly watches while some tragedy occurs, wishing it were different. Rather, *God is at work* to bring about good. He is altogether *active* in all the events of our lives, never merely *passively*, and certainly not *helplessly*, watching. Second, God works *in all things*. This precludes the notion so prevalent in open theism that God may be involved in the good of life but not in its suffering and pain. Contrary to this view, Paul states that the scope of God's work is absolutely comprehensive. There is no event in which he is not actively working to bring about good for his own. Third, God works in all things *for the good* of those who love him. While the framework of this promise concerns God's disposition toward his own (and so does not include unbelievers), yet for all believers, this promise from God assures them that there is no pointless suffering. God works *everything* for their good.¹⁰ We

will have to look at Scripture's teaching elsewhere to see whether gratuitous evil is allowed for (or supported) more generally, or in relation to those who stand outside of God's love in Christ. However, this verse clearly teaches that there is *no pointless suffering or evil for believers*. To say that believers experience gratuitous evil is to deny the explicit promise of God in this wondrous text.

Think again of the weightiness of this promise in light of the three tenets of open theism's response to suffering. Openness proponents suggest that despite his love, God is not always able to prevent unwanted suffering, that he sometimes inadvertently contributes to our suffering, and that we must accept the reality of pointless suffering as part of human life. Contrary to each of these notions, Romans 8:28 states that in his love *God works in all things*, and as such he never stands unable to prevent what he does not want, and he never contributes to our harm. Further, in all these things, he ensures that *good is accomplished*, thus relieving us of the worry of pointless suffering. For believers, what assurance, what confidence, what peace, and what hope are here given! Yet, if we followed the proposals in open theism, the certain promise of this rich text would be obliterated. At the most, the God of open theism commits himself to doing his best in trying, within the significant limitations he faces, to work things out for the good of his own. No guarantees, however. After all, God does not know what choices might be made in the future that will frustrate his efforts to work things out for good. Remember God's guidance to Suzanne, as told by Boyd. God tried to work out her marriage to this college friend in a way that would be good for her, but in the end

God failed. And even in the work God *succeeded* in accomplishing (getting the two of them together in college), God actually contributed to Suzanne's pain and hardship, *not* her good. To suggest that God is just as sorry about her divorce and dashed hopes as she is renders the promise of Romans 8:28 empty and hollow. But since Romans 8:28 is true, it follows that the model of God and suffering proposed in open theism is simply implausible.

Consider also the promise of Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" Again, we are faced with a promise of almost unbelievable proportions. Paul uses a light/heavy line of argument to suggest that if God has done the *heavy* thing, i.e., *sent his own Son* whom he gave up for us all, how will he not also do the *light* thing, i.e. give to us *all things*, by his grace. That is, in keeping with promises such as Psalm 34:10 ("The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord *lack no good thing*") and Psalm 84:11 ("For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; *no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless*"), Paul revels in God's commitment to give *every good thing* to the elect. Now, it stands to reason that among the good things God gives to his own is the prevention of suffering that would not serve good purposes for them, and suffering that would be, in fact, altogether pointless and positively destructive. God, then, must stand in control of all that happens in believers' lives in order to ensure that only those circumstances and events that will advance the good he knows and plans for them will be accomplished. If God is in a position

in which he must watch tragedies occur to his people, unable to prevent them, and if he at times gives them direction which later proves to bring them harm, not good, and if he sees that some of the suffering and pain they must endure is actually and really pointless, then the promise of Romans 8:32 (and other related texts) is nullified. Again, it is clear that open theism's proposal stands in direct conflict with God's own stated promise to his people: he will surely bring to their lives all the good and only the good he plans for them.

Before leaving this passage, one more comment is needed. One must not think that the promises of Romans 8:28 and 32 indicate that God will exempt his people from suffering. In Romans 5:3 Paul has spoken about exulting in our tribulations, not because of those difficulties considered in and of themselves, but because of the good that God works into our lives *through* those tribulations (see 5:3-5). So, when Paul speaks of God working all things *for good*, or when he revels in God who will bring to his people *all (good) things*, one must see that this *includes* the tribulations of life that God designs for believers to endure *for the sake of the good* that those trials produce. So, the promise of God stands: whether through great trials and suffering, or through rapturous joys, God will bring *all good things* to his people and work *all things in life for their good*. The openness proposal simply cannot affirm these promises without invoking a thousand qualifications that empty and tarnish them beyond recognition.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

In the same breath, Paul speaks of sufferings he endures as from God (to produce good in him) and from Satan (to

torment him). How can it be both? And what can we learn from this episode in Paul's life? Consider the text of 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul's perspective on this suffering could not be further from the openness point of view. First, notice that Paul sees his suffering, while brought to him by Satan, as ultimately under the sovereign control of God. After all, the main purpose of this "thorn in the flesh" was an altogether positive and good one. Paul had been given wondrous revelations from God (see 2 Cor 12:1-6), and God wanted to keep Paul humble and dependent. So, Satan's torment was only a tool in God's hand to produce in Paul a good and constructive result. Paul's perspective is not that *Satan decided* to torment him and that God, in response to Satan's prior mischief, devised a way to use this for good. Rather, *God chose* to keep Paul humble, and *he decided* to use Satan and his ways to accomplish God's own ends. Far from being out of God's control, this suffering was ordained by God and it stood fully within his good purposes for Paul.

