

Dear friend,

We are in the midst of a series of articles considering the doctrine of God's providence. This doctrine is most succinctly summarized by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 1:11 which reads, "In him we were also chosen having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will..." God's providence is God's working out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. What we are currently seeking to understand is this: "Everything" includes all the evil actions of evil human beings, and so how is it that God works out evil actions in conformity with the purpose of his will? How does he do this without himself doing evil and remaining just in his punishing of men for the evil they do?

Last month and again this month I am seeking to show that the Bible does indeed say that all things, including the evil things that evil people do, are ordained by God and yet people willingly choose to do evil and God justly punishes those who do evil. Next month I hope to show how we should and should not respond to this knowledge about God's relationship to evil in the world.

The Assyrian Empire with its capital at Ninevah was one of the great empires of the distant past. They figure prominently in the Biblical narrative as they are the ones who wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel, whose capital was Samaria and carried those 10 northern tribes off into captivity (2 Kings 17:7-41). Assyria planned and then executed a campaign of war against Israel. Listen to how God, through the prophet Isaiah, describes his relationship to Assyria and its aggression towards Israel. Isaiah 10:5-6, "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets." Later in v.15 the Lord refers to Assyria as being his axe, his saw, his rod and his club. God is the one who sends Assyria against Israel. Assyria carries the club of God's wrath and Assyria is the club of God's wrath. He does this because Israel has made him angry by their disobedience and idolatry. He sends them to seize loot and snatch plunder and to trample Israel down like mud. This is a poetic description of the violence of warfare. God most definitely is the one who sent Assyria to wage war with all of its violent evil against Israel.

However, as you can see in the first word of this quotation, God also punishes Assyria for doing what he sent Assyria to do. The word "woe" in the Scriptures refers to God's just punishment of those who do evil. Listen to how God's punishment of Assyria is described: Isaiah 10:12-17, "When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, 'I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. For he says: "'By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings. As one reaches into a nest, so my hand reached for the wealth of the nations; as men gather abandoned eggs, so I gathered all the countries; not one flapped a wing, or opened its mouth to chirp.'" Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up, or a club brandish him who is not wood! Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors; under his pomp a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame. The Light of

Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers.””

God sends Assyria to destroy Israel and yet God justly punishes Assyria for destroying Israel because they did it willfully, arrogantly, with evil intent. It was God’s good purpose and will that Israel be destroyed by the Assyrians. Yet the Assyrians willed the destruction of Israel with an evil will. God did not “force” Assyria to do evil. They did exactly what they wanted to do. Therefore, it is right and good for God to punish Assyria for the evil they have done. Yet, the evil they did was exactly what God wanted them to do. This is the basic description the Bible makes of all that happens in the world. Listen to how the prophet Jeremiah describes this in Lamentations 3:37-39, “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? Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins?” (NOTE: the word translated “calamities” is the Hebrew word which is usually translated “evil things.”)

Time and space do not permit my telling you of the scores of times the Bible describes the evil actions of evil people as being ordained or decreed by God while at the same time insisting that God does not do evil. Rather, evil men willingly do evil and thus God is entirely just to punish those who do the evil that fulfills his good purposes (You can find a very large list of these passages in Dr. Wayne Grudem’s “Systematic Theology,” pp. 323-327.). The only way we can resolve these passages is to recognize that God is able to do things that we cannot do. He has made a way to create moral creatures that are able to willingly choose to do evil and thus he is just to punish us for the evil we do and yet these creatures are not free from his sovereign control over their evil actions. Yet, he never does evil while decreeing their evil actions. There is a mystery at the heart of this that we are unable to comprehend. But that should not cause us not to believe what we clearly read in the Bible. Like so many other doctrines (the Triune nature of God, the incarnation of the Son of God, etc.), this doctrine is beyond our full comprehension. Yet, as I hope to show next month, knowing this doctrine enables us to live joyful and productive lives for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor.

Praising God for his Providence,