

Tough Questions. March 29

Why Does God Allow People He Loves to Make Big Mistakes?

Hey there – Tim Perry, pastor of Spiritual Discovery here at Christ Community Church – coming at you with week 13 in Project 4:4.

The tough question that we're going to ask this week comes from today's reading out of our chronological Bibles. Let me read a clip of it and then launch our question for the week.

*When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.*

*So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."*

*But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do." (1 Samuel 8:1-9)*

Well, Samuel turns out to constantly rub this into the Israelite's minds that – "Hey, are you sure you want a king?" Samuel even goes so far on King Saul's inaugural day to call down rain and thunder and lightning so that the people know they are asking for something inappropriately of God.

It's not that God never wanted his people to be ruled by a king. That was set up a long time ago in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses spelled out the stipulations for a king once it was time for Israel to have a king. So the problem here isn't that they necessarily want a king, it's why they want a king. They're looking at all the nations around them and they see that maybe the key to their military success and their security as a nation is in their king leading them militarily. And Samuel, you remember, is the last judge of Israel. This was the end of the period of the judges that we've been reading about. So Samuel says, "are you sure you want to do this?" And the people persist and God actually goes along with it.

So the question I want to ask this week is this: Why is it that sometimes God goes along with people's choices even though He knows it's going to be a big mistake? The rest of the story plays out like this: Saul goes on to lead the people and he leads the people sometimes in a godly way and God endows him with spiritual

insight and power to conquer the foe and to fight off the Philistines, but there are times when Saul's leadership becomes prideful and self-important. At one point, it even says in Samuel that God regretted making Saul king because he was leading His people away from Him.

This is no new news for us. If we read the rest of the Bible, we see that God does allow people to make painful mistakes like that. Even in the New Testament, we've got to wonder what's going on when Jesus picks Judas as one of his twelve apostles. And Judas was the one who betrayed him. Didn't Jesus who claimed to be God know better than to pick someone who was going to betray him?

So to help us get a handle on this question of why God allows us to make big mistakes – I want us to take a look at this chart that I'm going to draw on my sketchpad.

So here we have a scale I'm calling the Scale of Culpability. Culpability is just a fancy word for being able to be held morally responsible or to be able to be blamed for something. To what degree do we hold God responsible for things like bad stuff happening, and God's people making bad choices and God himself seeming to allow evil in our world?

Let's think about it in terms of this scale. First of all over here on the left in the first position, we've got what some people like to think about God as a God who actively prevents absolutely all evil. That should be God's job according to some people's view. He is so perfect and so holy that everything associated with Him should be perfect and holy. He should never allow any evil to happen.

Well, the next step over – Position #2 I'm going to call it on this Scale of Culpability – is that we have a view that God actively limits evil "as able". Not absolutely all evil, but quite a lot of evil. We could imagine a world where more evil or bad or unjust suffering happens than does - so God actively limits the evil in our world.

How about Position #3 on here? Here we have a God who passively allows evil, but does so with ample warnings. That means in the Old Testament that he allowed people to follow him, but he delineated all over the place – "Hey, don't make this mistake – don't make that mistake." He's still not preventing all evil from happening – He's allowing people to make moral choices and so passively He's giving them some freedom of will, however, he's doing so with a lot of warnings – ample warnings about what to stay away from.

Well, Position #4 on the Culpability Scale is that God passively allows evil, but in many cases he does so with no explicit warning. He doesn't spell out every last thing that he's going to prohibit in scripture. The law is representative of things that He gives us warning about. He expects people to be able to extrapolate into situations where he gives no explicit warning and to be able to say what's right and what's wrong based on what he gives clear warnings about.

So if we go a little bit further over in our imagination of God, let's say here in Position #5, we have a God who actively promotes evil – but maybe a God who actively promotes evil unaware of its total consequences somehow. Sort of like God accidentally allows evil to take place. Or we can easily see this in people – that people promote evil, but perhaps they're doing so in a way that they're not aware of their actions fully.

