



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

God Can Use Human Actions Without Approving Human Motives

Providence, Responsibility, Discernment, and Trusting God Without Calling Evil Good

The Short Answer

Scripture repeatedly shows that God can accomplish His good purposes through human actions that He does not morally approve. Joseph's brothers intended evil against him, yet God intended good through the same events. Judas betrayed Jesus. Religious leaders opposed Him. Pilate authorized His execution. Roman soldiers crucified Him. Their motives and actions were not made righteous because God accomplished salvation through the cross.

God's sovereignty does not turn evil into good. It means evil cannot overthrow God. This distinction is especially important when Christians talk about providence. "God can use this" must never become: "Therefore this was right." "Therefore the person who did it is not responsible." "Therefore justice does not matter." "Therefore the victim should remain in harm." "Therefore I know exactly why God allowed it."

The biblical truth is both more careful and more hopeful: Human motives matter. Human responsibility remains. God is holy. God remains sovereign. And God can accomplish purposes far beyond what sinful people intended.

Genesis 50:15–21 • Acts 2:22–24 • Acts 4:23–31 • Romans 3:5–8

Opening Memory Anchor

God can use what He does not approve without ever calling evil good.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

PART ONE BEGINNER GUIDE

START WITH ONE IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

Christians often say: “God can use anything.” That statement can express deep biblical confidence. But it can also become dangerously vague.

What does “God can use it” actually mean? Does it mean God approved of what happened? No. Does it mean the person who caused harm is no longer responsible? No. Does it mean suffering should not be grieved? No. Does it mean Christians always know why God allowed something? No.

The Bible gives a more careful picture. God is powerful enough to accomplish His purposes even through sinful human actions without becoming morally like the people committing those sins.

1. WHAT DOES JOSEPH’S STORY TEACH?

Read Genesis 50:15–21.

Joseph’s brothers had betrayed him many years earlier. They acted from jealousy and hatred. They sold Joseph into slavery and deceived their father. Eventually Joseph rose to authority in Egypt, and God used his position to preserve many lives during famine.

Looking back, Joseph told his brothers that they had intended evil against him, while God intended good through what happened.

Notice what Joseph did not do. He did not call their betrayal good. He did not deny their intention. He did not pretend the suffering had been imaginary.

He distinguished: **WHAT THEY INTENDED** from **WHAT GOD INTENDED**. That distinction is foundational to this study.

Memory Anchor

Human intention and God’s purpose do not have to be morally identical.

2. DOES A GOOD RESULT MAKE A BAD ACTION GOOD?

No. Suppose someone lies and the lie unexpectedly results in another person discovering an important truth. The good result does not make lying righteous.

Or imagine someone acts cruelly, but the person harmed later grows stronger, wiser, or closer to God. The later growth does not make the cruelty acceptable.

This is exactly where discussions of providence can become confused. **GOD BRINGING GOOD FROM SOMETHING** is not the same as **THE ORIGINAL ACTION BEING GOOD**.

Joseph preserved both truths. His brothers meant evil. God brought good. Neither statement cancels the other.

3. WHY DOES MOTIVE MATTER?

Scripture repeatedly evaluates not only actions but hearts. Jesus teaches that evil proceeds from the heart (Mark 7:20–23). James warns about sinful desires (James 1:14–15). Paul speaks about God eventually bringing hidden motives to light (1 Corinthians 4:5).

That means two people can participate in the same event for very different reasons. A person may pursue greed, revenge, fear, self-protection, power, jealousy, or pride. God may nevertheless accomplish something beyond anything that person intended.

The fact that God’s purpose succeeds does not purify the person’s sinful motive.

4. WHERE ELSE DOES SCRIPTURE SHOW THIS?

Several major biblical examples establish the pattern.

JOSEPH — His brothers intended harm. God brought preservation. Genesis 50:20.

ASSYRIA — Assyria pursued conquest and boasted in its strength. God nevertheless used the empire within His judgment of Israel and Judah. Isaiah 10. For a fuller treatment, see 3Nails Study #224 — God’s Use of Assyria.

