



Providence

Copyright © Christopher Alton, Living Rock Church, 2021

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage or retrieval system without permission in writing from the author.

Purpose of this Paper

Given the global pandemic which emerged in 2020, many believers have understandably raised questions concerning how it was not foreseen by those who claim insight into God's purposes, how it may relate to God's purposes, and most pressingly, how we should position ourselves in a world struggling to deal with this seemingly unstoppable force and provide a voice from the church.

The purpose of this paper is not necessarily to try to answer these questions fully, but instead to consider what the Scriptures tell us about providence¹, in order to provide a secure foundation and bring clarity to our thinking, enabling us to speak into the emotive issues involved. This paper is not designed to be in any way exhaustive, given the sheer breadth of the subject matter, but hopefully a useful introduction.

Introduction

In order to consider these matters, we should start by considering the nature of God, and what the Scriptures tell us about how He, as Creator interacts with His creation, and His creatures. Far too often theological enquiries begin with the questions we are struggling to answer, and then work backwards (or upwards) to find a solution that fits the problem we're trying to solve. The danger with this approach is that we come to the Scripture with presuppositions that we consider helpful to our questions, rather than letting the Word speak for itself. A wise teacher described this as 'arguing our theology upwards, instead of down'. It often leads to a reinterpretation of Scripture to ensure that it fits with our presuppositions and to allow our theology to sit more comfortably within the context we find ourselves, often rationalised as a 'real life' approach.

Once we have considered the nature of God and what the Scriptures show us, we can then consider differing points of view, which developed, and have prevailed, during the history of the church. This starting point will help us frame the debates which have arisen and provide context for the presuppositions which often inform and underpin opinions today, knowingly or not.

¹ The English word *providence* is derived from the Latin term *providentia*, which primarily means foresight or foreknowledge but also forethought and providence in the religious sense; thus, Cicero (Roman statesman, scholar and writer, 106-43 BC) used the phrase the "providence of the gods" (*deorum providentia*) - Encyclopaedia Britannica.

The Sovereignty of God

Our starting point is the sovereignty of God. How do we know that God is sovereign and what do we mean by this? Firstly to define it, we mean God's absolute right to do all things according to His own good pleasure.² Scripture is clear about God's sovereignty over all things. [Psalm 104](#) alone is sufficient to establish this, but let's consider some other Scriptures about aspects of His sovereignty.

- **His absolute reign as King**

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.

[Psalm 29:10](#)

The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.

[Psalm 93:1](#)

The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

[Psalm 99:1](#)

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

[Psalm 103:19](#)

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

[Revelation 19:6](#)

² Easton, M. G. (1893). In *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, New York: Harper & Brothers.

- **His absolute authority as Creator**

- 4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
- 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
- 6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
- 7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?
- 8 “Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb,
- 9 when I made clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
- 10 and prescribed limits for it
and set bars and doors,
- 11 and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stayed’?

Job 38:4-11

‘Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.

Jeremiah 32:17

- **The inevitability of His purposes**

11 Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. 12 Both riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all.

1 Chronicles 29:11-12

24 The Lord of hosts has sworn:
“As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand 26 This is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations.
27 For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?

Isaiah 14:24, 26-27

9 Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, 10 declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

Isaiah 46:9-10

But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does.

Job 23:13

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

Job 42:2

The Immanence of God

Given Scripture is clear about God's authority over all His creation, then the next matter to consider is the extent to which God involves Himself with it.

Deism, which first developed in the 17th century, is the belief that God created the world, and for all intents and purposes abandoned it, to find its own course, such that God's existence can be discovered by natural reason alone, rather than divine revelation. It stood in contradistinction to *theism*, the belief in an immanent God³ who actively intervenes in the affairs of men. *Pantheism* on the other hand, which is the belief that the world is either identical to God, or an expression of God's nature (originating from a deist thinker⁴), embraces the idea of immanence but rejects the concept of personhood in God. Neither of these relatively recent beliefs represent the God self-revealed in the bible, who is distinct from His creation, and yet is actively involved in His creation all the time. It is claimed that the God of the bible stands uniquely as One who is uniquely infinite and personal at the same time.

In the days of the early church, the Apostles also encountered recent philosophies which had alternate views on God's involvement in the world, such

³ Immanence, applied to God, describes the nearness and extent to which God interacts with His creation. Perhaps the clearest expression of this is the name Immanuel, given to Christ Jesus (Isa 7:14, Mt 1:23), meaning "God with us" or "with us is God".

⁴ The term "pantheist" was introduced by the Irish deist, John Toland in the book *Socinianism Truly Stated* (1705).

as the Epicureans and the Stoics at Athens ([Ac 17](#)). The Epicureans believed in chance and the Stoics in fate.⁵ The Apostle Paul told them of God's immanence.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. **26** And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, **27** that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

Acts 17:24-27, ESV

The prophet Jeremiah had spoken centuries earlier, about the immanence of God within the heavens and earth He created.

23 "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? **24** Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord.

Jeremiah 23:23-24, ESV

And yet the Scriptures are also clear that God, whilst being immanent, also remains sovereign over the world and the affairs of mankind, both nations and individuals.

"He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away.

Job 12:23

For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

Psalms 22:28

10 The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. **11** The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

Psalms 93:10-11

⁵The Epicureans held that gods exist but are not concerned with worldly affairs. The Stoics, on the contrary, believed that all causes and effects were predetermined by the divine logos.

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

Proverbs 19:21, NIV

The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

Proverbs 16:1

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

Proverbs 16:9

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Proverbs 21:1

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.

Proverbs 21:30

24 ... O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, **25** that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.

Daniel 4:25

34 ...for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; **35** all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

Daniel 4:34–35

38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; **39** but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

Acts 5:38–39

The Freedom of All Living Things

We have seen that the Scripture clearly tells us that God is sovereign, so our next step is to consider the freedom God's creatures have to act, and what degree of autonomy they may be granted by their Creator. If they are free to act, what do we actually define as 'freedom'?

The NT scholar, I Howard Marshall, expressed our challenge well.

"The basic difficulty is that of attempting to explain the nature of the relationship between an infinite God and finite creatures."⁶

Invariably the best starting place to consider something not easy to understand, is to consider what we can clearly observe from the Scripture, without bias as to causality, and see what reasonable conclusions we can draw, if any.