Then the furthest position over on the Scale of Culpability, Position #6 – is that we have a concept here of someone or something or God or Satan as a being who actively promotes evil with deception - a lot more sinister. Here we have someone who knows how bad things are – fully conscious of how bad it is – yet proceeds with it anyway. Some people would say that the concept of God – because he allows any evil at all – he might as well be the source of evil – actively causing it and deceiving people into it. In the scriptures, this would fit a satanic agenda over here – that Satan would be the only one this vile. That he would be fully aware of how dangerous sin is but would actively lead people into it.

So where does our God fit out of the Book of Samuel and the conversation we're having right now about Samuel allowing Saul to be king even though he really didn't want to at first because God said, "Go ahead and do it – I'm going to allow my people to be put in that predicament." Where is the God zone on this scale? Well, it's clear that God operates between #2 and #4 on this scale. We just don't live in the kind of world where God thinks it's wise to actively prevent absolutely all evil. He allowed the possibility of the fall, He allows his people to make mistakes, and so He's not absolutely going to eliminate evil from our experiences.

Well, He does, in fact, limit the amount of evil that does take place. It would be easy to imagine a world with more natural disasters, with more suffering and evil. There are so many good features about our world that we can't say that our world is utterly devastated by evil. God has to be restraining and holding back the hands of evil in some way, shape or form. So we know that God operates on this side of that divide.

Well, we also know – over here – because of God's character, He doesn't actively engage people in evil. He doesn't actively promote evil. He permits it so that this particular zone right here (between 2 and 5) is the zone he's working in with humanity. A term I'm going to invent here called "culpable human responsibility" – this (between 2 and 6) is really where culpable human responsibility can take place. If God made it so that there was absolutely no possibility for human beings to ever go wrong or misuse their will, there would be no culpable human responsibility and then humanity would not reflect the image of God as a morally responsible agent.

So when we think about the person of Saul and why Saul came along and why God allowed him to be king, we realize that God is the kind of God who allows a certain amount of evil in our world so that humanity can have a sense of moral responsibility before Him. We know that God does not actively promote evil. He's

going to hold humanity responsible. He's going to hold Satan responsible for this someday and punish Satan.

But for here and now, I want us to see that in our world here and now today, we still have choices, and our view of God affects how we view our moral responsibility before Him. He's not the kind of God who's always going to prevent us from making mistakes. He is the kind of God who's going to limit the evil in our world and lead us toward Himself even though He gives us room to make mistakes in the process.

So what do you think of this cool Scale of Culpability? Give it a good look and give me your thoughts after the video is over. So in the case of Saul and the Israelites in this chapter of their history reminds us that, yes, God does allow His people to make painful choices sometimes. He doesn't prevent all the evil that He could.

Here are a few conclusions we could come to. First of all, because God doesn't prevent evil from happening altogether – doesn't mean that God is not limiting the amount of evil that takes place. God can and does prevent all kinds of evil that could possibly befall us. We can still trust him even though He does allow us to make mistakes and others to make mistakes that hurt us.

Second of all, God created us and gives us a sense of will so that He can hold us responsible to our moral choices. He gives us real decision-making ability. We have to handle that sincerely before Him realizing that it really matters what we decide.

Third, God does warn us explicitly and implicitly in scripture. He doesn't say just do whatever you want to do, but He doesn't spell out every last little bitty case that He could with a law or a rule for everything. It would turn us into legalists if He did.

So our responsibility is one of reading God's word, understanding who He is, what He's like and living in relationship with Him using our responsibility under His supervision.

Then the last thing to bear in mind is that God is not stopped by evil. God is not stopped by our mistakes. God can redeem our mistakes. God can even use evil upon itself to accomplish a greater good that in the midst of it we can't see.

Well, I hope you've enjoyed this tough question. It's a really good one. Thanks for preserving. If you've got comments or questions, I'd love to hear them. Hit on the "comment" link and let's talk.

Thanks for being with me – this is Tim Perry, Pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church.