

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S PURPOSES FOR EVIL

WHAT IS EVIL?

This is one of the fundamental questions we must face before addressing the 'problem' of evil. How does one determine if something evil? On what basis do we make moral judgments?

1. Secular Answers to Defining Good and Evil:

- a) Good is whatever benefits a society. Evil is whatever harms a society.
- b) Good and evil is a function of brain chemistry and evolves as humans evolve.
- c) Good is whatever makes a person happy. Evil is whatever fails to make a person happy.
- d) Good is what promotes psychological stability. Evil is what harms psychological stability.
- e) Good and evil are *generally* subjective evaluations people or societies makes.
- f) Good and evil are illusions. The world is meaningless and absurd.

2. Secular Answers to Determining what is Good and Evil:

- a) Good and evil is determined by societal norms or a particular era (e.g., Victorian Era).
- b) Good and evil is determined by genetics and human evolution.
- c) Good and evil is determined by each person's subjective opinions.
- d) Good and evil cannot be determined by any standard because the subjective nature of good and evil renders such evaluations meaningless. Thus, good and evil are illusions.

3. Biblical Answer to Defining and Determining Good and Evil

- Moral good represents the obligations morally responsible creatures have to objective commands and principles established and revealed to us by a holy (morally perfect) God). Moral evil represents the disregard of moral obligations by morally responsible creatures in violation of a holy God's moral standards (cf. Rom. 1:18-23, 32; 2:14-15; 3:9-20, 23). Good and evil are expressed in thoughts, words, and actions (Matt. 5:21-22; 27-28; 1 John 3:15).

4. Distinguishing between Moral and Natural Evil

- **Moral Evil** is that which is committed by personal moral creatures and causes pain and suffering for themselves and others.
- **Natural Evil** refers to adverse conditions in a fallen (cursed) world that causes pain and suffering. Natural evil includes the following:
 - Natural disasters (e.g., fires, storms, earthquakes, etc.)
 - Accidents and mishaps (due to adverse consequences of the laws of nature)
 - sickness and disease
 - Physical and mental handicaps
 - Physical toil

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WHAT IS THE PROBLEM OF EVIL?

Throughout the ages, the notion that an all-powerful and all-good God allows evil to corrupt His good and pristine creation has been regarded as the greatest challenge for Christianity. The following is representative of the argument against God due to evil going as far back as Epicurus in the 4th century BC and more famously by David Hume, a philosopher in the 18th century.

1. The Logical Problem of Evil

- (1) The God of the Bible is all-powerful (omnipotent).
- (2) The God of the Bible is all-good (omnibenevolent).
- (3) Yet, evil exists.
- (4) Therefore, the God of the Bible cannot possibly exist.

Hidden Assumptions in the Argument:

- (1) The all-powerful (omnipotent) God of the Bible **CAN** prevent evil.
- (2) The all-good (omnibenevolent) God of the Bible **WANTS** to prevent evil.
- (3) Yet, evil exists.

This leads to some preliminary conclusions:

- (4) Therefore, either God is not all-powerful (he **CANNOT** prevent evil)
OR he is not all-good (he does **NOT WANT** to prevent evil).

The supposed conflict between these two conclusions lead to the same conclusion as before:

- (5) Therefore, the God of the Bible cannot possibly exist (because the Bible insists that God must be **BOTH** all-powerful and all-good).

2. The Problem of Extensive and Senseless Evil

Some think: Maybe God could be excused for small amounts of evil or minor evil infractions.
BUT...

What about the Holocaust? The Nazis did not kill 60, 600 or 6,000 Jews. They killed 6,000,000.
What about the horrific atrocities that seem to be completely senseless (gratuitous)?
See Elie Wiesel's haunting Holocaust memoir entitled: *Night*.

3. The Personal Problem of Evil

For many people, evil is not a problem for their belief in God until tragedy strikes home. Even Biblical writers struggled with how God handles evil.