Second, Paul's three-fold prayer to the Lord indicates that Paul knew that it was *God* (not Satan) who had the power to *give*

or *relieve* this suffering. Paul did not have the attitude that because this is suffering, it cannot be from God. Nor did Paul wonder whether God was watching this suffering occur at the hands of one of his free moral creatures (i.e., Satan), helpless and unable to do anything about what was happening. Nor would it have been any comfort for Paul in prayer to know that God “felt his pain” while being absolutely unable to intervene to bring it to an end. Open theists may think this way, but the apostle did not. Rather, he knew that God stands behind this messenger from Satan, and God has the power to relieve it, if he so chooses.

Third, God’s answer to Paul, that God’s grace is sufficient, for his power is manifest in weakness, shows that God designed this suffering for the good that it would produce. This is not pointless suffering, but pointed, intentional, divinely-chosen, end-directed suffering, for the good purposes that would not be accomplished apart from it.

Fourth, notice how Paul generalizes in 2 Corinthians 12:10, joyfully accepting the whole range of weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties. Paul’s suffering of 12:7-9 is not an isolated case, and Paul understands that in *whatever* difficulties and hardships he faces, God is working in and through them to bring about his good purposes. Is there pointless and gratuitous suffering for Paul? Absolutely not. Rather, he sees the whole sweep of suffering in life as from God and given by his gracious hand to produce good.

Joseph’s story

One of the clearest illustrations in all of Scripture of how God *intentionally* ordains and uses the *intentional* evil

actions of people to bring about good is found in the story of Joseph’s providentially-guided slavery in Egypt and rise to prominence. Everything was ordained to bring about good both for Egypt and, through this, for the family of Jacob. As one reads the account of Joseph’s brothers’ jealousy, which led them to sell him into Egypt as a slave (Genesis 37), one would not naturally think that God was involved in these actions. After all, apart from the dreams that God gave Joseph, there is no clear indication that God is unfolding his purposes through the hatred and spirit of revenge growing in the hearts of Joseph’s brothers. From Genesis 37 alone, if one were asked, “who sent Joseph into Egypt?” the answer would clearly and uniformly be, “his jealous brothers, and they alone, did this wicked deed!”

Skip ahead several years. Joseph has been favored by God in every position he has been given. Even when falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and thrown into prison, God blesses Joseph. Because of dreams God gave Joseph in prison, Joseph was eventually called to Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, leading to his appointment as second in command in Egypt. So, during the years Joseph was in Egypt, the text of Scripture indicates that God is actively working to promote Joseph to this place where he will be in a position to bring good to his people. But, those same indicators seem absent earlier when we read of the brothers’ wicked scheming and plotting. Before, it would seem, God is passive and uninvolved. Only after Joseph is in Egypt does it appear that God is actively promoting Joseph.

How amazing, then, are the words we read in Gen 45:4-8. Here, Joseph finally

reveals his identity to his brothers, and in the process he interprets for us what *actually* happened in his being sold into Egypt. Genesis 45:4-8 reads:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one *you sold into Egypt!* And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with *yourselves for selling me here*, because it was to save lives that *God sent me ahead of you*. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But *God sent me ahead of you* to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, *it was not you who sent me here, but God*. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."

No reader would complain when, in verses 4 and 5a, Joseph says that his brothers sold him into Egypt. Everything in the preceding narrative would indicate this is exactly true! The surprise comes as Joseph continues. Beginning in 45:5b, Joseph now clarifies the ultimate cause behind his being sent to Egypt. Here he deliberately switches from saying that his brothers sent him to saying *God had sent him into Egypt*. Notice the language Joseph uses. He does not say, "You sent me here, and God responded by using this bad situation and turning it into good." No, he shifts the ultimate causal force of his being *sent* to Egypt from his brothers to God. In 45:7-8, Joseph has come full circle. Now the brothers, concerning whom he had said were the ones who sent him to Egypt, are completely excluded. Joseph boldly declares, "But *God sent me ahead of you* to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." The brothers are out; God is in. Even the

dreams God gave Joseph back in Canaan testify that God *knew* and *planned* the precise moment when the brothers would fulfill its prediction and bow at Joseph's feet. It is as if Joseph and the narrative say, if you want to know the real cause of Joseph's being sent to Egypt, do not look at the wicked actions of the brothers. To restate Joseph's affirmation: *God sent me here*, and my brothers were his tools to accomplish the work he purposed to accomplish. To confirm this line of thought, Joseph declares in 45:8, "So then, *it was not you who sent me here, but God.*"

This is staggering! What it illustrates so well is that God is not passively uninvolved and inactive in the wicked actions of men. Rather, he ordains them for purposes that might not be apparent at all to the people at the time, and in fact, they may never know in this life. Joseph certainly had no clue for many years why all this happened in Egypt. Then, graciously, the good design of God was clarified.

