

Death and Suffering

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I believe that God is so infinite that he created a significant man
without leaving chance at back of himself.

Francis Schaeffer

Funerals in America are often elaborate events. There will rarely be hired wailers anymore, as there were in past cultures. A different set of rituals has replaced much of the reality of death, with its sharp interference in the normal lives of relatives and neighbors. The deceased are no longer kept in the family home until burial but are whisked away, disinfected and embellished, and then exposed at a reception in their honor in the parlor of the funeral home. This is called a wake. As mentioned earlier, one advertisement suggested, "You just die, we do the rest." Skillful morticians disguise the face of death with their creams and lotions and a mouth filled with wire. Landscaped cemeteries resemble rolling hills and parks, sometimes with music piped in. Stones and monuments mark a place and time against oblivion and point to the sky until the expected resurrection from the brutality of death.

When death becomes a normal part of life rather than its revolting antithesis, a remarkable shift in the horizon of grief and hope has taken place. Both are reduced, only privately held, not publicly admitted. Perhaps this is the result of our longer lives and exhausted attachments. As an adult, you have had your turn. Now move over and cede the place to the younger ones in the cycles of life! But in that case something central to the biblical view of life and history has been made irrelevant.

Its comfort is reduced to improving personal feelings. Its message is spiritual in a perverted way. It no longer remembers the tragedy of life now and a future hope. Life and death are merely a part of the flow of things. The embellishment is an attempt to reduce the grief over the absence of a real and unique person. It is considered more spiritual to accept what has happened.

The message at a recent funeral of a distant relative is in many ways typical. A girl had died after struggling under her physical handicap for twelve years, supported by the intense, warm, and loving care of her parents. The pastor spoke about the plan of God for each life: God does not make mistakes. He had given that child to her parents to teach them these things, which they had learned. Now it was time to call her back to himself. In God's sovereignty he had permitted the handicap. Now he had decided on her death. This was good. We were all the richer for it: Lessons learned, sovereignty affirmed, events approved. End of sermon!

What an insult to the God of the Bible!

There was no word of grief, no admission that death stinks and is not part of the plan of God. It had all gone according to plan. Even the handicap of the child was a part of that, since "God does not make mistakes." The lessons learned by the parents had required the child to be burdened, to live a life of struggle and pain. The comfort comes from the belief in a plan of an inscrutable God who makes no mistakes and teaches us spiritual lessons.

There is an astonishing series of flaws in that reasoning that leads to sickening conclusions. The whole span of the Bible's teaching and example collapses as unnecessary. For if God makes no mistakes and if all that happens is the will of God, grief becomes merely a personal matter. It is then a form of resistance to the will of God. Grief is failing to see that everything is fine. To oppose death is an expression of doubt about the plan of God. Human history no longer takes place in a fallen world, but in God's plan. There is then no room for the word tragedy and no reason to argue with God about history.

Yet there is an even more serious question: What kind of a God would give a family a handicapped child to begin with for any length of time just to teach them something? What precisely was the lesson learned? Earlier Christians would learn to protest, to discover ways of healing, to improve life. But these parents learned to resign themselves to the plan of God. Happily they had not heeded that teaching in their attention and care for their child during those twelve years but had made every effort to improve the life of the child.

How much love, respect, and pity does God have for the child to make use of her, exposing her to the agony of her life, her struggles and frustrations, just to teach the parents something? And after years of building relationships, lessons learned, and effort expended, God takes the child away again so soon at the age of twelve? Or one might say so late—not before she had lived twelve long years! What comfort is it to know that you have learned your lessons? Should you perhaps have been a worse student, so God would have left you with the child longer? Wasn't it good that you did not learn quickly, for at least that way you had twelve years together?

The comfort of the Bible comes to us in two areas. First, we are told that death is brutal and the result of Adam's rebellion against God. It is therefore not a part of what God had made as a "good" creation. It is a terrible interruption of all effort, purpose, and creativity, but sadly real because of sin. Second, we are then told there will not always be death. It will only exist until it will be defeated as the last enemy of God in the resurrection at the return of the victorious Christ.

The Boulimie Theater in Lausanne, Switzerland, has had satirical pieces in its repertory. Its name reveals its intentions to throw reality into your face, much like a person with bulimia will give back what he or she has swallowed. Common occurrences and scenes from life furnish the actors with plenty of material to weave the cloth of their biting commentary. In the tradition of European court jesters they confront us, the modern sovereign of "the people," with scenes from life for closer reflection. Jesters were the only ones allowed to contradict the kings. In their humorous ways or in parables they pointed out contradictions, character flaws, and social evils. Nathan confronted David in such a way in the Old Testament, because the king had slept with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Satire has been used through generations to laugh behind the back of the powerful. It is a way to question and to break through any imposed rule with all its power. Satire thrives under dictatorships and points out the failings of the system.