⁶ Grace Unlimited, Pinnock, Clark H © 1998 Wipf and Stock Publishers.

The Actions of Creator and Creatures

Let's begin with a review of the Scriptures, where we can observe the actions of God, as Creator, and His creatures (mankind and spirits), in the same situation

Joseph's Brothers	
Man's Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jealousy [Ge 37:11] • Hatred [Ge 37:4,5,8] • Murderous intent [Ge 37:20] • Sold Joseph into slavery [Ge 37:24] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sent Joseph ahead of his brothers to Egypt [Ge 45:3] • 'Meant it for good' (what his brothers intended for evil) [Ge 50:20]

Pharaoh	
Pharaoh's Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hardened his own heart [Ex 8:15,32] • Sinned, hardening his own heart [Ex 9:34] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hardened Pharaoh's heart [Ex 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:20,27, 11:10, 14:4,8] • Raised up Pharaoh to show His own power [Ex 9:16] to all men [Ro 9:17]

The Egyptians	
Their Actions	God's Actions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hardened their hearts against the Israelites, about releasing them from laboured servanthood [Ex 14:5] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hardened the Egyptians' hearts so they would pursue the Israelites, in order for God to be glorified (over Pharaoh) in the sight of all [Ex 14:18] • Turned the Egyptians' hearts to hate the people of Israel [Ps 105:25]
--	---

The Canaanites	
Their Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hardened their hearts to come against Israel in battle [Jos 11:20, Judg 3:12, 9:23] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God was the one who hardened their hearts, in order to cause a conflict with the Israelites, which they would lose and be destroyed [Jos 11:20]

Samson	
Samson's Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desired to marry a Philistine woman, Israel's sworn enemies and oppressors [Jud 14:2] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samson's desire was 'from the Lord', who wanted an opportunity to strike the Philistines [Jud 14:4]

Saul	
Saul's Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saul was jealous of David, because of the song the women sang about his exploits [1 Sa 18:7-9] Saul kept his eye on David (<i>āvan</i> - 'to watch with jealousy') from that point on, by implication looking for opportunity to do him harm [1 Sam 18:9] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God withdrew His Spirit from Saul, after David's anointing to be king, and a harmful spirit 'from the Lord' tormented him [1 Sa 16:13-14] A harmful spirit 'from God' rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, eventually trying to kill David with a spear [1 Sa 18:10-12]

Eli's sons	
Their Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eli's sons treated the offering of the Lord with contempt [2 Sa 2:12-17] Eli asked them to stop, because of the danger this put them in, but they refused to listen to him [1 Sa 2:22-25] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was God's will to put them to death for their sin, which we are told was why they didn't listen to their father [2 Sa 2:25]

Shimei	
Shimei's Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shimei cursed David [2 Sam 16:5-8] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> David knew that God had told Shimei to curse him, and so he

	told his servants to leave Shimei alone [2 Sa 16:11], having already learned that God was willing to 'raise up evil against' him [2 Sa 12:11-12]
--	--

David		
David's Actions	God's Actions	Satan's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David sinned, by taking up a census, bearing responsibility for this [2 Sam 24:10] • David admitted his sin [2 Sa 24:10, 17, 1 Chr 21:8] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God incited David to take up the census because He was angry with David [2 Sa 24:1] • God punished the land because of David's sin [2 Sa 24:12-17] • God used Satan to incite David to take up the census [1 Chr 1:21] • God held David responsible for his sin [2 Sa 24:12-13] and punished the whole nation [2 Sa 24:15] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satan 'stood against' David and incited him to take up a census [1 Chr 1:21]

Job

Satan's Actions	God's Actions	Actions of Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satan struck Job's children, servants and livestock, after being granted permission to do so by God [Job 1:12-19] • Satan struck Job's 'flesh and bone' [Job 2:7] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God gave permission to Satan to strike all that Job had [Job 1:12] • God gave permission to Satan to strike Job's own body [Job 2:4-6] • God sent fire to burn up all Job's livestock [Job 1:16] • God sent a great wind to strike the house of Job's firstborn son, so that it fell upon him and his family, killing all his children [Job 1:18-19] • It pleased God to 'crush' Job [Job 6:9] • The 'hand of the Lord' moved against Job, because the life of every living thing is 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Sabeans and the Chaldeans took Job's livestock and struck down his servants [Job 1:14-17]

	in His hand [Job 12:9-10]	
--	---------------------------	--

Ahab's Prophets	
Their Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They prophesied victory for Ahab in the battle with the Syrians at Ramoth-gilead [1 Ki 22:11-12] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God wanted Ahab to 'go up and fall' at Ramoth-gilead and sought a spirit to 'entice him' [1 Ki 22:20] A spirit offered to go out and 'be a lying spirit' in the mouths of all Ahab's prophets. God instructed the spirit to do so [1 Ki 22:21-23]

Jonah	
Jonah's Fellow Travelers	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They threw Jonah into the sea to save themselves [John 1:15] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God cast Jonah into the sea [Jon 2:3]

Judas	
Judas' Actions	God's Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judas betrayed Jesus from a place of trust [Lk 22:21] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The betrayal of the Son of Man had been determined, but "woe to that man, by

	whom He is betrayed” [Lk 22:22]
--	---------------------------------

Christ	
Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel	God’s Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered against Jesus [Ac 4:27] • Crucified Jesus [Ac 2:23] 	<p>They did whatever God’s hand and His plan had predestined to take place [Ac 4:28]</p> <p>God foreknew and planned Jesus to be delivered up to them [Ac 2:23]</p>

In these Scriptures, we see God acting, intervening and instigating events, ‘seemingly’ in concert with others in the story, something called ‘concurrence’ by theologians⁷, which we explore more fully later in the paper. The most striking event is the crucifixion of Christ, about which Peter clearly states, twice (- just in case we’re in any doubt!) that both God and men acted out of their own volition, yet in concert with each other, and in accordance with God’s plan and purpose.

Exegetical Conclusions

So, what conclusions can be reasonably drawn from the above Scriptures? Starting with what they tell us about God’s actions.

1. God has a purpose at work behind the scenes in all these situations.

⁷ ‘Concursus dei’ or ‘concursus divinus’, defined as “the simultaneity of divine and human agency in specific actions and events”, Michael S. Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p.356.