Open theism simply cannot adequately account for such a text. The openness insistence that God is *not* involved in evil that occurs, and its firm rejection of the notion that God ordains and then uses evil to accomplish his good purposes, are both flatly denied by the story of Joseph. Imagine Joseph's dismay had he thought about his situation the way open theism would encourage! Gratuitous evil happens, Joseph would reason, and it has happened to me. I am a victim of this pointless evil and revengeful plotting of my brothers and now of the false accusations of Potiphar's wife. Even the dreams God gave me about my brothers, dreams he meant to be an encouragement to me, have actually contributed to their hatred of me and thus to my increased suffering. God did not mean to do this, but in fact

he has made my life immeasurably worse by granting dreams. Imagine my brothers bowing down before me! How absurd—it was wrong anyway! Furthermore, God did not even know what was going to happen to me, and he is unable to control these horrible events. After all, free agents have done these things to me and God cannot know in advance what they will do nor can He control their actions. All I can do is accept the fact that this pointless suffering has been directed at me and has ruined my life. Yes, I am glad to know that God is with me in this prison, but how I got here, when if ever I might get out, and whether there is any purpose served from it, are all beyond the control of God. Woe is me, Joseph would think. What hope is there in this? My life is over. All I can do is despair.

That this was *not* Joseph's understanding is evidence of the fact that he saw the hand of God *in* the wicked deeds of his brothers and every other event leading to his promotion in Egypt. God was *not uninvolved*; rather, he was *orchestrating all that occurred!* Joseph's own summary statement of this episode of his life says it all. The book of Genesis ends with the death of Jacob and the fear of Joseph's brothers that Joseph might now take revenge on them. In Gen 50:20, Joseph responds, "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*" To God be the glory, great things he has done. And God's great and glorious work relates as much to his ordaining and use of *evil* for the purposes he designs as it does to the clear *good* gifts from him in life. God's people may be confident: God *does* work all things together for good for those who love him! Joseph's story tells us so.

Job's Story

The story of Job stands in the biblical canon as a monument to God's control over wicked and even Satanically-wrought suffering, all so that God might accomplish his good, yet hidden, purposes. Job chapters 1 and 2 set the stage for the book's discussion of the meaning of human culpability, human suffering, divine sovereignty, and divine justice. Job is presented in the strongest terms as a righteous man (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), accused by Satan of serving God for personal gain. God then permits Satan to inflict suffering on Job to demonstrate the integrity of Job's character. God controls the extent of the suffering, first allowing Satan to bring about enormous loss of family and possessions but to leave Job's own life and body untouched (1:12). In the second instance, God again reigned in Satan's evil intentions allowing Satan to torment Job's body but insisting that Satan spare Job's life (2:6). In answer to the question, "Who is responsible for inflicting this weighty suffering on Job?" it is clear that two answers are needed: God specifically permitted and gave approval to the precise suffering Job experienced, and *Satan* actively, willfully, and maliciously carried it out.

Amazingly, Job's initial response to the enormous loss of his family and possessions affirms that it is *God* who has both given and taken. Job says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). As Job's "counselors" begin to charge Job with great wrongdoing to account for such obvious affliction, Job does not say what open theists would encourage. Job never suggests that this suffering is not from God, or is not con-

trolled by God, and that it would be wrong to say so. Job does not say that Satan as a free agent has brought on this suffering and that God cannot prevent him doing what he freely chooses to do. Job never suggests that this suffering is gratuitous. No, from beginning to end the understanding of Job and all concerned is that in some ultimate sense, Job's suffering is *from God* and his suffering has some *meaning*. Just what that meaning is, however, is the dispute within the book itself.

As the story continues, Job wearies of hearing his friends' accusations against him, and in his defense he begins moving closer toward a position of charging God with wrongdoing in inflicting this pain upon him unjustly. Again, for Job this is not Satan's doing but God's!

God's response to Job, and Job's counter-response is very instructive. God confronts Job in chapter 38, and for the next four chapters he humbles Job by pointing to Job's extensive limitations in contrast to God's infinite majesty, power, rulership, wisdom, and supremacy. At a pivotal point in God's case against Job, we read that the Lord answers Job out of the storm, and he says, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:7-8). Since this is God speaking directly in regard to a situation of enormous and prolonged suffering, it is crucial that we see what God says and what he does not say. God does *not* say, "Job, why are you blaming *me* for this suffering? I am not the one behind it! I have not brought this on you! In fact, I feel as badly about your suffering as you do, and I wish it could have been avoided. Unfortunately Satan is a very powerful being whose free choices I cannot control, and

he has brought on you this suffering. So, stop blaming me for something I have not done and realize that sometimes pointless evil is inflicted on others in a world of sinful creatures who possess moral freedom."

Instead, God spends four chapters humbling Job by asserting that since his wisdom, power, and glory are beyond the comprehension of a finite creature like Job, *it is simply presumptuous, arrogant, wrong, and out of place for Job to challenge the justice and wisdom of what God has done*. God never backs away from the book's uniform assertion that *God* (not Satan) is the ultimate cause behind Job's suffering. So, what Job is to learn is not that God is totally passive and uninvolved in Job's suffering, but that God is fully just and righteous in causing, ultimately, all the suffering Job has experienced.