BABYLON — Babylon acted violently and proudly. God used Babylon in judgment and later held Babylon accountable. Habakkuk 1–2.

THE CRUCIFIXION — Human beings betrayed, condemned, mocked, and crucified Jesus. God accomplished redemption through the cross. Acts 2:23 and Acts 4:27–28.

These examples do not prove that every painful event works in exactly the same way. They establish a more limited but important biblical truth: God can remain sovereign over sinful human actions without morally approving those actions.

5. WHY IS THE CROSS THE CLEAREST EXAMPLE?

Because Christianity cannot call the human wrongdoing surrounding Jesus’ death righteous.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

Judas betrayed Him. False testimony was used against Him. Religious and political leaders acted from mixed and often corrupt motives. Pilate knew Jesus was not guilty of the charges deserving execution yet surrendered Him to crucifixion. Roman soldiers mocked and killed Him.

Yet Peter says Jesus was delivered according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge. See Acts 2:23. Acts 4:27–28 similarly places human opposition and God's sovereign purpose beside each other.

The cross therefore forces Christians to hold two truths together: **The human evil was truly evil. God's redemptive purpose was truly good.**

6. SO WHO GETS CREDIT FOR THE GOOD?

God.

This distinction protects moral responsibility. Joseph's brothers do not deserve praise because Joseph eventually saved lives. Judas does not deserve praise because Jesus' death brought salvation. Pilate does not become righteous because the cross was part of God's plan.

The glory belongs to God for bringing redemption through actions sinful people intended differently.

Memory Anchor

God deserves praise for redemption. People remain responsible for sin.

7. DOES THIS MEAN "EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON"?

That phrase can mean different things.

If it means, "Nothing exists outside God's ultimate sovereignty," it can express a biblical conviction.

But if it means, "Christians always know the particular reason God allowed something," Scripture does not support that claim.

Joseph eventually understood part of what God had accomplished through his suffering. Many biblical sufferers did not receive that kind of explanation. That difference becomes very important later in this study.

8. SHOULD CHRISTIANS SAY, "GOD WANTED THIS TO HAPPEN"?

That sentence can be too imprecise. It may mean several different things.

A speaker might mean: "God sovereignly permitted this within His providence." Or: "God directly commanded this action." Those are not identical claims.

If the event involved obvious sin—abuse, betrayal, deception, exploitation, murder, sexual wrongdoing, cruelty—Christians should be especially careful not to speak as though God morally desired the evil itself.

Scripture teaches that God is holy. See Isaiah 6:1–5. James 1:13 teaches that God does not tempt people with evil. Therefore, language about providence should never make God morally indistinguishable from human sin.

9. DOES "GOD CAN USE THIS" MEAN THE VICTIM SHOULD DO NOTHING?

No. Trusting God does not require passivity toward wrongdoing.

Scripture includes confrontation, legal appeal, escape from danger, protection of vulnerable people, church discipline, public exposure of wrongdoing, and appeals for justice.

Paul sometimes fled persecution (Acts 9:23–25). At other times he invoked his Roman citizenship and legal rights (Acts 16:35–39; Acts 22:25–29).

Biblical trust is not the belief that faithful people must remain indefinitely accessible to someone harming them.

Pastoral Safeguard

Never use God's sovereignty to pressure a person to remain in abuse, conceal wrongdoing, avoid appropriate authorities, remove reasonable boundaries, or protect an offender from legitimate accountability.

10. DOES FORGIVENESS CHANGE THIS?

No. Joseph forgave without pretending his brothers' intentions had been good.

Forgiveness and moral clarity can coexist. A Christian may forgive and still say, "That was wrong." A Christian may forgive and maintain boundaries. A Christian may forgive and cooperate with lawful accountability. A Christian may forgive and refuse reconciliation where repentance, safety, or trust has not been established.

Forgiveness releases personal vengeance. It does not redefine evil as good.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

PART TWO

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

INTERMEDIATE

11. WHAT MAKES JUDAS SUCH AN IMPORTANT EXAMPLE?

Judas brings the issue directly into the story of Jesus. Read Matthew 26:14–25.