In a particular sketch years ago one lone man was on the stage in front of a totally black background. He faced the world, trying to make sense of it. His only props were a pile of newspaper clippings at his feet, as if left behind by previous occupants of this lonely place. He picked up one at a time and read them as if looking for explanations. They were death

announcements and obituaries. Some just stated the fact of death with dates and times of the funeral. Others were introduced with bits of poetry or a saying of some Chinese or other sage. A number had a more religious, Christian statement, a verse from the Bible, or a thought expressing piety and frustration. They spoke of a valley of death, but also of fearing no evil. Others said things like "Her life was filled with work." One spoke of the autumn of life. The one that arrested the actor had a rather common phrase found in many religious obituaries with little variation. "It pleased the Lord to call home to himself," it went and perhaps it also said something like "in the Lord's perfect timing."

From then on we were woven into a web of comments and reflections from these obituaries. They drew us into and then spun us around in the recent historic context. Did it please the Lord to prolong Hitler's life? Why could he not call this evil man home to himself on an earlier day? Think of what murder, pain, and suffering could have been avoided if only God's timing had been a little less than "perfect." At the end of this, everyone in the audience was confronted with the pain and horror, the suffering and absurdity of life and death, of effort and evil, and the irrelevance in life of such religious thoughts.

Most of the funerals I have attended in churches say the same things, if not always in such strong terms. The sermons don't intend to communicate the actual message from the Bible. Instead they for the most part suggest that everything is fine since God has willed it so. They seek to draw for us some benefit, some spiritual lesson, some overarching purpose in the reality of suffering, injustice, and death. Reality itself is meant to be covered over with religious phrases to give the impression that what is wrong in our eyes is really right, in the same way that the Buddhist would say that what seems real to us is really an illusion!

In the dark world we inhabit as much as that actor, the hope of the Christian from his Bible has always been the defeat of death in the resurrection. The Christian and the Jew knew that death was an enemy, a result of sin to be removed as the last enemy through the work of God in the Messiah. But now, according to such newspaper clippings and many sermons, life requires our effort to justify an absurd situation. All of life is spent under the shadow of death. Every effort to resist death, to fight it with medicine, safety regulations, education, legal protection, technology, and moral repulsion, is temporary and therefore finally without resolution. Authors write their ideas to outlast their life span; artists make images in stone or on canvas more durable than their own physical presence. Parents have children to defy their own death. Yet in the end they concede defeat by death, which is at that point embellished, justified, and accepted. The only hope, that there would be a God in heaven to make things right, has been washed away in sayings that everything is fine already. There is no more enmity between life and death. The earlier Christian and Jewish resistance is contradicted by the admonition to a final resignation.

Modern Christianity has to a large extent moved away from the traditional teaching of the church about suffering and death, about good and evil in a relatively short period of history. This has and will inevitably affect the way we interact with and counteract a fallen creation. In its core the shift constitutes what I like to call the Islamization of Christianity. A particular understanding of God's relationship to creation, history, and the life of man formerly associated with the fringes has been moved much more into the center. What was believed by a few has become a quasi-litmus test of faith in general.

This view is promoted almost as a mark of spirituality. It covers over the real problem of evil by demanding acceptance as piety, while the Bible confronts evil with the power of judgment and redemption.

There has been an insidious shift in worldview from a biblical perspective to a more Islamic one, which consequently affects all of life, from work to enterprise, from responsibility to engagement, from moral will to social concern. The shift is a move from seeing God outside of creation but acting into it, to God being manifest in creation and driving all events of history.

The Protestant Reformation had reestablished a more responsible mandate for man from the Bible than much medieval Roman Catholicism had allowed. The authority of Scripture as God's Word to explain our life's context stood in contrast to the authoritarian positions of the Roman church in its historic weight and power. Europe always had the privilege and burden of historic roots. Athens and Rome imposed their marks on all of culture through literature and law, through art and architecture. The European is always much more caught in the inheritance from the past, molded by what went before. This expresses itself not only in pride of history but also in a sense of being caught, limited, and almost a victim of what went before. Under such a weight there has always been a tendency to accept the past as destiny, as the will of God, as inevitable in the run of history from Cain and Abel on. This remains from older pagan forms of fatalism, against which the Reformation brought real freedom of conscience, purpose, and identity in God's Word (the Bible) and his work of creation (Genesis) and re-creation (redemption).

In the exposure to a new continent (America), Reformation thinking was able to bear more fruit in moral/cultural areas. The past was known but did not present as much a burden as it did on the old continent. On new shores gospel freedom and accountability could be expressed more freely, more daringly, more creatively, and, one must admit, also often more foolishly. A new city on a (new) hill would shine more brightly and unburdened.

The Christian spirit could easily go farther in the new territory. Entrepreneurship would blossom outside of the limitations of traditions, rank, and class structures. Personal ability would be rewarded, individual responsibility demanded. God's mandate that the creature in his image have dominion, love and work, and resist death could more easily be carried out there. The belief in solutions was unhindered by an awareness of limited possibilities and past failures.