The book ends with Job repenting in dust and ashes (42:6) after realizing how wrong he has been to challenge God's justice. He admits that God *as God* can do all things (including the inflicting of suffering) and that no purpose of his can be thwarted (42:2). He admits that he has spoken out of turn and has erred gravely in what he has said (42:3). And he pledges now to listen and learn, instead of attempting to instruct the Almighty (42:4-5). Chapter 42 concludes with God restoring to Job double for all his prior loss, and his siblings and friends coming to bring him comfort. Some of the last words in the book announce again the theme that *God* has reigned over all Job's suffering. Job 42:11 reads, "All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over *all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him*, and each one gave him a piece of silver

and a gold ring.”

Open theism’s theological framework stands in blatant and irreconcilable conflict with the theology of the book of Job. Where Job says that God ultimately controls human suffering, open theism renders God inactive and uninvolved in relation to suffering. Where Job says that God restrains Satan’s evil choices and activities, open theism stresses God’s inability to control the choices of his free creatures. Where Job says that extensive, weighty, debilitating suffering is meaningful because it is used by God for good, open theism flees to the concept of gratuitous evil, robbing sufferers of all sense of true meaningfulness in the midst of deep pain. Where Job says that no purpose of God’s can be thwarted (42:2), open theism says that God’s purposes are thwarted constantly so that God must accept defeat and frustration as part of the course of his life. Where Job says it is impertinent and insolent to challenge the wisdom and justice of God in relation to God’s employment of suffering to fulfill his purposes, open theism brazenly declares that God would be both unjust and unloving were he to bring about affliction for the sake of accomplishing greater good purposes. All in all, we have here two mutually-exclusive models of God and his relation to the world. The reader will have to decide which to follow. One thing is clear: one cannot seek to adopt the mindset, worldview, and theology of Job and, at same time, follow the course of open theism. The contrasts are that great.

“Spectrum Texts”

While the above passages deal with suffering in relation to believers in particular, several others indicate that the whole sweep of life, both ends of the spec-

trum, as it were, and everything in between are in the control of God. Open theists are simply wrong in their denial that God has anything to do with pain, suffering, disease, hardship, and death. Scripture clearly teaches that God not only has something to do with all these matters, rather he ordains and governs them all. Such a view is deeply troubling for open theists. Greg Boyd, for example, ends his recent book on this theme and writes:

The world is still scary. It is in a state of war, under siege by the enemy of our souls, and this is not a comforting thought (1 John 5:19). The open view grants this. Even God takes risks. But the world is less scary in this view than if we try to find consolation in the belief that *everything that occurs is controlled by God and thus reflects his dubious character*.¹¹

Does Scripture in fact teach that God controls all things? If so, what can be said of Boyd’s implicit charge that such a view results in a God of “dubious character”? First, consider a number of passages in which God is referred to as having control of all facets of life, the bad as well as the good. The “spectrum” references obviously indicate that he controls both extremes and all that is in between. For example:

The Lord said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him *deaf* or *mute*? Who gives him *sight* or makes him *blind*? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exod 4:11).

See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to *death* and I bring to *life*, I have *wounded* and I will *heal*, and no one can deliver out of my hand (Deut 32:39).

The Lord brings *death* and makes *alive*; he brings down to the *grave* and *raises up*.

The Lord sends *poverty* and *wealth*; he *humbles* and he *exalts* (1 Sam

2:6-7).

Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When *times are good*, be happy; but when *times are bad*, consider: *God has made the one as well as the other*. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future (Eccl 7:13-14).

I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the *light* and create *darkness*, I bring *prosperity* and create *disaster*; I, the Lord, *do all these things* (Isa 45:5-7).

Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both *calamities* and *good things* come? (Lam 3:37-38).

When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When *disaster* comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it? (Amos 3:6).

The lot is cast into the lap, but *its every decision* is from the Lord (Prov 16:33).

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. 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* (Eph 1:9-11).

While it is true that the statements made in every one of these passages relate to specific, historical situations to which they apply, it is also true that the truths they announce within those situations are truths that transcend time and place. These are truths about God and his overarching providential governance of the world he has made. Open theists try to dismiss the force of these texts by lim-

iting them to very restricted applications within which they were spoken.¹² Indeed, they do relate to those situations, but the truths they proclaim are bigger than those situations themselves. Take just one passage above to illustrate this point. Isaiah 45:5-7 is a bold declaration of the godness of God. The very deity of the true and living God is asserted by virtue of his control over and performance of absolutely everything that occurs in life. What relevance does this have in the situation in Isaiah's own day? To God's rebellious people, God makes clear that the peace and rest they enjoy (they currently are at relative rest, although living in outright rebellion) *and* the calamity and disaster they are about to experience (as the Assyrians come to destroy them) are *both from God's mighty and sovereign hand*. Indeed, we would miss much of the importance of this text if we failed to see that light and darkness, prosperity and disaster, were brought to Israel by God at this time in history. But, just as wrong is an interpretation that limits these truths to *this single historical episode*. What is true here is true always: God, *as God*, maintains providential governance over every facet in the full spectrum of life, for to fail to do so would mean that God, in fact, is not God.