Judas deliberately approached the chief priests and agreed to betray Jesus for money. Later he identified Jesus to the arresting group. See Matthew 26:47–50.

At the same time, Jesus repeatedly spoke of His approaching death as part of what Scripture anticipated and what He had come to accomplish.

The New Testament therefore refuses two opposite mistakes: **MISTAKE #1:** Jesus' betrayal happened because God lost control.

MISTAKE #2: Judas was therefore morally innocent.

Neither conclusion matches Scripture. God's plan remained intact. Judas remained responsible.

12. DID JUDAS "HAVE TO" BETRAY JESUS?

This question enters the larger theological discussion about divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Scripture clearly presents Jesus' betrayal as fitting within God's redemptive plan. See Psalm 41:9, John 13:18, and Acts 1:15–20.

Scripture also portrays Judas acting intentionally and holds him responsible.

Exactly how divine foreknowledge, divine purpose, prophecy, and human choice relate has been explained differently by faithful Christians.

This study does not need to solve that entire debate. The text requires readers to affirm at least this much: The betrayal did not surprise God. The betrayal did not defeat God's plan. Judas' betrayal was still sinful.

Reader Safeguard

The Bible gives firm truths here without giving a complete philosophical explanation of every relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom.

13. DOES ROMANS 3 ACTUALLY ADDRESS THE "BUT GOD USED MY SIN" ARGUMENT?

Yes. Read Romans 3:5–8.

Paul anticipates reasoning along these lines: If human unrighteousness somehow highlights God's righteousness, why should the sinner still be judged?

Paul rejects the conclusion. He also condemns the idea: "Let us do evil that good may come."

That is remarkably relevant to this subject. God's ability to bring good from wrongdoing never turns wrongdoing into obedience.

A person cannot reason: "My sin contributed to a good outcome, therefore the sin was justified." Scripture explicitly rejects that logic.

14. WHAT IF SOMEONE SAYS, "GOD TOLD ME TO DO IT"?

Claims of divine guidance do not override Scripture. This matters because spiritual language can be used manipulatively.

Someone may claim: "God told me you must obey me." "God told me you should give me this money." "God told me our relationship is meant to happen." "God told me not to report what happened." "God told me the rules do not apply in this situation."

Such claims deserve careful biblical testing. Scripture repeatedly warns about false claims made in God's name. See Jeremiah 23:16–32.

Someone cannot justify conduct Scripture condemns merely by attaching God's name to it. Claims of divine guidance should be tested by Scripture, God's revealed character, truth, wisdom, and appropriate accountability.

15. CAN "GOD HAS A PURPOSE" BECOME SPIRITUAL MANIPULATION?

Yes. A true doctrine can be misused.

Imagine someone suffering abuse being told: "God must have put you here for a reason, so leaving would mean resisting His plan." That conclusion does not follow from biblical providence.

Or imagine an offender saying: "Look at all the good God produced afterward. Clearly what happened was meant to happen." Again, the conclusion does not follow.

God's ability to redeem consequences belongs to God's glory. It does not transfer moral approval backward onto the wrongdoing.

Memory Anchor



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

Providence explains why evil cannot defeat God. Providence does not excuse the person doing evil.

16. WHAT DOES JOSEPH KNOW THAT JOB DOES NOT?

This comparison is extremely important.

JOSEPH — Eventually Joseph can identify a major good God accomplished through his suffering: the preservation of many lives.

JOB — Job never receives a comparable explanation within the story. The reader knows about the heavenly scenes of Job 1–2. Job does not appear to receive that information.

When God finally speaks, He does not give Job a neat explanation for each loss. He reveals His greatness, wisdom, and authority.

This means Joseph should not become a formula: “If someone waits long enough, God will eventually explain why everything happened.” Sometimes He may reveal part of His purpose. Sometimes He may not.

17. WHAT SHOULD A CHRISTIAN SAY WHEN THE REASON IS UNKNOWN?

Often the most faithful answer is: “I do not know.” That is not unbelief. It can be biblical humility.

A believer may know important truths without knowing the specific reason for an event: God is holy. God sees. God cares about justice. God remains sovereign. God can redeem what people intend for evil. God has not promised to explain every event during this life.

