

Dear friend,

In our consideration of the doctrine of God's providence we are now going to consider how we are to respond to the fact that God ordains all that comes to pass in the world, including the evil actions of men and demons, yet God never does evil and he is right to punish men for the evil we do. The fact of God's sovereign rule over evil is to be a source of great help for Christians. But before we look at how knowing this helps us as Christians let me first be clear about two ways we cannot respond to this fact.

First, we can never accuse God of doing evil, nor should we ever thank God for evil as we thank him for good. God ordaining evil and God doing evil are two different things. Even as the Bible clearly teaches that God ordains evil yet these same Scriptures clearly teach that God does not directly do evil. James 1:13-14, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." Psalm 145:17, "The LORD is righteous in all his ways..." Psalm 5:4, "You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil..." Therefore, we must never call evil good. We must never excuse the evil that we or others do by saying it was God's will we do it. We must always condemn ourselves and others for the evil we do. We must always recognize that we and others are justly accountable for the evil we do because all the evil that is done in the world is willingly done by us, that is, we want to do evil.

Second, we must always resist evil in ourselves and in others. We are not fatalists. We do not live as though the evil we or others do is inevitable as it is the "will of God." We must fight against the evil that is in us as Paul says in Colossians 3:5-8, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry... You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." We must work to help our brothers and sisters overcome the evil in them as Paul says in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently..." We must stand up for justice in the world and work to lawfully protect the weak and the vulnerable from the predation of wicked people. Proverbs 29:7, "The righteous care about justice for the poor..." Proverbs 31:8-9, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." Romans 13:3-4, "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong... if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

A good friend of mine, together with her sister, was sexually molested by their grandfather who was also a pastor. Their grandmother knew what was going on but rather than confront her husband and rescue these little girls from him she told them it was God's will and that they must submit to it. This was gross and perverse evil for which you can be sure that both of these grandparents are suffering in hell as there was never any acknowledgement of these sins, nor repentance from them. We are not fatalists. We "hate what is evil and cling to what is good (Romans 12:9)."

Yet, the fact that God sovereignly rules over all the evil that is done in this world is a source of great comfort and help to believers. When evil is done to us, while we are encouraged to lawfully resist it, yet we also recognize God's good purposes for us in it. Hebrews 12:4-11 is probably the clearest description of God's good purposes in the evil that is done to us. This letter is written to people who are undergoing the evil of persecution for their faith (see Hebrews 10:32-39). In Hebrews 12:5-7 the author asserts that the suffering of persecution is God's discipline. God is the one who has sent the persecutors even though what they are doing is evil and God is going to punish them for doing this if they do not repent (2Thessalonians 1:5-10). He tells these persecuted people to recognize that God is disciplining them for their good which is that they may share in his holiness. The loss of earthly comfort and security brought upon us by the evil actions of others is used by God to enable us to know the glory and greatness of belonging to God, of being his holy, that is, set apart people. Our joy in God is increased as our joy in the pleasures of this world is taken from us. This does not mean that we are not sad and do nothing to escape or halt the evil being done to us but it does mean that we know that God himself has sent these evil actions for our eternal good and so we rejoice in that eternal good even while we grieve the present pain (v. 11).

In addition, God's rule over evil men also gives us confidence that we can ask God to stop those who are doing evil and to deliver us from them as we see Paul doing in Romans 15:30-31, "I urge you, brothers... to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea..." We also see this same prayer repeatedly in the Psalms, for example: Psalm 7:9, "O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure." Psalm 33:10-11, "The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations." If God cannot interfere with the "free wills" of evil men then it makes no sense to ask him to rescue us from evil men.

It is because we know that God rules over evil men that we are courageous, joyful and loving people in the face of the threats and actions of evil people. We are not people who take revenge or repay those who do evil to us with evil. Our sovereign king is in charge of what is done to us and every person who does evil will one day have to face him and give an answer. Therefore we seek to bless those who do evil to us. We rejoice when men insult us, persecute us and falsely say all kinds of evil against us because of Christ because we know that great is our reward in heaven (Matthew 5:11-12). We know that they may kill us but they cannot harm us because nothing can separate us from the love of Christ for us. Indeed not only can evil men not harm us but the evil they do to us is sent by God for our eternal joy.

Rejoicing and resting in our sovereign Lord,