What of Boyd's claim that such a view results in a God of "dubious character"? More will be said below on this key issue, but suffice it here to say that God's character is not hereby impugned if it can be established that in respect to *all* the evil he ultimately controls, he is accomplishing his good purposes *through, and only through*, such horrible wrong-doing.

While many examples could be given, none is better than God's control of the greatest, most horrendous, most vile, and

wicked evil ever perpetrated in the whole of human history, viz., the murderous crucifixion of the innocent Son of God, Jesus the Messiah. Remember the familiar words of 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." Luke names four different "players" in the crucifixion of Christ: Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel. Concerning all four of these, Luke says that they did precisely what God had previously decided that they should do. And certainly we must hold this if we mean it when we say that *God the Father* sent his Son to die on that cross (John 3:16), that it pleased *the Father* to crush his Son to save guilty sinners (Isa 53:10), that Christ was delivered up by the *predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God* (Acts 2:23). In other words, God planned and brought to pass the crucifixion of his Son, and he did so through the activities of these wicked people who murdered God's own Son. Now, why is it that these wicked people are preeminently *blame-worthy* while God is preeminently *praise-worthy* for carrying out the same action (i.e., the action of putting Christ on that cross)? The answer clearly is that they did their evil *for the sake of the evil*, and God worked through their evil *for the sake of the greater and glorious good that would result*. The God who controls all that happens, the light and the darkness, well-being and calamity, life and death, is not, then, a God of dubious character. His ways are always and only good, and his purposes are perfectly upright and wise. As we shall see below, it is only because of these truths that we can have unassail-

able comfort and peace in the midst of suffering. *God is in absolute control*, and *God is absolutely good*. In these twin truths we find rest, comfort, and hope.

Practical Christian Living and Open Theism's Response to Suffering

How well does the openness response to human suffering work when placed in the framework of practical Christian living? Is it a coherent approach that can be applied consistently? How pastorally, spiritually, and existentially adequate is the counsel offered by openness proponents?

At the heart of the pastoral counsel offered to suffering people by open theists is this claim: God did not bring about your suffering, so do not blame God for it; instead, be encouraged because he feels as badly about the suffering you are enduring as you do. To many, this has an initial appeal. On the surface, it offers suffering people comfort. God did not do this to me, they say, and furthermore, God cares about the pain I am experiencing. To many, this sounds like good and wise counsel.

On closer analysis, however, this line of pastoral counsel presents a deeply flawed and troubling perspective. Regarding the claim (God did not bring about your suffering and he feels as badly about it as you), it is either true or it is not that God could have prevented your suffering. Granted, in either case (whether he could have prevented it or not), he did not bring about the suffering. But, how shall we assess this counsel if it turns out that God *could have prevented* the suffering and did not? And what shall we say of this view if God *could not have prevented* the suffering though he wished very badly that he could? First we will consider the possibil-

ity that he *could* have prevented it, and then ponder what is involved if prevention was *impossible* for him.

God's uncaring ability to prevent suffering he allows to occur

If it is true that God does not bring suffering upon us but feels as badly about it as we do, this may imply that though God did not inflict the suffering on us, he did consciously and deliberately permit it to occur when he could have prevented it. Is this view valid within open theism, and what shall we make of it?

At the most general level, one must say that the God of open theism (unlike the conception of God in process theism) *could*, if he so wanted and chose, prevent *all suffering at all times*. But the cost to do so would be great. Essentially, God would have to abandon the kind of world he has created in order to ensure that there was no suffering. For open theists (and all Arminians, generally), since God has given human and angelic creatures significant freedom, these creatures cannot possess and use this freedom and, at the same time, be controlled in how they use it. To be free entails, by necessity, the *possibility* of using that freedom in wicked, mean, unjust, and abusive ways. So, at one level, we might say that given the kind of world God has chosen to create, i.e., a world within which free creatures choose to do good or evil, God cannot prevent suffering from occurring. It should be recognized, however, that God's inability to prevent suffering is a consequential, not absolute, inability. God cannot prevent suffering only as a consequence of a prior decision to create a world of free beings. God did not have to create such a world. So three things are clear: (1) God chose to create a world in which *he knew* there

existed the distinct possibility that free creatures would use their freedom to produce suffering; (2) because he could not know their choices in advance, and because he cannot control their choices, *he knew* that there existed the distinct possibility that gratuitous suffering would be inflicted on others, suffering over which he would have no control and out of which he could not bring some good; and (3) knowing these two things, God deliberately and freely chose to create this world of free creatures.

I would suggest to you that the openness position here is by no means problem-free. On the one hand, one might think that while God knew the *possibility* that freedom would be abused to bring about gratuitous suffering, he did not know this *would* occur, and furthermore, *he did not think it likely* that this would happen. John Sanders suggests such a scenario when he claims that the first sin in the garden caught God by surprise!¹³ If this is the case, however, in God's decision to create this world, might we not charge him with folly, negligence, poor judgment, and perhaps even stupidity? God obviously was greatly mistaken, especially when one considers the massive misuse of freedom that has occurred throughout human history. Could not God figure out quickly that things were not going to go well and so put an end to his "project"?