See Psalm 13:1-4; 44:22-25; 77:1-10; Lamentations 3:1-18

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CONFRONTING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The Christian response to the problem of evil is known as *theodicy*. The word comes from the Greek words for "God" (*theós*) and "justice" (*dikē*). A theodicy provides a solution for the problem of evil that "justifies God"; defending His integrity and exonerating Him from the charge that He is morally culpable for evil. Christians have responded to the problem of evil in 2 basic ways. One response emphasizes the autonomy of man's free will and is associated with *Arminianism*. The other response emphasizes the sovereignty and glory of God and is associated with *Calvinism*.

CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM

The 5 Points of Calvinism (TULIP)	The 5 Points of Arminianism
Total (Thorough) Depravity Sin has enslaved and corrupted every person. Humans are spiritually dead. They are unable and unwilling to repent and believe.	Depraved but Free Sin has infected every person, but their will is free. Humans are spiritually sick. They are able and may be willing to repent and believe.
Unconditional Election God chose the elect on the basis of His freedom and grace, not for anything seen in sinners.	Conditional Election God chose the elect on the basis of their foreseen faith that is freely exercised if they so choose.
Limited (Definite) Atonement Christ's death provides atonement only for the elect, definitively paying the price for their sin and guaranteeing their salvation.	Universal (Unlimited) Atonement Christ's death is a provisional atonement for the sins of the whole world which makes salvation possible for all but guaranteed for none.
Irresistible (Efficacious) Grace Saving grace is irresistible and efficaciously saves the elect. The Holy Spirit regenerates the hearts of the elect, enabling them to repent and believe.	Resistible (Provisional) Grace Saving grace is necessary but not sufficient to save sinners. It can be resisted and must be cooperated with by the free will of sinners.
Perseverance of the Saints God's grace preserves the elect and ensures they will persevere in faith till the end. None of the elect will finally fall away from the faith.	Uncertain Perseverance of the Saints God's grace cannot guarantee believers will not fall away from the faith. Not all will freely cooperate with God's grace to persevere in faith.

THE FREE WILL DEFENSE (ARMINIANISM)

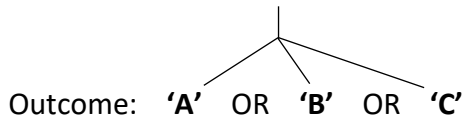
Defining Free Will

- 1) For our choices to be free and morally responsible they must be made autonomously. They cannot be sufficiently determined by anyone or anything outside our independent freedom to make these choices.
- 2) Whatever choices we make, to be free and morally responsible, we must be able to have made any number of alternative choices under the same exact circumstances.

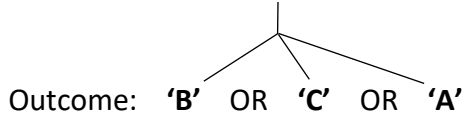
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Arminian Freedom of Will

Circumstances 'A' can lead to:

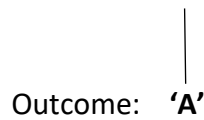


Circumstances 'B' can lead to:

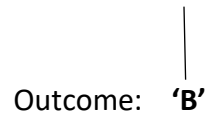


Calvinist Freedom of Will

Circumstances 'A' can **ONLY** lead to:



Circumstances 'B' can **ONLY** lead to:



Defining the Free Will Defense (FWD)

- 1) Free will is necessary for acting good and being morally responsible for our actions. For example, if our love for God is genuine, then we must have equal freedom to hate God.
- 2) God must allow us to exercise this freedom of contrary choice otherwise we could not be blamed for acting evil nor praised for acting good.
- 3) When God grants us this moral freedom, he is taking a huge risk because of the possibility we will abuse this freedom and choose evil. But God is willing to take this risk because free will is so highly prized. The benefits outweigh any risks.
- 4) Therefore, evil is always the result of free will choices having gone in the wrong direction. God cannot be blamed for the evil choices his creatures risk making.