2. God intervened in each situation in accordance with His own goal or purpose.
3. God is willing to exert influence or control on His creatures, whether righteous or wicked, to serve His purpose.
4. Although God may influence or even instigate events, He is never described as the author of any form of evil that takes place, nor to blame in any way for evil that transpires from the acts of others.⁸
5. God remains in overall control, in accordance with the other Scriptures we have looked at concerning His absolute sovereignty over all things.⁹

Now let's consider what we can reasonably conclude about the actions of others, be they people or spirits.

1. The others involved in each event appear to act of their own volition and in accordance with their own nature ([Ja 1:14](#)).
2. They are also held accountable by God for their own actions, which have real consequences, both immediate, long term and eternal ([cf. Isa 66:3-4, Eccl 7:29, Isa 10:5-7](#)).
3. We cannot say that creatures act independently of God, but it is clear they have a degree of autonomy to make their own decisions. Nevertheless they are unable to frustrate the overarching purposes of God.
4. Neither can we say that they are being totally controlled by God in each given situation, given they are held accountable by Him, and in some cases acknowledge their guilt ([e.g., David 2 Sa 24:10](#)). Scripture is clear that God does not induce us to sin ([Ja 1:13](#)).
5. The extent to which others are influenced by God and by their own nature is not revealed to us in these Scriptures.

There may appear to be some contradictions in the above conclusions. For example, how can God influence others toward His own end, including their own evil deeds, yet hold them accountable and yet remain blameless and Holy Himself?¹⁰ The greatest example is our last one, from the New Testament, with the crucifixion of God's own Son. Scripture never seeks to explain these apparent

⁸ There are hints of blame in Adam's excuse after the fall, when he says to God, "The woman whom *you* gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Gen 3:12.

⁹ Were God not to remain sovereign, and in ultimate control, then how could we expect Him to keep evil in check in the universe, which could eventually lead to it overwhelming all things?

¹⁰ God's holiness is abundantly clear and frequently emphasised in the Scriptures (Exo 3:5, Exo 15:11, 1 Sa 2:2, Rev 4:8, 15:4).

contradictions but does clearly state that God's actions and motives cannot always be understood ([Isa 55:8-9](#), [Ro 11:33-34](#)). Moreover, they stand beyond the questioning of mankind ([Job 36:22](#), [Rom 9:19-20](#)). What is never left in any doubt in Scripture is that God is righteous in all He does ([Ps 119:142](#), [145:17](#)); that He is also unchanging in His character, and thus is always holy and righteous in all situations. Were this not the case then there would be no constants in the universe, which depend upon God's unchanging nature.

Berkhoff's conclusion to these matters is that the problem of God's relation to sin remains a mystery.¹¹ They cannot be satisfactorily explained by any of the theories put forward by theologians in church history, without problematic corollaries, which themselves in turn cannot be explained. Grudem's overall conclusion is to ... *'affirm that God causes all things that happen, but that he does so in such a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make willing, responsible choices, choices that have real and eternal results, and for which we are held accountable.'*¹²

¹¹ Systematic Theology, page 173, © L Berkhoff 1958, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh.

¹² Systematic Theology, page 321, © W Grudem 1994, IVP, Leicester.

God, the Author of Evil?

Most theologians agree that given God is the Creator of all that exists, then He created the authors of sin, being Satan and his demonic forces, as well as all mankind born into sin. And that given the prescience of God,¹³ He knew what would transpire, and yet still chose to create them. This is the biggest mystery of all, given the pain suffering caused by sin, most of all by Christ. However Scripture goes further in describing God's immanence in situations involving sin, so let us consider a few more examples.

*I form light and **create** darkness,
I make well-being and **create**
calamity, I am the Lord, who
does all these things.*

Isaiah 45:7

Cyrus was God's chosen instrument, prophesied by Isaiah over a hundred years earlier. Just as prophets, priests, and kings were anointed for service, so Cyrus was anointed by God to perform his special service for Israel's sake. To apply 'anointed' to a pagan king demonstrates God's willingness to use him to serve His greater purpose.

God's claim of being responsible for both light and dark¹⁴—good and evil—may allude to Zoroastrianism, the religion of Persia, which centred on a dualistic struggle between good and evil deities. The reference here indicates God's superiority to both light and dark.¹⁵ God is

¹³ Prescience (Lat. *praescio*, to know before it happens) is an attribute of God popularly known under the term 'foreknowledge', and ascribed to Him in different degrees and extent by Arminians and Calvinists [biblicalencyclopedia.com].

¹⁴ Hebrew word, 'ra' [רע] occurs around 640 times, which range in meaning from 'nasty' taste to full moral evil, with 275 of them referring to trouble or calamity. Each case must be judged on its context ('Isaiah', Tyndale OT Commentaries, © Moyter, J A 1999, page 286).

¹⁵ Faithlife Study Bible (Is 45:7). Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

	asserting His position as being the first Cause of all. ¹⁶
<p>⁸ “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, ⁹ behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. ¹⁰ Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹ This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹² Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.</p> <p>Jeremiah 25:9-12</p>	<p>Judah repeatedly ignored God’s ‘persistent’ warnings to them, through His prophets. Babylon¹⁷ is ‘sent for’, i.e., summoned to God’s service, to bring judgment upon the nation. Nebuchadnezzar himself, God describes as His servant, because he acts at God’s behest and command. Despite being God’s tool to bring His righteous judgment, God also punishes Babylon for its own iniquity (‘recompenses them according to their deeds and the work of their hands’ v.14). The actions against Judah, whilst being part of God’s judgment against the nation, remained unrighteous and thus subject to judgment of their own.</p>

¹⁶ Henry, M. (1994). Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume (p. 1164). Peabody: Hendrickson.

¹⁷ ‘Tribes of the north’, not referring to the now-extinct kingdom of Israel; rather, a coalition of foreign nations subservient to Babylon through treaties.