On the other hand, one might think that God possessed a high degree of confidence that freedom would be misused pretty much as it has. That is, even though God did not *know* that massive, extensive, and even significant amounts of gratuitous suffering would occur from the misuse of human freedom, *he believed that it was highly probable* that this would be the

case. But here, one would question the moral goodness of God in very much the same way openness advocates question proponents of classical theism. The fact is, God did not have to create a world, either this one or any other. And on this understanding, when he did create, he knew full well that massive human suffering was the highly probable result of his decision to create. He could have prevented all this by not creating at all, or by creating a different kind of world, but he chose to create *this* world. Can the God of open theism escape the moral charges leveled against classical theism's God? The fact is that God did not have to create, and in choosing to create he could have created a world with no evil or suffering. In considering this fact, it appears that open theism is on the horns of a dilemma. Either God created a world with significant freedom, believing wrongly that the misuse of freedom to bring about massive and pointless suffering was unlikely, or he created such a world believing that this misuse of freedom was probable. In the first case, God is apparently a fool; in the second, he is seemingly malevolent. Open theism is not commended by either option.

Consider a different expression of this issue (*viz.*, what if it is the case that God chooses to allow suffering he could have prevented). As I write, my wife, Jodi, is laid up in bed with a heavy plaster cast on her right arm. While taking a meal to a family with a new baby, she tripped at the top of a staircase and tumbled to the landing, breaking her arm. As accidents go, this one was relatively minor (easy for me to say, I know!). Even with the pain of the surgery, plate and screws that were required, prospects are very good for full recovery, and the main problem is the

inconvenience of the whole ordeal.

Now, I raise the question: could the God of open theism have prevented this accident from occurring? I find it hard to see why not. This was not a case where my wife *willed* to take some action that would inflict suffering. Therefore, to prevent this suffering, God would not have had to override her freedom and so spoil, as it were, the integrity of the created moral order. No, in fact, since he is God, all he would have to do is cause my wife's foot not to trip at the top of the stairs, or he could have made sure her foot recovered quickly enough to reach the step and avoid the fall, or even with a fall he could have ensured that the bone withstood the impact and remained unbroken. In any of these cases (and how many more might *God* be able to think of?), Jodi would have simply walked away from this situation *totally unaware that God had even intervened*. No harm would have been done to the integrity of human freedom, no disruption to the regular course of natural law, no apparent drawback or harm to any divine purpose in God's relationship with his human creatures.

Yet, if the true God is the God of open theism, he did not prevent this accident. And if it is true that he could have prevented it, it follows that *he deliberately allowed it to occur*. Why? Two possible answers come to mind, the first sees God as "hands off" and the second as "hands on." On the first of these, God might have allowed what he could have prevented because he simply will not, on principle, intervene in such a way as to disrupt the natural course of life, the regular sequence of cause-effect relations that make up the tapestry of every day existence. That is, God chooses to be hands off as it pertains to human decision making and the flow

of natural cause-effect relations. But if this is the case, is this God (the God of open theism) really the intimately personal God he is touted so to be? As will also be seen below, this picture of God resembles deism more than the personal, deeply involved God of the Bible.

Concerning the second “hands on” option, God might have allowed what he could have prevented because he envisioned some good purpose to come from the suffering. Of course, the God of open theism is often unable to *know* what will come of what. Perhaps, though, we could say that God is hopeful, or views it as probable, that good will come. But if this is the case, can we really tell people that God was not involved in the suffering that they experienced? If God has deliberately allowed it and is quite “hands on” in relation to the suffering, can we rightly comfort people by reassuring them that God had nothing to do with the tragedy that occurred? No, in fact, if it is possible that God purposely allows suffering to occur because of perceived benefits coming from it, then for what specific instance of suffering could we so dogmatically tell someone that God is not—surely *not*—involved in it? Do we know the mind of God? Can we say with such confidence that while example A of suffering was allowed by God for some perceived good that would come from it, example B of suffering is clearly and certainly gratuitous and God had nothing at all to do with it? How immensely knowledgeable and wise the openness counselor must be to be able to discern instances of suffering with such precision! Satire aside, how presumptuous it is for the open theist to reject out of hand the possibility that for some horrid instance of suffering, God was intentionally involved for some

greater good. How much one must know to be able to say with such confidence that this cannot be the case! So, whether God is “hands off” or “hands on” in relation to instances of human suffering, it appears that if the God of open theism allows what he could prevent, the pastoral counsel open theists offer in the face of suffering falters.

God’s caring inability to prevent suffering he wishes did not occur

If it is true that God does not bring suffering upon us but feels as badly about it as we do, this may imply that God really stands just as helpless to prevent suffering as the one who is forced to endure it. But what does this say of God? For all the talk in open theism about a God of intimate personal relationship, here we have a view of God in which God is no more involved in some of human life’s most pressing and agonizing experiences than the god of deism. The God of open theism waits, watches, and learns what unfolds, *but he is passive, not active*, in the moment of tragic suffering. To take seriously the notion that God could not have prevented the suffering is to render God uninvolved, although clearly not uninterested or uncaring. But what do we typically think of someone who cares deeply about the unfolding of some tragedy but who can do nothing to stop it or change it? We would pity such a person, and we would hardly think this quality (caring but helpless passivity) would rightly be characteristic of deity.