Problems with the Free Will Defense

- 1) ***Free Will Undermines God's Sovereignty.*** Psa. 103:19. FWD says if God interferes with our free will, then our freedom and responsibility is stripped. But God often intervenes. The question is, why doesn't He intervene all the time? See Matt. 2:12-19.
- 2) ***Free Will Undermines the Doctrine of Depravity.*** See John 8:34; Eph. 4:17-19; Rom. 3:10-18, 23; 8:7-8.
- 3) ***God does not have Free Will.*** Why/ how does God grant us something He doesn't have?
- 4) ***God could Design us to Choose Only Good.*** Such will be the case in the eternal state.
- 5) ***Free Will cannot Account for Divine Foreknowledge.*** If free will is true, then how could Jesus know about Peter's denials (Matt. 26:34)?
- 6) ***Free Will Allows Gratuitous Evil.*** "Gratuitous" means senseless/ meaningless/ devoid of any good reason for occurring. See Matt. 2:12-19 again.

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THE GREATER GOOD DEFENSE (CALVINISM)

The Greater Good Defense (GGD) locates evil not in the unintended results of free will choices gone bad, but in God's particular intentions for the course of all things whether good or evil. Nothing escapes his plans and purposes for history due to his meticulous sovereignty.

Defining the Greater Good Defense

- 1) If there is any evil in this world, then it could only come about because God has allowed it for some good and wise reason. See John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 4:17; 1 Pet. 1:6-7. James 1:2-4.
- 2) Evil does not happen and then God reshuffles things so he can salvage some good from it. Rather, every instance of evil is part of his predetermined plans for history.
- 3) There can be no possibility of some evil existing for which God had no good and wise purpose. If God cannot get the necessary goods he intends from the various evils that permeate this world, then those evils would never have come about in the first place.

Two Criteria a Faithful Theodicy Must Meet

- 1) **Unique Goods.** Whatever good God brings about due to evil must be a unique sort of good that otherwise could not have come about without the evil it is dependent upon.

Illustration: "Compassion." George Müller could have never cared for 10,000+ orphans unless there existed a crisis of British children in abject poverty that cries out for such "compassion."

- 2) **Weighty Goods.** The good that comes about due to some evil must be weighty and important enough to justify the existence of the evil the good is dependent on. God does not pursue trivial goods out of some weighty and horrendous evil. The good God gets from evil must be significantly greater than the evil itself.

Illustration: Greg Welty says, "Imagine if someone asserted that unless the Holocaust happened, the inventor of his favorite flavor of ice cream would not have existed (and he tells some crazy story that allegedly links the two things.)"

Problems with the Greater Good Defense (GGD)

- 1) God does not escape being morally responsible for evil. We will address this later.
- 2) How can the ends justify the means? See the two criteria for a faithful theodicy above.
- 3) There is no incentive to fight against evil. See Rom. 12:21; 1 Thess. 5:15.
- 4) Doesn't this mean we can pursue evil so that good may come? No. We are not in the place of God (see 5c below). See also Rom. 3:8.

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- 5) How do we know what goods God gets from evil?
 - a) Some goods are self-evident (e.g., death of Christ).
 - b) Some goods need to be explained (e.g., Joseph being sold into slavery; Gen. 50:20).
 - c) Most goods we can never know; they fall under God's inscrutable wisdom. Again, consider the story of Herod and Bethlehem babies in Matt. 2:13-18. See also Isa. 40:13-14; 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33-36.