<p>9 And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. ¹⁰ And they shall bear their punishment—the punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the enquirer shall be alike— ¹¹ that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves any more with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord God.”</p> <p>Ezekiel 14:9-11</p>	<p>Similarly to Ahab’s prophets¹⁸, Israel’s prophets were now ‘deceived’ if they agreed to prophesy to idolatrous elders in Israel, because of God’s judgment against them. The same word (pathah¹⁹) is used here and can be translated ‘enticed’.</p> <p>Both enquirer and prophet had done wrong and therefore were subject to God’s judgement (v.10). Given the similarity here to Ahab’s prophets, we could surmise that there was demonic deception at work, which would follow given the idolatrous spirit of the elder had opened him up to such deception.</p> <p>God is not condoning deception, but His actions to remove the protection of the prophet (enabling him to be deceived) serve to warn Israel of the integrity required amongst His people (v.11). Arguably the prophets should have discerned the idolatrous spirit of the elder approaching them.</p>
<p>Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?</p> <p>Amos 3:6</p>	<p>The prophet Amos poses a series of common sense questions to the people of Israel, in defence of his own prophetic ministry, arguing from an observed result to a common cause, using everyday things they would</p>

¹⁸ 1 Ki 22:20

¹⁹ Interestingly the word ‘pathah’ also means ‘to be open-minded, be simple, be naive’, i.e., easily led astray, due to the position the person has put themselves in, in this case by refusing to accept the truth.

	<p>understand. The purpose was to evoke negative answers, but Amos is laying a trap of his own (in verse 6), similar to Nathan's trap for David, in order to demonstrate that the people know God's judgement has come against them, and that the prophet is speaking the truth. The word for disaster ('ra') used in Isa 45:7 (see accompanying footnote above). This can ultimately only come from the Lord. Using the same word, the prophet Jeremiah expresses the same thought (Lam 3:38).</p> <p>The prophet speaks throughout his messages with irony and sarcasm (4:4) to an audience that had grown somewhat deaf and tired of hearing his calls for repentance.</p>
--	---

One of the issues which we have to deal with, is the fact that each narrative presents God as an active participant in the story, similarly to the passages evidencing concurrence, but sometimes appearing to do more than permit the deception which takes place. We will come back to the literary style of the bible writers later in this paper (see 'primary and secondary causation' below), but for now we will be well served by adhering to the hermeneutic discipline of viewing each part of Scripture in light of the whole of Scripture, which clearly establishes that God is holy and that He is light, for in Him no darkness exists at all ([1 John 1:5](#)). He cannot therefore also be the direct author of evil.

In Ahab's case, God's actions could be seen as removing protection where there has been a deliberate refusal of the truth.

God is telling Ahab, "Wise up. I am allowing your prophets to lie to you." In a sense, God is revealing further truth to Ahab rather than lying to him. If

God were truly trying to entrap Ahab into a life-threatening situation, he would not have revealed the plan to him! Even so, Ahab refuses to heed God's truth, and he follows his prophets' advice.²⁰

In all of these situations, we see the same pattern, of God allowing spiritual blindness to take its course.

God remained sovereign in the midst of all the evil that ensued – much of it deservedly happening to those who deliberately refused the truth and preferred their own version of reality.²¹

We also see the same willingness of God to use evil spirits ([1 Ki 22:22](#)), or other nations (e.g., [Babylon: Jer 25:9](#), [Assyria: Isa 10:5-12](#)), to serve His overarching purposes.

Defining Free Will

A key question for us to consider is not only God's responsibility for evil, but the extent to which mankind is free to make its own choices. Scripture never states that man has complete free will, in the sense of being outside of God's control; as we have seen already, quite the opposite. Therefore free will can only be defined within the parameters of God's absolute sovereignty.

If we start with the fall, described in Genesis, no explanation is provided of why Satan was allowed in the garden God had created for man, or indeed why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was also present. We simply have tempter and temptation. It is reasonable only to deduce that for God's higher spiritual beings (the angelic realm and mankind) the freedom to choose He deemed necessary and appropriate, and dare we say, 'good'? The right choice was the tree of life, which represented the maturity of the God the Son through whom all things were made. Jesus is the faithful Son and the fullness of maturity for which we were destined (in Him) of glorious dependency on God the Father. For that to be a choice, there had to exist the option not to choose it. An option which man has exercised time and again, down through history. The Apostle Paul tells us that God therefore gave man over to sin ([Ro 1:18-32](#)), and it's desire to master and control man's spirit ([Ge 4:7](#)). Although the sinful nature cannot be escaped without regeneration of the spirit, mankind has always made choices regarding how much it's demands are heeded.

In considering the above we are faced with a choice of our own, broadly speaking, to either accept that God is less than sovereign, such that history is out

²⁰ [Hard Sayings of the Bible](#), @ Kaiser Jr., Davids, Bruce, Brauch, 1996. Page 231.

²¹ [Ibid.](#)

of His control, or that God has permitted things to happen which are not what He would have chosen for us, had He decided to tightly control every thought, word and deed. If the former is true then we have no firm basis of confidence for God to be able (at any point) to bring things into conformity with His eternal purposes. Whereas the latter leaves us with the lament of the Psalmist at the mystery of suffering.

Why does the psalmist suffer and cry out? Some psalms offer repentance to God. But the vast majority of lament psalms do not assume that God is punishing or disciplining for sin through the suffering. Why does the lamenting psalmist suffer? For no reason accessible to the psalmist.²²

²² "Avoiding the Dead Ends of Providence: Monocausal Fatalism and Open Theism [Part 2]", © J. Todd Billings 2015

The Doctrine of Providence

Now that we've taken time to consider some of the issues arising on the subject of providence, this would be a good juncture for us to consider the spectrum of views on the subject of providence throughout the history of the church and how they have evolved, sometimes in response to historical events.

Components of Providence

The fact that God is an actor in human history cannot be in doubt. The theological debate has centred upon the nature and extent to that involvement, both initially and ongoing. To this end we should consider three main elements by which theologians have categorised God's involvement in the world.

- *Preservation* – God maintains His creation

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:17

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

Hebrews 1:3

- *Concurrence* – God cooperates with His creatures, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do²³

Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

Psalms 139:16

²³ Grudem (ibid, pp.317-318) shows how this involves all of creation, not just man, such as the natural world (Ps 148:8, Job 37:6-13, Ps 135:6-7, Mt 5:45), animals (Ps. 104:27-29, Job 38:39-41, Mt 6:26, 10:29), and even 'random/chance' events (Pr:16:33).