Openness proponents surely would counter that at least in their view, God is not *inflicting* evil upon suffering people as must be the case if God is the ultimate determining cause of all that occurs. At least, they would say, the problem of evil

is due to *our* doing, not God's. Three responses are needed. First, in arguing that God is not the ultimate determining cause of all things, open theism flatly rejects Scripture's clear testimony to the contrary. The "spectrum texts" cited above make clear that darkness as well as light, death as well as life, calamity as well as prosperity, sickness as well as healing, are all under the sovereign and providential regulative control of God. Like it or not (Rom 9:14, 19), this is the God of the Bible who will have mercy on whom he desires and harden whom he desires (Rom 9:18).

Second, as illustrated earlier through our brief consideration of Acts 4:27-28, God works through evil men, and he uses evil decisions and actions, but *God never, never, never himself does evil*. God, who through the wicked actions of evil men, put his Son on the cross is fully glorious, righteous, and praiseworthy in his actions, while the evil men God used to crucify his Son are fully despicable, deserving of judgment, and blameworthy. God ordains evil, uses evil, and accomplishes infinitely good purposes through evil, but he never does evil.

Third (and most important for the issue at hand), if it is true that God could not have prevented some horribly painful situation, and so, if it is true that God is not in control of such tragic experiences, then *who or what is in control of what happens?* However we answer this question, the answer clearly is not "God." Perhaps Satan is in control, or his demons are in control, or wicked and vile people are in control, or forces of nature are in control, but clearly God is not in control. This raises the question, how much of life is in this category? That is, how much of life stands outside of the control of God? Do I know whether at the next moment some

tragedy might occur while God stands watching it develop, unable to prevent it? Do I know whether my children are being subjected to the assaults of satanic attack, and God merely watches as Satan has his way? Do I know whether natural disasters or traffic accidents or debilitating physical ailments await me or my family, and when I inquire, "where is God?" I hear, "he is watching the events unfold, and if (because he also does not know what will occur) they are bad, be assured he will feel your pain with you."

Compare this with the long-standing Christian answer given to human suffering: God has ordained this suffering and is working through it to accomplish purposes that are good, right, beautiful, and glorious. While we may or may not be able to see what those purposes are, *we know God*, and we know his character is good and righteous, and we know that he is in control of all things (Eph 1:11), and so we rest in the assurance that God is doing what is best. As the songwriter puts it,

God is too wise to be mistaken; God
is too good to be unkind.
So when you don't understand,
when you can't see his plan;
When you can't trace his hand, trust
his heart.¹⁴

What it comes down to is this: would you rather see your life as at the mercy of the God of all knowledge, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and love who is in control of all that occurs? Or, would you rather have your life at the mercy of Satan, demons, wicked people, and natural forces who have control over much of your life, bringing disaster and suffering upon you, some of which is entirely pointless in the great scheme of things, while God watches, unable to intervene? In the first case, you do not have to know and

understand why God has ordained that you experience suffering. *All you have to know is God!* All you need is the confidence that this “accident” or tragedy is not outside of his control (God forbid!) but rather is *designed by him for purposes in keeping with his own character*. But in the second conception, when God is taken by surprise by the unfolding of future events, or when he cannot stop the free will agency of some wicked person or demon, we realize that our lives are not in God’s hands after all. Pointless evil happens! And all the comfort offered in the face of deep and tragic suffering is, “God feels just as badly about this as you do.” Such a view will lead Christian people to despair, not hope. They will question whether God is worthy of worship, or trust, or allegiance. Such a God is a pathetic being, a poor, marred, shallow, and empty substitute for the God of the Bible.

But here is your choice: do *you want the God who risks?* Then take with him the uncertainty, the lack of confidence, and the despair that goes with this risk. Talk all you want about the personal relationship offered with such a God, but what you have, in fact, is great disappointment, fear of what may lie ahead, and shallow, faltering faith. Or, on the other hand, do *you want the God who controls all that is?* But this brings with it the problem of evil, you say. Well, open theism has its own problem of evil (see above), and this problem for classical theism has a viable solution. Besides, what you really get is the God in whom you have complete and full confidence. His character is impeccable, his wisdom flawless, his will and ways righteous, his heart holy and good, and *he is the one* who “does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or

say to him: ‘What have you done?’” (Dan 4:35). What could possibly be better than to know that this God, the true and living God of the Bible, rules over heaven and earth, and governs every facet of your life!

Consider again the two deaths spoken of by John Sanders discussed early in this article. In both cases the question asked was, “Why did God kill” my brother, or my child? And, of course, the counsel offered by Sanders in the face of such tragic loss is to suggest that these are pointless deaths. God had nothing to do with killing his brother or this little child. But are these really words of comfort? Is it comforting to know that some other power, apart from both God’s power and our own, controlled the taking of these lives? Is it comforting to know that even though God would have liked it to be different, he could not prevent some drunk driver or some fatal disease from taking these lives? Is it comforting to know that our lives are subject to massive layers of control by human and demonic free will agents in regard to which God cannot exert his control over what they choose to do? Is it comforting to know that in every “next moment” of my life, there awaits the possibility of some horrid gratuitous evil that God can only bemoan but not prevent? When the reality of this counsel settles in, the emotions produced in people will not be calmness and comfort but fear, anxiety, betrayal, dread, discouragement, dismay, disappointment, and despair. Such is life with the God who risks.

