

It was not a good trip. After a wonderful vacation in Nantucket, my wife and I were returning to our home in Philadelphia. We started out on Interstate 95. I-95 is a classic case of good news and bad news. The good news is that it travels down the entire East Coast. The bad news is that everyone on the East Coast knows it, so it is heavily traveled and constantly under repair. We had already encountered three bumper-to-bumper stoppages, and I was fuming. Patience is not my strength and driving seems to bring out the worst in me. As a Christian, I should be more patient. I could use traffic jams as an opportunity to meditate. I could use it as an opportunity to bless other people stuck in traffic. I could pray for the recovery of anybody who might be involved in an accident. I try, but before long, I'm steamed.

Finally I was able to exit I-95. By now it was 9 p.m. and I was breezing down the Hutchinson River Parkway in White Plains New York, just outside New York City. That's when I heard it, the classic whirring sound of a loose fan belt. I turned to my wife and said, "Gee, I hope that belt sound isn't us." Sure enough, it was. Two miles later, I heard the clanging sound of a spring dropping from my car. With the engine temperature rapidly rising, I coaxed our '98 Explorer into a Mobil station, hissing to a stop as the steam rolled out from under the hood. I went into the mini-mart and asked a middle-eastern man by the name of David for help. David had no interest in helping me. He would not let me use a phone book that was in plain view. When I asked him for our location, he blurted out a few undistinguishable words. Finally I was able to locate a "You Are Here" map that pinned down my location. I called AAA to find that they cannot tow from that parkway but would call the Westchester County police to get me off of the road. One hour later, we were still alone. Finally I called the Westchester County police directly and approximately one half hour later Eddie, a friendly African-American tow truck driver appeared. He towed us to a Ford dealer, we took a taxi to a hotel, and the next day our car was repaired. Finally, our ordeal was over.

I tell this story so that I can contrast two different ways of interpreting it. Many Christians feel that God controls each and every moment of our life. They might say that God knew I needed to work on patience. He tried, creating three different traffic jams, to slow me down. He knew that I drive like a maniac, and this was his way of saying, "Slow down and be calm. The world operates on my time, not yours." But I wouldn't listen, so he had to slap me a little harder. That's why the fan belt broke. He then needed to test my tolerance of people who are different than me. That is why he gave me David to interact with at the Mobil station. He wanted to see if I could bless this rude Middle-Eastern man. He then provided me with a friendly African-American tow-truck driver to drive home His point that we should not judge people by the color of their skin. However, there are many problems with this perspective. Do you really think that God would create traffic jams just to teach me patience? What was he teaching all of those other people stuck in traffic? Would he really create an accident ahead on the road just to slow me down? Would he really break my fan belt, putting others and me in harm's way, just to make a point? I don't think so. It is far more likely that the first stoppage in traffic was related to rush hour near Providence, Rhode Island. It is likely that the second was due to construction on Route 95, and that the third was related to an accident. I imagine the fan belt broke because it was seven years old. The attendant at the Mobil station was Middle-Eastern because the population of New York is diverse. I don't know why he was rude. Certainly, there are many rude people in the world. His job was hectic and uninteresting. Maybe he was having struggles at home. There are thousands of reasons why he could have been rude.

Most people who believe in God would agree that God created the universe (in one way or another). They also would agree that God maintains sovereignty over that universe. However, differences arise in how people perceive that sovereignty. At one extreme we can envision a God who creates the universe, winds it up, and then lets it function autonomously. At the other extreme we can envision God as a puppeteer, holding all of our strings, directing each and every event in our life. Both of these theological extremes are erroneous and misleading.

The first case presumes an impersonal God, a God detached from his creation. This contradicts the God revealed in the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament we see a God who more than anything else wishes to be in relationship with humankind. Beginning with Genesis, man and woman reject God. A case can be made that the rest of the Bible is a chronology of God's attempts to restore that relationship. Heroes of faith such as Abraham, Noah, and Moses are in constant relationship with him. He speaks to the people of Israel through the prophets. He rejoices when Israel is faithful and weeps when it is not. The image is of a personal God who cares deeply about his creation. The New Testament Gospels describe a Jesus whose ministry is relational in nature. Jesus makes it clear that he wants us to be in relationship with him and his Father. The greatest commandment he gives us is to "Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind." Jesus had an intimate, loving relationship with his disciples, and one of the last instructions he gives them is to love one another as he has loved them.