JOB AS A TEST CASE FOR UNDERSTANDING GOD AND EVIL

- 1) Job is a godly man. Not just human assessment (1:1), but divine assessment (1:8; 2:3).
- 2) Job was prosperous and successful and had a good family (1:1-5).
- 3) Job was unaware of the invisible conversation between God and Satan.
- 4) Satan is up to no good (1:7; see how this alludes to the language of 1 Pet. 5:8).
- 5) God instigates the challenge for Satan to afflict Job (1:8, 12).
- 6) God and Satan have opposed agendas/ aims. God wishes to uphold Job's integrity. Satan wishes to destroy it so that he will stop "fearing" God and "curse" him instead (1:9, 11).
- 7) Satan acknowledges God's sovereign protection and blessing over Job (1:10) as well as his ultimate sovereign control over what happens to him ("put forth **your** hand"; 1:11).
- 8) Satan is the immediate instrument of the evil that came against Job, but he can do nothing God does not intend him to do (1:12; note use of "your hand" in vs. 11 & 12).
- 9) Job's response after all his suffering is not to "curse" God but to "worship" him (1:20).
- 10) Job assigns **ultimate** responsibility to God for the evil that came against him (1:21), but not **moral** responsibility according to the inspired narrator (1:22).
- 11) God did not stop Satan, but in fact, invites him to afflict Job a second time (2:3, 6).
- 12) God acknowledges his own **ultimate** responsibility and assigns **moral** responsibility to Satan (2:3 – "you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause").
- 13) Job's wife falls prey to Satan's devices, but Job does not (2:9).
- 14) Again, Job acknowledges God's **ultimate** responsibility (sovereignty) over good and evil, while not assigning **moral** responsibility to him (2:10), thereby retaining his integrity.
- 15) Job acknowledges God's inscrutable wisdom and sovereignty again in 42:1-6.
- 16) God restores Job's fortunes twofold (42:10), and now his family acknowledges God's sovereignty over the evil that befell him (42:11).

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UNDERSTANDING THE GREATNESS OF GOD

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (A. W. Tozer). When it comes to the problem of evil, we cannot think God relates to evil in the same way humans do. We tend to humanize God and deify humans. However, God is a supreme being uniquely distinct from us; a being of which no greater can be conceived.



The Holy One

The idea of God's holiness has two dimensions:

- **Supreme Righteousness** – God is set apart with a white-hot righteousness.
- **Supreme Transcendence** – God is wholly set apart in his fundamental essence as God.

God is – [He has these great-making properties/ attributes – see Job 11:7-9]

- 1) *Self-existent* – He is the uncreated Creator of all.
- 2) *Self-sufficient and Independent* – He has no need of anything nor is he dependent on anything outside of Himself and His own perfect self-satisfaction and blessedness.
- 3) *Infinite and Perfect* – there are no limits to greatness of His being. All His attributes are perfect. He can be no less and no more than wholly good, just, loving, wise, etc.
- 4) *Simple [Unity]* – God is not composed of parts (like a puzzle) that are somehow put together from some other source. All that is **IN** God **IS** God. He has a unified essence. All His attributes are necessary, co-equal, co-eternal, and co-dependent.
- 5) *Timelessly Eternal* – God stands outside of time and history and is not in any way dependent upon the succession of moments that are part of the finite creation.
- 6) *Immutable* – God cannot change in His essential being. He is not altered or adversely affected by anything outside Himself.
- 7) *Omniscient [All-knowing]* – God is the source of all knowledge. He knows all things infallibly and exhaustively. He does not learn anything.
- 8) *Omnipresent* – God stands outside of space. He is present everywhere. However, because he is also an independent spirit (immaterial), this denies pantheism (that He **is** everything) and panentheism (that He is **in** everything).
- 9) *Omnipotent [All-powerful]* – God is able to do anything that is logically possible (being a God of all logic) and that does not contradict any of His other attributes.
- 10) *Incomprehensible* – Although God is knowable, the infinite depth of His being is inexhaustible. It is not possible to know or comprehend God in all His fullness.

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The Sovereign One

In order to make sense of God's relationship to evil we must have a Biblical understanding of His sovereignty. God's sovereignty is all-encompassing and meticulous. There are no "maverick molecules" running wild in the universe. Such a view of sovereignty is utterly humbling as seen in the story of Nebuchadnezzar. See Daniel 4:34-35. Note the ruler sets God's sovereignty in the context of His transcendent holiness—His incomprehensible otherness and majesty.