Those truths provide genuine hope without inventing knowledge.

18. WHY CAN TIDY EXPLANATIONS BE HARMFUL?

Because they may assign motives to God that Scripture has not revealed.

Someone suffers a miscarriage. A child dies. A spouse commits adultery. A person experiences abuse. A family loses everything. Another believer says: “God did this because He wanted to teach you _____.”

Perhaps God will indeed produce growth through suffering. But unless God has revealed the specific reason, the speaker does not know that explanation to be true.

Compassion should not be replaced by speculation. Biblical providence gives confidence in God's character. It does not give Christians access to God's unrevealed reasons.

Pastoral Safeguard

Do not force someone else's suffering into a lesson God has not revealed. Lament, grief, justice, unanswered questions, and trust in God can exist together.

19. WHAT DOES ROMANS 8:28 ACTUALLY PROMISE?

Read Romans 8:18–39.

Paul does not say everything Christians experience is good. The chapter contains suffering, groaning, weakness, persecution, danger, and death.

Romans 8:28 promises God's active providence for His people according to His purpose. The surrounding chapter keeps that promise connected to God's larger work of conforming His people to Christ and bringing them ultimately to glory.

The Christian confidence is therefore not: “This painful event is secretly pleasant.” It is: “This painful event cannot separate God's people from His love or overthrow His ultimate purpose.”

20. DOES GOD NEED EVIL?

No. This distinction prevents another misunderstanding.

When Scripture describes God bringing good through evil, it is not teaching that God depends upon sin.

God does not need betrayal because He lacks power. God does not need abuse because He lacks wisdom. God does not need injustice because He lacks alternatives.

The biblical emphasis is not: **GOD NEEDS EVIL**. It is: **EVIL CANNOT DEFEAT GOD**. Those are radically different ideas.

21. CAN GOD'S PROVIDENCE BE RECOGNIZED ONLY AFTERWARD?

Often, yes. Joseph understood his story differently in Genesis 50 than he could have understood it while sitting in the pit in Genesis 37.

Biblical characters frequently understand God's work retrospectively.

But even afterward, humility remains necessary. Christians may recognize: God provided. God protected. God redirected. God produced unexpected good.

Those observations may be reasonable. But Christians should distinguish them from claiming exhaustive knowledge of why God allowed every part of an event.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

Providence can be recognized without pretending omniscience.

22. WHAT ABOUT CONSEQUENCES?

God bringing good from sin does not necessarily remove the consequences of sin.

David received forgiveness after his sin involving Bathsheba and Uriah. See 2 Samuel 11–12. Yet serious consequences followed.

Grace is not the same as consequence-free living.

Likewise, repentance does not automatically restore trust, a leadership position, a relationship, financial responsibility, access to vulnerable people, or freedom from lawful consequences.

God's redeeming power should never be used to rush accountability.

23. WHAT IF THE PERSON WHO DID WRONG REPENTS?

Repentance matters deeply. The Gospel offers forgiveness even to serious sinners.

But genuine repentance does not normally say: "God used it, so let us stop talking about what happened."

Biblical repentance owns the wrong. It does not hide behind providence. It seeks forgiveness. It accepts appropriate consequences. It makes restitution where possible. It respects another person's boundaries. It does not demand immediate restoration of trust.

God's grace is enormous. Grace does not require pretending sin was small.

24. HOW DOES THIS TRUTH PROTECT BOTH GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN DIGNITY?

It allows Scripture to speak honestly about both.

Human actions matter. Choices matter. Motives matter. Victims matter. Justice matters.

And yet God is not helpless before human decisions. If human sin could permanently derail God's redemptive purpose, evil would possess a kind of ultimate sovereignty.

Scripture does not give evil that power. God can take what human beings intend destructively and accomplish purposes beyond their intentions.

25. HOW DOES THIS POINT TO JESUS?

The cross remains the ultimate answer.

At Calvary, sinful human motives converged: betrayal, envy, fear, political calculation, mockery, violence, cowardice.

Yet none of those things became virtues because God accomplished salvation.

