

Blessedly unaware

God gives us the gift of not feeling His control

How can God be operating everything in accord with His own will (Eph. 1:11) and 6 billion people have free will simultaneously?

Well, this is strange. I was going to plant petunias in my helmet today, but I suddenly feel like attacking Israel instead.

It's impossible. Both things cannot be true. So where does the human will come in?

It comes in every second of every day. When he decided to go up against Israel, the king of Assyria was certainly exercising his will. What he did not realize was that his will was directly influenced by God. A will that is influenced by anything—let alone God—cannot in any way be construed as free. Remember this: **we all have wills, they are just not free.**

Then why do we even exist? Why do our wills exist? Is God playing chess with Himself? Why does He even need us? Why does He bother making us *think* that we're free?

It is in this perceived realm of freedom that we live and learn. God has given us the gift of NOT FEELING HIS CONTROL, and it is this gift that allows us to struggle with decisions, suffer for mistakes, and revel in the overcoming of obstacles. It is this gift that allows us to turn to Him with tears both of sorrow and of joy. The idea, friends, is to bring us in humble adoration to His feet. If it takes a sovereign God to assure that we come to this blessed place, then let's let Him be sovereign—at the same time reveling in our perceived (not actual) freedom. ■

Martin Zender's Clanging Gong News

"If I know all mysteries and all knowledge, but have no love, I am a clanging gong" --1 Cor. 13:1-2



Two out of three isn't bad.

King of Assyria ignorant of God's control



God does what *He* will in this world (Eph. 1:11), and the inhabitants of the world can either realize that or disbelieve it—it doesn't matter. Those of us who are savvy to the sovereignty of God believe it, and we say things like, "God is operating all things in accord with the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11) and, "All is of God" (2 Cor. 5:14). It doesn't bother us that all is of God. In fact, we're fine with it. In fact, we like it. Those who simply cannot believe that God is sovereign say things like, "God is *not* operating all things in accord with the counsel of His will" (sorry, no verse reference), and "All is *not* of God" (again, no verse reference) and go on believing that they are the captains of their own fate.

A perfect example of a person who was doing the exact will of God even while imagining that he had a free will (I mean, besides your local pastor) was the king of Assyria. You can read about him in Isaiah, chapter 10, and I recommend that you do so.

The King of Assyria was minding his own business one day when he got the sudden urge to unleash a military campaign against God's people. So off he went just like any other power-mad potentate, capturing booty, seizing plunder, and trampling down people like mud in the streets (Is. 10:6). The important thing to note

here is that the king of Assyria thought he was doing this of his own free will. He had no idea that, the whole time, God was causing him (not allowing him) to attack Israel.

I can hear the protest: "But Martin, God would never cause a heathen king to go to war against His own people. If fact, we doubt that He would even allow it."

I know. I once had a problem with this myself. Since this is so hard to believe (I have to admit it's a bit of a shock), here is the passage:

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hands is My indignation. I send it against a godless nation and commission it against the people of My fury, to capture booty and to seize plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets. *Yet it does not so intend, nor does it plan so in its heart, but rather it is its purpose to destroy, and to cut off many nations (Is. 10:7).*

On the day Assyria began its campaign against Israel, there were two intentions operating simultaneously: 1) God's, and 2) that of the king of Assyria. It was the intention of the king of

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Assyria to destroy Israel and expand his kingdom. It was the intention of God, however, to discipline His people for their own good. God knew what He was doing, and the king of Assyria knew what *he* was doing. The disconnect was that the king of Assyria did not know what *God* was doing—and neither does your local pastor when he insists upon human free will.

"God is operating all in accord with the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11). This is such a simple verse that a kindergartener can understand it. It is so simple, in fact, that it takes a trained theologian to explain it away. Since I am not a trained theologian, I am going to believe it, and spend the rest of this issue of *The Clanging Gong News* explaining it into your heart. ■

God judges the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria



The question I always get is: “How can God judge people when He Himself makes them do what they do?”

At least the people who ask this question understand the truth that God does, indeed, make people do what they do. This is not something I dreamed up; it’s God’s truth. It’s the testimony of Romans, chapter 9. Romans 9:11 contends that the purpose of God is a choice, “not out of acts, but of Him Who is calling” (Concordant Literal New Testament.) *The Message* is good here:

God’s purpose is not a hit-or-miss thing dependent on what we do or don’t do, but a sure thing determined by his decision, flowing steadily from his initiative.

It is God’s decision that causes things to happen, not ours. He decides what He is going to do, and this decision (His initiative) flows through Him into the veins and sinews of beings created for the purpose of enacting His will. I like how *The Message* calls it “a sure thing.” It is a sure thing. If God’s will for this world was not a sure thing, how could any of us sleep at night? Do we really

want the power (free will?) to thwart God’s sure thing?

Here is the classic argument against God’s sovereignty, specifically, the sovereignty that causes Him to judge those whom He controls. Again, from *The Message*:

Are you going to object, “So how can God blame us for anything since he’s in charge of everything?” (Rom. 9:19)

That’s a pretty straightforward question isn’t it? The answer is just as straightforward:

Who in the world do you think you are to second-guess God? Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question?

Okay. So we’re not to call God into question in Romans, chapter 9. In Romans, chapter 9, we are simply to accept that God does indeed judge those whom He ultimately controls. But in Isaiah, chapter 10, God does explain this strange principle to us, using the king of Assyria to do it. The answer is this: *God judges people in accord to what they think they are doing, that is, He judges their hearts.*

I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness. For he has said, “By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this, for I have understanding” (Is. 10:12-13).