- ***The Components of Divine Sovereignty:***

- 1) *God's Eternal Decree* – the establishing of God's comprehensive plan for history in eternity past. See Psa. 33:11; Isa. 14:27; Eph. 1:11.
- 2) *God's Providence* – God is both the architect of history's plan as well as its executor (builder). God sustains and directs every thought, movement, and action in part and in whole over the entire course of history. See Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; Dan. 2:21; Isa. 46:9-11; Matt. 10:29; Prov. 16:33; 1 Kings 22:28,34; Acts 14:16; 17:25-28.
- 3) *God's Omnipotence* – In order to ensure that God's plan unfolds as He designed it then He must have all the necessary powers to make it happen. See 2 Chron. 20:6; Isa. 40:21-26; Job 26:14.

- ***God's Sovereignty Over Evil***

God would not be the God as He describes Himself in Scripture if somehow evil exists outside of His sovereign control and purposes. We have already seen this in the life of Job. See also Isa. 45:5-7; Lam. 3:37-38 (note how evil is not detached from God's goodness. He never purposes evil for the sake of evil. see Lam. 3:19-26, 32-33).

- ***God as Transcendent Author of All***

God's providence is not like a domino maze where he sets everything in motion or a Grandmaster Chess player trying to outmaneuver His opponents. He is like a Dickens or a Tolkien or a C. S. Lewis; a grand storyteller creating a grand epic.

The Good One

If God were all-powerful but not all-good then we would have reason to fear. What assures us that God's all-encompassing sovereignty is worthy of our full trust and unfailing praise is precisely because He is also supremely good.

- 1) *Benevolence of God* – God is the "overflowing fountain of all good" (Belgic Confession). See Psa. 34:8; 145:7, 9. God is identified with the very essence of love (1 John 4:8), kindness (Psa. 145:17), faithfulness (Psa. 36:5), and mercy (Lam. 3:22).
- 2) *Righteousness of God* – See 1 Tim. 6:16; Hab. 1:13; Psa. 5:4; Prov. 6:16-19.
- 3) *Justice of God* – See Deut. 32:4. He rewards righteousness equitably and punishes all wickedness impartially (Ex. 34:7; 1 Sam. 26:23; Rev. 20:12-13).

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MAKING SENSE OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

If God is meticulously sovereign in every detail of time, space, history, and the whole scope of actions taken by every human he creates, then how can he escape being charged with all the evil that unfolds in his creation—both moral and natural?

Is God the *Passive Policeman* who refuses to intervene when criminals exercise their free will to commit crimes OR is He the *Sinister Mob Boss* who orders the criminals to commit their crimes?

Is God the Author of Evil?

- 1) Importance of James 1:13. God cannot be the direct or vicarious instigator of evil. He does not infuse an evil will or implant evil thoughts in His creatures (humans or angels).
- 2) God relationship to good and evil is ***asymmetrical*** such that He stands behind good in direct way as the source of all good but stands behind evil in an indirect way, nonetheless, as the one who sovereignly controls all things, whether good or evil.
- 3) As the ***Transcendent Author*** of history, God stands outside the storyline. No one blames Tolkien for the evil of Sauron even though he writes it into the story of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien also provides the worldview by which to judge Sauron's actions as evil.

Moral Responsibility in Scripture

- 1) *The Knowledge of Good and Evil*. a) God implants His moral law upon the hearts of all people. b) He has given them a conscience, an internal alert system that affirms good actions and warns of evil actions. See Romans 1:18-32; 2:12-13.
- 2) *The Intentions of the Heart*. The heart is Mission Control Central for human behavior (Prov. 4:23). What kind of tree are you? (Matt. 12:33). What is the treasure of your heart? (Matt. 12:35; cf. Matt. 6:21).
- 3) *God Makes Judgments Based on Intentions*. See Gen. 6:5; Prov. 16:2; Jer. 17:9-10; 1 Cor. 4:5.
- 4) *God's Supremely Good Intentions*. God's sovereign plans coincide with his "good pleasure/ intentions" (Isa. 46:9-11). God can never have evil intentions (Psa. 5:4).