On the other hand, it is equally inaccurate to assume divine providence in all of the details of our daily life. To assume so negates the very essence of free choice. Yes, God has a plan for us. He has given us gifts to use for his purpose. When we listen to his voice, he will help us discern his plan for humanity and the role we play in it, but we still must choose. Most of what transpires in life directly results from those choices, not his direct intervention. Much of the rest of what happens is the result of random occurrences in the natural world. My cousin undertook a bicycle trip as a teen. Her group was riding single file on the shoulder of a highway. A large truck drove by at the same time that she hit a loose patch of gravel. She was pulled into the road by the force of the passing truck and was killed. Misguided friends might try to comfort her mother by saying, "God decided to take her at a young age. He must have needed her." That's ridiculous! God doesn't murder innocent teenagers. Jesus taught, "It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (Matthew 18:14) Thousands of people also die each year because drunk drivers jump the median and crash into cars head-on. Are we to say that it was God's intention for this to happen? Certainly not. Jesus clearly sympathized with those who suffered. Given the opportunity, he healed them. At no point did he inflict disease or illness upon another person to make a point.

It is likewise poor theology to invoke God as a source for natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes. After hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, numerous fundamentalist preachers cited this as retribution against New Orleans because of its immorality. Of course they failed to note that the hurricane totally destroyed impoverished sections of the city while sparing the French Quarter, New Orleans most infamous district. It does not make sense that God functions like a divine scorekeeper. He does not tally up our sins and jump into action when they reach some sort of threshold. It is easy to see where people might get that idea. Many sections of the Old Testament including the Psalms and Proverbs present the notion that

moral and ethical behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished. People clearly thought that disease and natural disasters were a consequence of one's sin or a consequence of the sin of their ancestors. The book of Job, however, has a different perspective on the issue of suffering. The author clearly states that Job was free of sin. He was a holy man in close relationship with God. Job's friends try to attribute his misfortune to something that he must have done wrong, but God makes it clear that this is not the case.

Obtaining insight on this matter from Jesus, it would appear that God does not use pain and suffering as a mechanism to control his creation. Not once does Jesus tell a poor or suffering person that their lot in life was a result of God teaching them a lesson. In Luke 13, Jesus is specifically asked about two events. In the first, Galileans were killed, perhaps because they were thought to be rebelling against Rome. In the second, eighteen men died when a tower fell on them. Certain people from the crowd thought that the misfortune was a result of their behavior being more sinful than others. Jesus answers, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!.... Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!" Jesus does not explain why these events happened, but he makes it clear that it was not a result of wrongdoing.

We also see this in John 9 prior to Jesus healing a blind man. Again reverting to ancient beliefs, His disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus makes it clear replying, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." Jesus is less interested in the question of "Why?" with regards to suffering and more interested in "To what end?" In other words, He is more interested in how we respond to the events that befall us. Natural disasters happen. Crime happens. Disease happens. Accidents happen. They are not within the intentional will of God as revealed through Jesus in the Gospels. They occur as a result of the fixed laws of nature and poor decisions made by humans. However, even in suffering, God can transform evil into good. In times of natural disasters, apathetic people can be transformed into compassionate and generous people. People who suffer through illness often let go of their self-righteous and arrogant attitude and revert to humility and dependence on God and others for strength and sustenance. Causing pain and suffering, something Jesus did not do, is different than transforming pain and suffering into good. We must avoid the notion that everything that happens in the world is the will of God in that it is his intention. Thinking this way may bring comfort to many people, but doing so excuses our indifference and complacency. We become lazy waiting for God to direct life rather than acting as his emissaries in the world.

Does God ever directly intervene in earthly matters? The biblical authors would answer "Yes." There are unexplainable events and miracles that seem to defy explanation without invoking divine intervention. If so, these are exceptions, not the rule. The most direct intervention of God in this world was his incarnation in Jesus, but that was unique. Jesus re-introduced God's plan for humanity, God's desire to bring justice, love, and compassion into the world. So how does God do this if he does not directly manage the events of daily life? He does it through us, people of faith. He has given us a world full of resources. He has given us a community of people, the "body of Christ" with all of the talent necessary to fulfill his plan. He has enough faith in his creation, "made in his image", to believe we will freely choose his way for the world. People living "in Christ", a term used repeatedly by the apostle Paul, will choose

generosity over greed, compassion over apathy, peace over war, love over hate, and forgiveness over revenge. He expects us to be his eyes and ears, to see and hear the cries of the impoverished and marginalized. He expects us to be his hands, reaching out to all who need comfort, to feed those who hunger, to aid those who struggle. As we love one another, forgive one another, bring joy and peace to one another, we represent God intervening in everyday life. The next time you look for God's providence in the daily events of life look in the mirror. Do you see God there? Why not?