Instead, the cross reveals a God whose redemptive power is greater than human rebellion. And resurrection reveals the verdict.

Human beings rejected Jesus. God raised Him. Human beings condemned Him. God exalted Him. Human beings intended to silence Him. The risen Christ became the hope of the world.

Christian hope is therefore not merely: "Something good may eventually happen after something bad." Christian hope is a Person. Jesus Christ was crucified. Jesus Christ rose. And because He lives, evil will not have the final word.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

WHAT THIS STUDY DOES — AND DOES NOT — TEACH

THIS STUDY DOES TEACH:

- God is sovereign.
- Human motives are morally meaningful.
- People remain responsible for sin.
- God can bring good through sinful actions.
- A good outcome does not justify evil means.
- Christians should be cautious about claiming to know God's unrevealed purposes.
- Providence must never be used to excuse abuse or suppress accountability.

THIS STUDY DOES NOT TEACH:

- Every painful event is morally good.
- Every suffering person will eventually learn why something happened.
- Victims must remain in harmful situations.
- Forgiveness eliminates consequences.
- Every claimed message from God is genuine.
- Human choices are meaningless.
- Christians must solve every philosophical question about sovereignty and freedom before trusting God.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. DISTINGUISH PROVIDENCE FROM APPROVAL.

"God can use this" and "God approves this" are very different claims.

2. TAKE MOTIVES SERIOUSLY.

A useful outcome does not automatically make the original intention righteous.

3. TEST CLAIMS MADE IN GOD'S NAME.

No private claim of divine guidance outranks Scripture.

4. NEVER WEAPONIZE PROVIDENCE AGAINST A SUFFERING PERSON.

Trust in God should strengthen people seeking truth, safety, wisdom, and justice—not silence them.

5. LET REPENTANCE BE REAL.

Do not use good consequences produced by God as an excuse to minimize the sin that preceded them.

6. BE WILLING TO SAY, "I DO NOT KNOW WHY."

Humility about God's unrevealed purposes is more biblical than confident speculation.

7. NOTICE PROVIDENCE WITH GRATITUDE, NOT ARROGANCE.

When God clearly brings good from painful circumstances, praise Him without claiming exhaustive knowledge of His plan.

8. LOOK TO JESUS.

The cross and resurrection provide the strongest reason to believe that human evil cannot defeat God's redemptive purpose.

REVIEW AND RETENTION

1. What distinction does Genesis 50:20 establish? Joseph's brothers intended evil while God intended good through the same events.
2. Does God bringing good from an action make the action righteous? No.
3. Who deserves credit for the good God brings from human sin? God.
4. Does Scripture excuse Judas because his betrayal occurred within God's redemptive plan? No.
5. What argument does Romans 3:5–8 reject? The idea that evil becomes acceptable because God may bring good from it.
6. Can a claim that "God told me" override Scripture? No.
7. Did Joseph eventually understand part of God's purpose? Yes.
8. Did Job receive the same kind of explanation? No.
9. Does Romans 8:28 say every event is itself good? No.
10. Does forgiveness automatically remove consequences or restore trust? No.

THINK IT THROUGH

11. Why is "God used it" different from "God approved it"?



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

The first statement concerns God's providence and sovereign ability to accomplish His purposes. The second makes a moral judgment about the human action. Scripture permits the first without requiring the second.

12. Why is Judas particularly useful for understanding this subject?

His betrayal clearly belonged within the events leading to the cross, yet Scripture still treats his betrayal as morally blameworthy. God's plan and Judas' responsibility remain side by side.

13. Why is Job an important companion to Joseph?

Joseph eventually learned something about the good God accomplished through his suffering. Job did not receive a comparable explanation. Together they prevent Christians from assuming every believer will discover the specific reason for suffering during this life.

14. Why is Romans 3:5–8 such an important safeguard?

Because Paul directly rejects the argument that wrongdoing becomes justified when God brings good from it. God's ability to overcome sin never gives people permission to commit sin.

15. What should Christians do when someone claims God told them to do something Scripture condemns?

Reject the claim. God's revealed Word—not private assertion—governs Christian moral obedience.