- **Government** – *God directs all things in creation to accomplish His eternal purposes.*

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will

Ephesians 1:11

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

Historical Development of Providential Doctrine

During the patristic period the early church fathers, whilst not expressing a clear doctrine of providence, were focussed on dealing with the Epicurean position that the world is governed by chance, and the Stoic belief that it is ruled by fate. From the very start theologians took the position that God preserves and governs the world.

However this usually involved a tightrope between God's sovereignty (whilst maintaining His holiness in a fallen world) and man's freedom (and responsibility for his actions). Clement, Origen, and the later Greek Fathers sought, moreover, to solve the problem of theodicy,²⁴ stressing human freedom and responsibility, and at the same time exempting God from all blame for the existence of evil.

The intellectual landscape of the ancient classical period, with its Platonic and Aristotelian ideas of the world,²⁵ was inherited by Augustine and others who developed Christian thought on providence.²⁶ Augustinian ideas largely prevailed for over a thousand years, until Aquinas developed them further, particularly the concepts of primary and secondary causation in the world.

²⁴ Theodicy, (from Greek *theos*, "god"; *dikē*, "justice"), explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil. The term literally means "justifying God." [Britannica.com]

²⁵ *Plato* (428-328 BC) taught that every human soul has the desire to reach for a higher, purer, and more spiritual truth that will illuminate our lives and transform our world. Thus philosophical contemplation (thinking logically) -- rather than observation -- is the road toward Truth. Plato's mystical Idealism will be adopted by subsequent generations of Christians to explain the nature of God. *Aristotle* (384-322 BC), Plato's pupil, on the other hand, said the light of truth is found here in the material world, and our job is to understand and find our place in it. That made him the father of Western science. If God created an ordered, natural world, man could and should apply reason to understand the natural world, thereby better understanding and celebrating the will of God as manifest in his creation.

²⁶ Along with other Neo-Platonists, Augustine translated and transmitted Plato's concept of Truth and its relationship to the natural world into Christian terms: this world is a shadow, fallen version of God's eternal Truths, and the pursuit of knowledge has damned humanity.

The Reformation era saw much of the providential debate focus on soteriology, necessarily given the rejection of Luther and the reformers of the church's teaching on the subject. Billings summarises,

*"In the ancient, medieval, and Reformation-era church, a set of affirmations and distinctions were utilized in the course of biblical exegesis to avoid extreme positions regarding providence, while guarding the central guiding mystery of God's providential care. Positively, these statements affirmed in various ways that the Triune God not only freely created the world but that God the King continues to sustain and govern the world toward his own good ends. The Westminster Shorter Catechism distills this earlier theology well when it exposit's God's works of providence as "His most holy, wise, and powerful **preserving** and **governing** all His creatures, and all their actions" (emphasis added)."*²⁷

²⁷ "Divine Providence: Occupying The Mysterious Middle [Part 3]", © J. Todd Billings 2015

Arminianism vs. Calvinism Debate

During the reformation period the soteriological debate was polarised around two main schools of thought, Arminianism²⁸ and Calvinism,²⁹ so it's worth considering their main distinctions.

The Five Articles of Remonstrance (Arminianism)

- **Partial Depravity** – we are unable to save ourselves, but we can provide the impetus to trust God. We are fallen and tainted by sin but not to the extent that we cannot choose to come to God and accept salvation. New birth is therefore God's work of renewal in our hearts in response to our act of saving faith.
- **Conditional election** – conditional upon faith in Christ. God elects those He foreknows will respond.
- **Unlimited Atonement** – Christ died for all, but salvation is efficacious only for those who choose to believe.
- **Prevenient Grace** – the grace of God given to individuals that releases them from their bondage to sin and enables them to come to Christ in faith but does not guarantee that the sinner will actually do so.
- **Conditional Preservation of the Saints** – continued faith required, allowing for a final apostasy.

The Five Articles of Calvinism

- **Total Depravity** – Man is unable to save himself, except for a sovereign divine act of renewal in our hearts that necessarily brings about the act of willing, hearty, saving faith.
- **Unconditional election** – God has chosen from eternity those whom He will bring to himself not based on foreseen virtue, merit, or faith in those people; rather, His choice is unconditionally grounded in His mercy alone. God has chosen from eternity to extend mercy to those He has chosen and to withhold mercy from those not chosen.
- **Limited Atonement** – Although the atonement is sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world, Christ only died for those God chooses to be saved.
- **Irresistible Grace** – saving grace of God is effectually applied to those whom He has determined to save (the elect) and overcomes their resistance to obeying the call of the gospel, bringing them to a saving faith.
- **Preservation of the Saints** – the eternally elect in Christ will persevere until the end, because God's will cannot be frustrated. Those who fall away were never part of the elect to begin with.

²⁸ Arminianism, a theological movement in Christianity, a liberal reaction to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, and asserted that God's sovereignty and man's free will are compatible. Dutch Arminianism was originally articulated in the five articles of Remonstrance (1610), a theological statement signed by 45 ministers and submitted to the Dutch states general. The crux of Remonstrant Arminianism lay in the assertion that human dignity requires an unimpaired freedom of the will. The Synod of Dort (1618-1619) was held by the Dutch Reformed Church, to settle the controversy caused, which issued the Canons of Dort (commonly called the five points of Calvinism).

²⁹ Calvinism is a denomination of Protestantism that adheres to the theological traditions and teachings of John Calvin and other preachers of the Reformation-era. Calvinists broke from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century, having different beliefs of predestination and election of salvation, among others. In contrast to Luther, Calvin began his Institutes not with justification by faith but with the knowledge of God. Luther found refuge from the terror of God's dispensations in the mercy of Christ. Calvin could more calmly contemplate the frightfulness of God's judgments because they would not descend upon the elect.

Concurrence: Primary and Secondary Causation

Now that we've considered the spectrum of doctrinal views on providence, it would be helpful to explore the concepts of primary and secondary causation, which form the backbone of providential doctrine for many theologians, in seeking to understand the events described in the Scriptures, i.e., concurrence, one of the three components we described above. It is a way of trying to reconcile the sovereignty of God and human free will, both of which are in evidence in the bible.