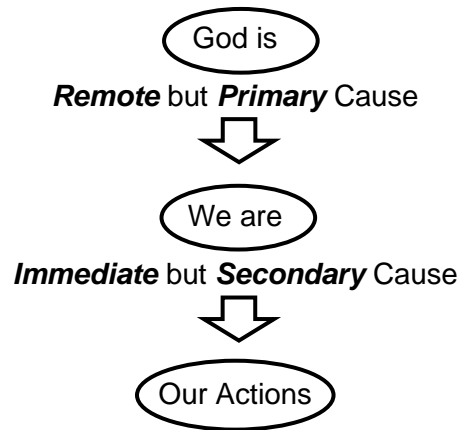
Examples of God's good intentions:

- Joseph and his brothers – Gen. 45:5-9; 50:15-21.
- Crucifixion of God's Son – Isa. 53:10. See also Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28.

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Biblical Compatibilism and Moral Responsibility

- 1) *Defining Compatibilism.* There is a dual explanation (double agency) for every human choice. God's meticulous sovereignty is compatible with human freedom and responsibility. See Prov. 16:9; 19:21; 21:1.



We always do what we ***most want*** to do based on the ***strongest motive[s]*** of our heart directing our wills, bearing in mind that the intentions of our hearts are tied to our fundamental nature whether ***corrupted*** or ***regenerated***.

- 2) *Examples of Compatibilism and Moral Responsibility*

Human intentions for evil are always corrupted by evil. However, God's intentions for those same evil actions are always good.

- Joseph and his brothers. See Gen. 50:20.
- Pharaoh's hardened heart. See Exod. 7:13-14; 9:34; 10:27.
- Eli's Worthless Sons. See 1 Sam. 2:12, 25, 34.
- The Ruler of Assyria. See Isa. 10:5-19.
- Crucifixion of Jesus. Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28.

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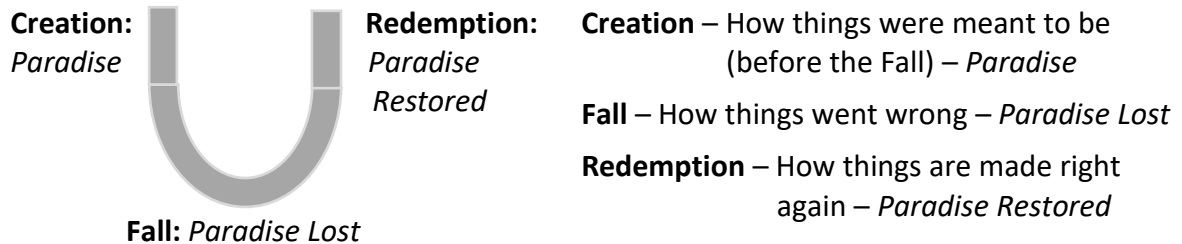
THE ONE TRUE STORY

In order to make sense of the Bible’s theodicy, we must understand the importance of storytelling. The Bible shows how evil is written into the broad story God tells.

The Importance of Stories

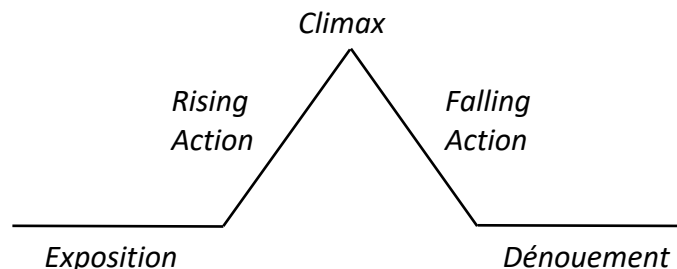
Stories help us make sense of the world we live in whether they be actual history, fiction, legend, or myth. Flannery O’Connor says, “A people is known, not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells.”

Conflict-Resolution Pattern. Every good story has a poignant *conflict* demanding a compelling *resolution*. Every well-crafted story makes assumptions about (1) the way things *ought* to be, (2) how things have gone wrong, and (3) what is to be done to make them right again. This reflects the ‘U’ shaped storyline of the Bible:



Comedy or Tragedy. Stories tend to be either *comedy* (good ending) or *tragedy* (tragic ending). The story always has a hero who faces the conflict and overcomes it or fails to overcome it (tragic hero). The victorious (comedic) hero is what we all long for (e.g., David). Classic stories have villains whom the heroes have to face and hopefully defeat (e.g., David vs. Goliath), thereby overcoming the conflict and bringing resolution to the story (the “happy-ever-after”).