FINAL MEMORY ANCHORS

- God can use what He does not approve without ever calling evil good.
- Human intention and God's purpose do not have to be morally identical.
- God deserves praise for redemption. People remain responsible for sin.
- Providence explains why evil cannot defeat God. Providence does not excuse the person doing evil.
- Faith does not require knowing why. It requires knowing whom to trust.

A SCRIPTURE PATH FOR CONTINUED STUDY

Genesis 37:18–36 — Joseph's brothers act against him
Genesis 45:1–15 — Joseph begins recognizing God's preserving work
Genesis 50:15–21 — Human evil and divine purpose
Job 1–2 — The reader sees what Job himself does not
Job 38–42 — God answers Job without giving a simple explanation for every loss
Isaiah 10:5–15 — Assyria is used without being morally endorsed
Habakkuk 1–2 — Babylon is used and remains accountable
Matthew 26:14–25 — Judas arranges the betrayal
Matthew 26:47–56 — Judas betrays Jesus
John 18–19 — Human responsibility surrounding Jesus' death
Acts 2:22–24 — God's plan and human accountability
Acts 4:23–31 — Human opposition within divine providence
Romans 3:5–8 — Never "do evil that good may come"
Romans 8:18–39 — Providence amid suffering
James 1:13–18 — God's holiness and human temptation

RELATED 3NAILS STUDIES

3Nails Study #224 — God's Use of Assyria — Isaiah 10

Examines one specific biblical example in depth: God's use of Assyria, Assyria's pride and responsibility, and the relationship between divine sovereignty and human intention.

3Nails Study #225 — God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Explores the broader theological question in greater depth, including major Christian frameworks concerning sovereignty, freedom, election, and responsibility.

Study #226 intentionally stays narrower. Its central question is not: "How does every theological system explain sovereignty and freedom?" It is: "How should Christians understand and apply the biblical truth that God can accomplish His purposes through human actions He does not morally approve?"



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

THE BIG PICTURE

There is an enormous difference between saying: “God is sovereign over what happened” and saying: “What happened was therefore morally good.” Scripture never requires Christians to collapse those statements into one.

Joseph could look directly at the brothers who betrayed him and say their intention had been evil. He could also recognize that God had accomplished good. Both were true.

At the cross, the distinction becomes even clearer. Judas betrayed Jesus. Leaders acted unjustly. Pilate surrendered an innocent man. Soldiers crucified Him. Scripture does not rehabilitate their motives simply because the cross became the means of salvation.

Instead, Scripture magnifies God. The glory is not that human evil was secretly righteous. The glory is that human evil was not powerful enough to defeat God.

Romans 3 protects this truth from becoming an excuse: Never do evil so that good may result. Judas protects it from turning human beings into morally innocent puppets. Job protects it from becoming a promise that every sufferer will eventually receive Joseph’s explanation. Scripture’s warnings about false prophets protect it from people claiming private divine permission to violate God’s revealed commands.

And the Gospel protects it from becoming merely an abstract argument about providence.

Jesus entered a world filled with sinful human motives. He was betrayed. He was falsely accused. He suffered injustice. He was crucified. And He rose.

The resurrection does not require Christians to say Friday was good because Sunday came. It means Friday did not win.

That distinction matters when suffering becomes personal. A Christian does not need to call betrayal good in order to believe God can redeem. A Christian does not need to call abuse good in order to trust God. A Christian does not need to abandon justice in order to forgive. A Christian does not need to understand every reason in order to believe God remains sovereign. And a Christian does not need to defend God by inventing explanations He has not revealed.

Faith can say: That was wrong. That hurt. That person was responsible. Justice matters. The reason may remain unknown. And God is still God.

That is not weak providence. It is enormous providence.

Human beings can act from motives God condemns. God remains holy. Human beings can rebel. God remains sovereign. Human beings can intend destruction. God can redeem.

And at the center of Christianity stands the ultimate evidence: a cross intended by human beings for death, followed by an empty tomb.

Final Memory Anchor

God does not need evil to become good in order to overcome evil with good.

The cross proves it. The resurrection declares it. Jesus has the final word.

ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE — POINTING TO JESUS