Berkhoff provides us with a formal definition of concurrence.

The cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do.³⁰

The extent to which God causes 'subordinate' powers to act as they do, is the matter on which opinion varies as shown above. Some see God's hand at work in every single act of every creature He has made, and some regard this as only possible in morally good human action. We have already evidenced from the Scriptures that the latter cannot be the case, because God has used the immoral as His instruments, without exonerating them from guilt and judgment for their actions and whilst remaining holy Himself.³¹ Ultimately, how God does this is a mystery.

Primary and secondary causation therefore seeks to explain how the relationship between God's actions and human actions relate. Earlier we said that the Scriptures 'seemingly' describe divine and human actions in concert. A form of cooperation between God and man in every case. Although there may be co-operation, there is not necessarily collaboration. The cooperation of God and man is sometimes represented as if it were something like the joint efforts of a team of horses pulling together, each one doing his part. However Berkhoff comments.

This is a mistaken view of the distribution of the work. As a matter of fact each deed is in its entirety both a deed of God and a deed of the creature. It is a deed of God in so far as there is nothing that is independent of the divine will, and in so far as it is determined from moment to moment by the will of God. And it is a deed of man in so far as God realizes it through

³⁰ Systematic Theology, © L Berkhoff 1958, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, page 171.

³¹ Ps 92:15, Ja 1:15, 1 Jo 1:5.

*the self-activity of the creature. There is interpenetration here, but no mutual limitation.*³²

God is always the Primary Cause for all things, whether they be natural events,³³ or actions of His creatures (see previous section). Mankind is the Secondary Cause of their actions. God typically works out His purposes through human decisions, natural laws, and the many causes and reactions that are constantly at play in ordinary life. Miracles being the only exception to this. The Secondary Cause is always subservient to the Primary Cause, otherwise mankind could frustrate the will of God. Yet man, as Secondary Cause, can do nothing without God, as Primary Cause (**Jn 15:5**).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) affirms a distinction between primary and secondary causation. God is the Primary (ultimate) cause of all things, but He is not the Secondary cause. Therefore God is not the author of sin.

Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

*God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.*³⁴

Some object to what they see as the implication that if God were the secondary cause of sin, He would be evil. Instead they suggest that were God to be the secondary cause then that action ceases to be evil and becomes good.

Calvinists, given they are monergistic, see God as both Primary and Secondary cause of sin, but does not sin in doing so. Pointing to **Romans 9**, they would say that He is simply exercising His divine right to do what pleases Him (**Ps 115:13, 135:6**), as Eli expressed (**1 Sa 3:18**). For the Calvinist, God is not need of our exoneration!

One of the most helpful examples of primary and secondary causation in Scripture is found in the prophet Isaiah.

5 Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!
6 Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

³² Systematic Theology, © L Berkhoff 1958, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, pages 172-3.

³³ Events have a natural explanation and yet also a Divine cause – e.g., ‘fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command’ Ps 148:8; God *causes* the grass to grow, Ps 104:14.

³⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1646, Chapter V Providence, II and III.

7 But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few; **8** for he says: “Are not my commanders all kings?”

9 Is not Calno like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad? Is not Samaria like Damascus?

10 As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, **11** shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols as I have done to Samaria and her images?”

12 When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes.

Isaiah 10:5–12

In **verse 7** the prophet states the Assyrian king has his own intentions, despite being ‘the rod of my anger’ (**v.5**). The Lord intends a morally punitive expedition, but the Assyrian intends an extension of his own imperialism and the end of the sovereignty of others.³⁵ Here we have primary and secondary causation in sharp relief.

This brief passage, dealing though it does with a single historical event (the Assyrian invasions from 704-701 BC), is one of the Bible’s profoundest statements on the nature of earthly history, the relation between the King and the kings. It corresponds to the Assyrian passage in 7:18 – 8:8. The passages coincide in affirming divine control over history (7:18; 10:6) but while the former concentrates on the fact and effects of the Assyrian incursion, this passage asserts a philosophy of history, how the historical facts arise from hidden supernatural causes, and how the human actors who are the hinges on which history outwardly turns are themselves personal and responsible agents within a sovereignly ordered and exactly tuned moral system.³⁶

Although primary and secondary causation are clearly evident in the Scriptures, it’s also important for us to understand the literary style employed by the authors of the bible, which don’t always discriminate between what someone does and what they permit. This is why we have to interpret such passages in light of what we know of God’s nature elsewhere, which enables us to qualify our conclusions.

Without saying that God does evil that good may come, we can say that God overrules the full tendencies of pre-existing evil so that the evil promotes God’s eternal plan, contrary to its own tendency and goals.³⁷

³⁵ Isaiah, © J Alec Motyer, 1999. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Page 96.

³⁶ Ibid, page 95.

³⁷ Hard Sayings of the Bible, @ Kaiser Jr., Davids, Bruce, Brauch, 1996. Page 230.

Perfect and Permissive Will of God

The concept of God's perfect will and His permissive will is an attempt to deal with the fact that God is sovereign, and yet clearly not all things which happen within His creation are, *in themselves*, aligned with His purpose. As we have seen this does not preclude God's ability to use all such acts toward His purpose (e.g., [Ge 50:20](#)).

For some the 'perfect and permissive will' distinction is fraught with hermeneutic difficulties. For example it may imply that God is not sovereign, being limited in carrying out His will, which means reducing God to the role of a spectator, or a helpless Father. Calvin absolutely objected to the distinction between will and permission, regarding it as unnecessary in a monergistic framework.³⁸

We are not saying that sinful acts are '*not what God would have wanted*', because giving mankind freewill was clearly His intention and will, and He does not contradict Himself ([Mt 12:25](#), [Mk 3:25](#)). A prescient God sees the end from the beginning. However describing anything as 'the will of God' clearly involves nuance, concerning what exactly this really means. For example, statements expressed in the imperative form of the verb, in the Scriptures, can sometimes represent only what is *permitted* to happen.³⁹ We have two clear examples from the New Testament of Jesus doing just this.

31 And the demons begged him, saying, "If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs." **32** And he said to them, "Go." So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters.

Matthew 8:31-32

26 Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. **27** Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly."... **30** So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

John 13:27

³⁸ Institutes I.xviii.1, "... they wrongly try to clear God's justice of every sinister mark by upholding a falsehood".