The king of Assyria will not be able to say to God: “You can’t judge me because you made me do what I did.” God would only answer: “I know I made you do what you did. That’s not the point. The point is that what you thought you were doing at

the time—that is, acting independently of Me—made you a vain person in your own heart. I wanted you to feel the burden of vanity because now I’m going to deliver you of it. My creation—including those unaware of Me—learns by contrast, and I, Myself, create the contrast. I am judging you, by the way, for your own good.”

And thus God judges the heart of the entire world: for its own good. ■

Q&A

Q: When I do something wrong, I feel that I am upsetting God. I understand God’s sovereignty, but I can’t stop feeling bad. Why do I feel bad if God is working in me?

A: Remember, God’s purpose is to exercise us. In the ebb and flow of life, we are mostly unaware of God’s control. This is by design, so that we can experience all the joys and sadness of life. I believe that we are supposed to feel bad about doing wrong—but only long enough to learn from our mistakes. If you keep feeling bad, then you are forgetting that God meant your mistake for your ultimate benefit. My advice is: Use your sadness, but do not abuse it. The only thing that could upset God is if you insisted on condemning yourself. Don’t go that far! ■



Hey! Axe! Duh!

WITH TWO SIMPLE QUESTIONS, GOD PUTS US IN OUR PLACE

“Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it? Is the saw to exalt itself over the one who wields it? That would be like a club wielding those who lift it, or like a rod lifting him who is not wood” (Is. 10:15).

These exposing little questions come on the heels of God claiming to be the One



behind the king of Assyria’s decision to invade Israel. God Himself sent and commissioned the king (Is. 10:7), but the king erroneously thought it was his idea. This is explained in verse 13:

For he has said, “By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this, for I have understanding.”

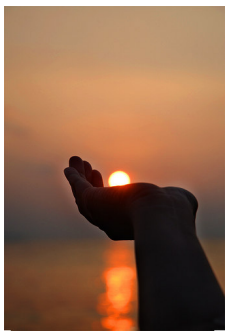
The king is articulating human free will in a nutshell: “my wisdom”; “my hand”; “I did this,” and so on and so forth. But no. The king’s claim is as ridiculous as an axe claiming power over the one chopping with it. Do we all agree how dumb it would be to insist that an ax wields a man?

Very well, then. That is precisely how dumb the doctrine of human free will is. ■

Rants & Stuff

The Apostle Paul says we should not murmur (Philippians 2:14). Therefore, I shall rant.

God's hand is oftentimes so ridiculously invisible



God is operating all things, feel it or not.

Allow me to get into the head of the king of Assyria. I'm sitting in my palace one day, all comfy on my golden throne, getting fed sliced pomegranate segments by one of my concubines, and all of a sudden I get the urge to attack Israel. Later, I wonder if maybe it was indigestion from the pomegranate slices that put me in a sour mood. *Maybe it was.* Or perhaps it was that my dad hadn't spent enough time with me when I was a kid. Or maybe it was just my darned ingrown toenail that impelled me to seize new territory.

All of these things would have been relative causes, not absolute. The absolute cause of the king's decision is explained in Isaiah 10:7. The God of Israel, whose people the king attacked, sent and commissioned him for this very action, arranged the necessary circumstances to MAKE SURE the king did His bidding.

The king of Assyria would never have believed this;

most Christians have the same trouble. Many so-called believers simply cannot grasp the fact (in spite of verses like Ephesians 1:11, that "God is operating *all* in accord with the counsel of His own will") that an inability to sense or even understand the necessity of divine control, precludes such control. When prayers are said and goose bumps come, then God is in it. But when ordinary events inspire action, it is a matter of free will; God is removed from the picture.

God is never removed from the picture. Occasionally, God gives a backstage glance at the workings of the universe. Isaiah, chapter 10 is one such glance.

Let us never forget the lesson: "God is operating *all* in accord with the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11)—feel it or not. ■

God makes sure that we all experience stubbornness

IF GOD MERELY ALLOWS EVIL, HOW CAN HE BE CREDITED WITH THE GOOD THAT EVIL BRINGS?

Romans 11:32 from the Concordant Literal New Testament says: "God locks up all together in stubbornness, that He should have mercy on all." This illustrates the purpose of evil we discussed two weeks ago: contrast. Without sin and frustration, we can never know the sweet deliverance of God's mercy and grace. Now check out Romans 11:32 as rendered in *The Message*:

God makes sure that we all experience what it means to be outside so that he can personally open the door and welcome us back in.

Paraphrases such as *The Message* must always be checked against a literal version, but when the paraphrase is within the

bounds of the original Greek, it can sometimes capture the essence of a writer's thought better than the word-for-word rendering. That's the case here with the phrase, **GOD MAKES SURE**. It is so important to God that His creatures first experience stubbornness and distance from His love and grace, that He **MAKES SURE** this is precisely what happens to them. How does He do this, specifically?

"He is wise and will bring evil" (Is. 31:2).

As we said two weeks ago, evil is morally neutral and can be used wisely to good purpose. *Stubbornness is essential to a later understanding of God's welcoming arms.*

So essential is this, that God does not sit back and hope it happens. Rather, He actively makes it happen. Does this sound to you like a God who is merely allowing evil? No! This is a God who is actively bringing it for the eventual good of His creatures. ■