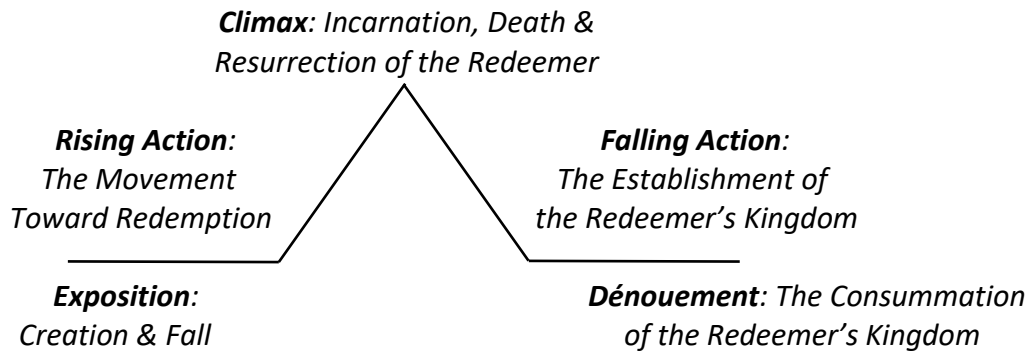
Freytag’s Pyramid



- 1) **Exposition.** Backstory. Compelling characters & themes leading to the emerging conflict.
- 2) **Rising Action.** Conflict builds and plot thickens (“entanglement”). Resolution is uncertain.
- 3) **Climax.** Critical moment of crisis. Conflict seems impossible to resolve. Turning point of plot.
- 4) **Falling Action.** Conflict moves toward resolution. “Reversal.” Plot twist? Epiphany?
- 5) **Dénouement.** Final unraveling where conflict fully resolved. The happy-ever-after begins.

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Structure of the Biblical Storyline



1) **Exposition: Creation and Fall**

- *The Creation*
The drama of redemption begins with Gen. 1:1. God is the fundamental precondition for all reality. Note Creator-creature distinction. Earth is central. Man is central (supporting role to main actor—God the Transcendent Author). We are designed to bring God glory.
- *The Fall*
Conflict emerges in Gen. 3:1. “Serpent” introduced as main villain. He seeks to usurp God and turn man against him. God tests Adam and Eve. They fail. They are deceived by false promises of rebellion. Alienation sets in. All creation is cursed.

2) **Rising Action: The Movement Toward Redemption**

2 trajectories toward redemption: divine and human:

- *Human Failure:* Fig leaves (Gen. 3:7), murder (Gen. 4:1-8); anarchy (Gen. 6:5); Israel disobeys (Deut. 28); kings and people fail over and over again.
- *Divine Success:* Garments of skin (Gen. 3:21), head crushing seed (Gen. 3:15); grace to Noah (Gen. 6:8); promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21), deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 9:16), prophecies of coming Messiah.

3) **Climax: Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of the Redeemer**

Star appears (Matt. 2:1-2). God-man born, enters plotline (John 1:1, 14). Unconventional hero who must die/ scandalous (1 Cor. 1:18). Weakness defeats evil (1 Cor. 1:25). Resurrection secures defeat (Matt. 28:6). Descends into abyss, rises in triumph.

4) **Falling Action: The Establishment of the Redeemer's Kingdom**

“I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). Followers proclaim message (Matt. 18:18-20). Kingdom spreads to whole world. Battle continues with the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2:1-3; 4:17-27; 6:10-17), but Christ promises victory (Rom. 8:29). He will “ransom people...from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

5) **Dénouement: The Consummation of the Redeemer's Kingdom**

Christ delivers kingdom to God (1 Cor. 15:24). Glorification for believers (Rom. 8:30). Judgment for enemies (Rev. 21:8). Paradise restored. New heavens-earth (2 Pet. 3:13).

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