But shall we say to these grieving individuals that, in fact, *God did take these lives?* And the answer is that with gentleness, with compassion, with deep sympathy for the unavoidable and natural sense of loss, we will say, “Yes, the God of all wisdom, goodness and power has ordained to take

these lives.” Remember Deuteronomy 32:39 and 1 Samuel 2:6-7? The Lord gives life and he takes life. He is God, and this is his prerogative. But, his ways are always righteous. So, his taking of these lives must be seen as fulfilling good purposes to which we may not, at this time and perhaps throughout all of life, be aware. But do we trust his character? Do we know God for who he is? Can we say, with Job, “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21)?

Conclusion

One of open theism’s strongest appeals is its claim to account for tragic human suffering in such a way that God is both blameless and caring. On the surface, this appeal appears strong. Upon examination, however, it is clear that open theism’s counsel is unbiblical, incoherent, and shallow. It is unbiblical insofar as it fails to account for the prevailing biblical vision of the God who reigns over human affairs and who ensures that his purposes are accomplished even through human wickedness and evil.

It is incoherent because it faces the horns of an untenable dilemma. Either God allows suffering he could prevent, in which case moral questions of the blamelessness of God are not avoided as openness advocates propose. Or God stands idly by, unable to prevent great and agonizing human suffering, in which case one is led to despair at the realization that life is under the control of massive amounts of free choice, over which God has no control, and much of which is desperately evil.

And, the counsel of open theism is shallow. Many thoughtful Christians will begin to wonder what hope there is if much of suffering is pointless and if God

is unable either to prevent it or bring good from it. Despair and lack of confidence in God will be the legacy of open theism, should it extend its influence in the church. The simple truth is this: the God of the Bible is not the limited, passive, hand-wringing God open theism portrays. He is king, lord, sovereign, wise, good, and perfect in all his ways. The message of the Bible is that suffering has meaning, God is in control over it and all else, and so life can be lived by faith in the infinitely wise and powerful God.

ENDNOTES

¹ Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) 103-106.

² *Ibid.*, 105.

³ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

⁴ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 9-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

⁸ See Part Two of my forthcoming book, *God’s Lesser Glory* (Crossway, forthcoming), in which I offer a sustained critique of both of these central aspects of open theism

⁹ All scripture references are from the NIV.

¹⁰ Notice how fundamentally different this is from Boyd’s understanding of Rom 8:28. Boyd (*God of the Possible*, 155-156) writes, “It [the open view] affirms that whatever happens, God will work with us to bring a redemptive purpose out of the event (Rom. 8:28).” Notice two things. First, for Boyd, God does not work “in all things,” as Rom 8:28 says, but he works *with us* in response to all things. This verse never says he works

with us (though, perhaps, he may); it says he works *in all things* to bring about good *for us*. Second, the surety of the promise is subtly missing in Boyd's version of the promise. Boyd's claim is merely that "God will work with us to bring a redemptive purpose out of the event," but then, there are no guarantees that this will happen. Since God must work with us, and since we may or may not cooperate with him, God simply cannot guarantee that he *will* bring good out of the events of our lives. Yet, Rom 8:28 offers a guarantee: God works in all things for the good of those who love him. The simple fact is that open theism offers a model that is incompatible with the promise of this text.

Sanders (*God Who Risks*, 127-128) is wrong when he says that Rom 8:28 does not say that all things in fact work for good but that "God is working to accomplish good in all things," yet "the purposes of God meet with resistance, and even God does not always get what he wants." This interpretation defies the following context in which Paul buttresses the claim of Rom 8:28 by declaring that *God gets just what he wants on behalf of his elect*. Whom God foreknows, he predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies (8:29-30). Furthermore, no one can successfully stand against God's own, for God gives to them "all things" as he has already given them his own Son (8:31-32). Finally, absolutely nothing can separate them from his love in Christ, including all the suffering and tragedy life may hold (8:33-39).

Nothing in this context would suggest that Paul has reservations about whether God will be successful in working all things for the good of his own. Just the opposite, instead, is the case. The God who gave to them his own Son will not fail to give them all good things (8:32).

¹¹Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 156 (italics added).

¹²See, e.g., Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 82: "Isaiah 45:7 refers to the specific experiences of Israel in exile and not to divine pancausality." The problem with Sanders's statement is the false disjunction made in his statement. Surely, it is true that this text refers to the specific experiences of Israel. But since God defines his godness in terms of his control of all things, this text indicates then how God functions *as God*, and therefore it is, in addition, a general principle or transcendent truth.

¹³Sanders (*God Who Risks*, 46) writes, "In Genesis 3 the totally unexpected happens."

¹⁴Words taken from "Trust His Heart," written by Eddie Carswell and Babbie Mason, © 1989, May Sun Music, Causing Change Music, Word Music and Dayspring Music.