³⁹ Hard Sayings of the Bible, @ 1996 Kaiser Jr., Davids, Bruce, Brauch, page 230.

In both cases the authors of evil and wrongdoing were instructed by Jesus to do something they wanted to do, but He is granting them permission from His position of authority. By what measure can we say that those actions were the will of Christ?

As we've seen, the Old Testament has many examples where God's will is clear, but the immediate outcome is not what transpires. His intention for Adam and Eve to mature within the Edenic environment in order to multiply this throughout the earth (and perhaps beyond?), God's plan for the nation of Israel to make the journey to Canaan trusting Him every step of the way, which Scripture tells us should have been no more than two weeks but took forty years (**Dt 1:2-3**). In each case, God's plan eventually wins out, Adam and Christ (**Ro 5**) and Israel and the Church (**1 Co 10**) through divine contingencies. One might even say that somehow eventually the permissive will conforms with the perfect will (and plan) of God, so there is no contradiction. In some ways this is what the apostle Paul was saying when He made that great statement concerning God's providential hand.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

Ultimately this conformity, whereby all free will decisions eventually dovetail into God's plan and purpose, find its fulfilment (like everything else) in Christ (**Ep 1:11**). In Him, despite the free will of God's creatures, all things eventually serve God's purpose and plan for creation. In Christ, God's purposes continue uninterrupted from the eternal standpoint. The apostle Paul had the clearest revelation of this, laid out in all its magnificence in the book of Ephesians.

“Now the great effect of Paul's discovery concerning the Lord Jesus on the Damascus road was not only to reveal to him the fact of His Sonship... but to lift Christ right out of time and to place him with the Father in the 'before times eternal'. That does not perhaps for the moment appear to be striking, but it is a very big step toward what the Lord wants to say to us. Christ has been lifted out of time. The 'time' Christ, that is, His coming into this world in time, becomes something like a parenthesis; it is not the main thing. It is the main thing if we look at the whole in light of the fall and need for recovery, but not the main thing from the Divine standpoint originally.

I want you to come to grasp this, because it is at this point we come into that greatest of all revelations that has been given to us concerning the Lord Jesus. This effect of his experience on the Damascus road, this lifting

of Christ right out of time and placing Him in eternity, came in Paul's conception to be related to eternal purpose, and in eternal purpose there was no fall and no redemption. That is, so to speak, a bend down in the line of God through the ages. God's line was to have gone straight without a bend, without a break, but when it came to a certain point, because of certain contingencies which were never in the purpose, that line had to go down, and then up and on again. The two ends of that line are on the same eternal level. You may, if you like, conceive of a bridge across that bend, and of Christ thus filling the bend, so that what was from eternity is not interrupted at all in Him; it goes on in Him.

The coming to earth and all the work of the Cross is something other, the result of a necessity by reason of these contingencies; but in Christ eternity to eternity the purpose is unbroken, uninterrupted, without a bend. . There is no hiatus in Christ. This came to be related to purpose. That is a great word of Paul's '...according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.; '...called according to his purpose.'

These are eternal conceptions of Christ, and this purpose, and these Divine counsels were related to the universe, and to man in particular. Let us get across that bridge for a moment, leaving the other out; for I want you to notice the course that the Letter to the Ephesians takes. The letter begins with eternity. It says much of things that were before the world was, and it comes back to that point. Just in between it speaks of redemption, and it never speaks of redemption until it has the past eternity in view. Redemption comes in to fill up that gap and then we go on to eternity again ..."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ The Stewardship of the Mystery, Volume One - All Things in Christ: Austin-Sparks T. Reprinted, 2002 from the original, unabridged writings of T. Austin-Sparks.

Conclusion

So what conclusions can we draw, pulling together everything we've considered? And how do they help us deal with our original inquiry?

It is clear that our doctrine of providence is really important, affecting our hope for the future. While initially divine providence may not seem high on the hierarchy of truths in Christian faith for some, a closer examination reveals that providence is foundational for Christian hope and our participation in building the kingdom of God. An underlying belief in God's guidance, provides Christians with a convincing foundation for hope (**1 Pe 3:15**). Christians are able to give an account of their hope because of divine providence.

Let's begin with summarising what we've established about God and His actions. Starting with who He is, we can say unequivocally that God is good (**Ps 34:8, 100:5, 145:9, Mk 10:18**), that He loves us (**Ps 107:1, Jn 3:16, Ro 5:8, 1 Jn 4:16,18**), unfailingly (**Ps 107:1, Ro 3:3-4, 8:37-39**) and faithfully (**De 7:7, Lam 3:22-23, 1 Co 1:9, 2 Ti 2:13**). We also know that God's goodness and His purpose are closely linked. Paul's great providential statement in **Romans (8:28)**, is arguably mistranslated by some versions of the bible. For example the NLT translates - '*for the good of those who love Him*;⁴¹ however more literal translations render - 'all things work together for good' (ESV). God isn't shaping our circumstances to suit us; He is shaping us to suit His purposes. This middle part of the verse is a kind of parenthesis, sandwiched by the descriptions either side of it ... '*those who love God*' and '*those who are called according to His purpose*'. The 'good' God is working in our lives, serves His purpose.

God's actions always work toward His purpose, which Paul summarises in his letter to the Ephesians.

4 ... he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, **8** which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight **9** making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in

⁴¹ This rendering is not grammatically supported by the original text and includes an element of interpretation (which is to be expected with the dynamism of the NLT). In this case the result is focusing God's working on us, instead of His purposes. The NIV provides one of the best renderings, '*And we know that in all things God works*'.

Christ **10** as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, **12** so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:4-12

God's purpose throughout history is to unite all things in Christ. Where we see God intervening in human affairs, it is ultimately toward that end. Like a tapestry of intricately woven threads, which look complicatedly messy and random from one side but form a beautiful picture on the other. Where the front is smooth, the back is covered in knots and loose ends. Every age in history can appear, disjointed, chaotic and uncoordinated, with no clear purpose; but from God's eternal perspective all things work together toward His eternal purpose. From a purely natural perspective (the backside of the tapestry), recorded history is almost a constant stream of wars, natural disasters, and disease pandemics. The current global pandemic is so far relatively small compared with others faced throughout human history, in absolute terms but even more so when you consider the global population was much smaller.⁴² Jesus told us such things would persist until the end of the present age (**Mk 13:7-9**), so we should expect them.

Nazi concentration camp survivor, Corrie Ten Boom, in her poem (The Master Weaver's Plan) wrote about the importance of keeping in view God's over-arching purpose in the midst of suffering. One verse reads.

*Oft' times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside.*

The Apostle Paul exhorted us to look beyond our circumstances, to the unseen realm.

17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, **18** as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

⁴² John Hopkins University Estimates - Bubonic Plague 'Black Death' 200m (1347-1351); Smallpox 56m (1520), Spanish Flu 40-50m (1918-19), Plague of Justinian 30-50m (541-542), HIV/AIDS 25m (1981-present), The Third Plague 12m (1855), COVID-19 3m (as at April 2021).

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

We must come back to our original query, which was twofold. Firstly the apparent lack of prophetic foresight of the pandemic. Why didn't the prophets predict it, given God does nothing without revealing His plans to His servants the prophets ([Am 3:7](#))? This seems a reasonable question, but it arguably ignores a broader historical context, which itself led many 'secular prophets' to predict that a global pandemic of this kind was only a matter of time; given the significant increase in interconnectivity of humans across the planet compared with the last similar pandemic (Spanish flu in 1918). The church is therefore to stand ready.

In the days of the early church we see prophets like Agabus sometimes moving in predictive prophecy ([Ac 11:27-30](#)), the purpose of which was not to help the church avoid what was coming, but to be ready to help, in this case sowing seed which would increase the *harvest of their righteousness* and result in bringing glory to God ([2 Co 9:10-13](#)). Later, Agabus's prediction over Paul's future ([Ac 21:10-12](#)) again did not serve the purpose of avoiding trouble but was to prepare him for it. Paul understood this, which is why it didn't deter him from going to Jerusalem ([Ac 21:13-15](#)). In all things God works.

Secondly how should we, as Christians, position ourselves in a world struggling to deal with a global pandemic. Our exploration of the doctrine of providence has shown that God has always remained in overall control of the world, even when the world around us seems to contradict this Scriptural truth. God's sovereignty is always exercised teleologically, so none of our circumstances will be devoid of divine purpose.

This must be our starting point in drawing conclusions about the events transpiring in the world today. It must be the filter through which we digest the news, and the lens through which we observe the world around us.

This doesn't mean that we should lapse into fatalistic passivity, but it does mean that our measure becomes eternal rather than temporal. So then how active must we be? Here we must be careful. The monergistic/monocausal end of our spectrum holds the danger of passivity. Why should we pray for the harvest if God will bring it in anyway? Why should I take a stand against the enemy, if God has already decided how things will play out? This too easily becomes a safety net to deal with disappointment and opt out when things get tough.

In contrast the other end of the spectrum can present the danger of thinking that everything depends on us, individually. When something doesn't happen it's obviously because we didn't pray hard enough or have enough faith. Although both those things can be true, the danger of a more synergistic viewpoint is that the more we view the outcome dependent upon our actions, the more we tend to lose sight of God's grace (as we can also subconsciously take more credit) and how He works in us and through us ([Php 2:12-13](#)), especially in our weakness ([2 Co 12:9](#)). The life of the believer is impossible to live, because God's standard is unachievable, unless we stop trying and just allow Christ to live His life through ours ([Ga 2:20](#)).

God's prescience has always been a problem for some theologians, viewing this as precluding our influence in any situation. Surely if He sees and determines the end point, then what do we bring? If I do nothing, doesn't God already know that, and compensate accordingly? However, this concern brings God down to our level, viewing Him as someone who, having been made aware of the future, then adopts and changes His actions in each situation to bring about the future that He has already seen. In reality God does not sit inside time with us, He is outside of time and space, for they are His creation. Therefore He views every moment in time simultaneously, including His own actions and interventions in it.

This is an altogether different plane of existence than we experience. It doesn't stop Him from reacting to events, such as expressing sorrow or regret for the actions of others ([Ge 6:6-7](#), [1 Sa 15:11](#)). And it doesn't stop Him from allowing others to truly shape the passage of events. Like the Israelites' journey to Canaan, God often sets the destination but allows us (within some limits) to determine the route we take to get there. As Father, God often laments the route we choose, but it never stops Him from giving us the freedom to do so, without which we could never grow into the maturity He intends for us. He does so with divine foreknowledge.

The New Testament writers allude to our ability to shape things, such as Peter's exhortation to pray for the return of Christ ([2 Pe 3:12](#)). From God's perspective He already sees the date that will happen. But for God both the waiting and the timing are different to us. Peter was writing into a context where Christians were being persecuted by Nero and false teachers were rife amongst them, living as they pleased such that Christians were questioning where God was in all this, and wondering what was delaying the return of Christ. Peter reminds them that God doesn't experience the passage of time the way we do ([v.8](#) *'with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.'*) and thus His timetable can seem long in our eyes.

Moreover God's timetable is driven by His purpose (v.9 *'not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.'*), which is not measured quantitatively (how long will things continue like this?) but qualitatively (when things have reached their fulness, cf. **Ep 1:10**). This is why Peter could tell them to *'look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.'* (**2 Pe 3:12**). We can "speed" the coming of the Lord as we live out the new covenant realities, to bring about the right conditions (fulness). This is perhaps why the Scriptures never seek to explain how God manages to create the space for His creatures to act, whilst weaving His tapestry through the ages, but ultimately leaves this as a mystery to us, for now. It is because we don't know the future interplay of our actions and His, that we must simply pray His kingdom come (**Mt 6:10**) until we see it in fullness.

"Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely."

1 Corinthians 13:12, NLT

God's people have to therefore find the place Abraham did, of active patience (**Heb 6:15** *'having patiently waited, obtained the promise'*) praying into situations that they don't always understand or yet see God's purpose in, thereby somehow hastening a deliverance that awaits a 'fulness' in the situation to suit God's timetable for His purposes.

So the answer to any question concerning the events we see around us, must always be rooted in who God is, and how those events might be serving His eternal purposes. It is how the saints in every age have always endured and overcome ... with eternity in view.