Biblical teaching produced beneficial cultural, scientific, and social results because it brought together the creation mandate with the realization of a fallen world. Biblical Christianity continued the Jewish outlook. In America it was more independent of the constant reminder of historic limitations and encouraged daring, exploration, and experimentation. American efforts against evil, from the defeat of North African pirates to the abolition of slavery, from democratic efforts to the defeat of European diseases like fascism, Marxism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism, are tied to the Scripture and enterprising cultural mandates.

It is, therefore, very surprising to see a large number of churches now turn away from this intellectual foundation. When they accept a more closed view of God's sovereignty, they in fact embrace a view that would never have produced such benefits. A controlled view of history has

never before set people free to do both evil and good. These moral categories are abolished when nothing can happen outside the control of scientific matter, as in the Soviet system, or outside the divine will, as in Islam, or outside the power of spirits and fates, as in African tribal religions.

Different results follow different ways of teaching what the Bible says about life. Our interpretation of the text eventually influences how we act in history. Human activities are informed and encouraged by words, ideas, and language rather than just by experience. An entrepreneurial spirit, a passion for justice, and attempts to interfere with natural events result from the creation mandate to make the earth subject and to have dominion over her. They are reinforced in the commands after the fall of Adam to work against evil, death, and a fallen nature, both of man and of creation.

This distinct biblical view needs to be seen over against two or three alternatives, which are extremes in any case.

First, creative actions often become excessive when man pretends to be accountable only to himself and his experiences. The selfishness of man is played out whenever he assumes a divine right for power. The only limit is what he cannot do. What he should not do is not his concern. Slavery, the eradication of Mongolian immigrants to America (known today as Native Americans), the breach of treaties, lawlessness, and the pursuits of industrial monopolies were consequences of an excessive and enormously destructive license. When the will of God is identified with "manifest destiny," it is merely a more active form of pagan fatalism, even when biblical texts are used to justify it. For the history of power is assumed to be the will of God, an inevitable destiny.

Second, creative actions tend to be much more rare, even unthinkable, in a more passive culture in which people are informed about what is good and true only from inside their normal and traditional collective behavior. When you are told and believe that everything is always the way it was meant to be, your response is submission or resignation. A flaw recognized, a pain experienced, an injustice noticed—all these things are then only upsetting because in your mind you are unwilling to see them as normal, rightful, and without a problem.

For that reason all the religions of the world, whether secular materialism or religious determinism as taught in Buddhism, Zen, Confucianism, Islam, or African animism, see the fundamental problem of man as being in his mind. He is called to change his thinking and become detached from his personal moral reactions to such events. Faith in these religions means acceptance of the status quo. All reality is normal, good, and necessary the way it is. The problem is with your way of thinking.

In Marxism you see yourself too much as an individual with questions, ideas, and demands for justice. Instead you must join the collective, which is being projected forward toward a perfected humanity in an inevitable progress of scientific materialism by the forces of history. Your destiny is woven into history, which in turn is directed by the material interaction of all reality, including the stars!

In East Asian religions you must seek to overcome your reactions to what you perceive as suffering. You train your mind to embrace all "being" as One, in which the difference between joy and sorrow, life and death, and youth and age disappear. You learn to be detached from such distinctions, to go with the flow, to float like a leaf on the river of time. Man enters the water and causes no ripple.

Islam is much closer to this way of thinking than to Judaism and Christianity, its belief in one God notwithstanding. For in Islam also everything is ultimately One. God is power everywhere and in everything. Belief is submission (the word Islam means that) to affirmations made, patterns followed, and experiences encountered in a collective around the world. There is no room for moral questions, doubt, or individual choices within Islam.

African animism sees all of life and nature as a hidden balance in which spirits and people determine all events. A person lives in repetition of what his ancestors did, for any deviation would upset the balanced applecart and bring trouble. There is no encouragement of individual life, choices, or significant changes to improve, vary, or invent an alternative. When the water runs over the dam, one will not raise the dam but will rather let the water flow freely and unused, for "it wants to live in Mombassa."

This necessarily brief characterization of religions shows a common threat to all of them. Religions tie or relate people to the greater, wider, longer aspect of "being" itself. The question of how man fits into the greater scheme of things is answered universally with teaching that man is part of it all. His problem is that he looks at it from the outside, from his own mind, instead of submitting to it.

When we recognize this, we are ready to appreciate the uniqueness of the God of the Bible and the difference of Christianity and Judaism from all other religions. Modern evangelical Christianity is at risk of abandoning this remarkable view. For it often straddles both fatalist paganism and East Asian spirituality. The God of the Bible is in his character now equaled to Greek fates or to Islam's Allah or to the materialist's energy: Everything is ultimately One. At the same time the believer rides a "personal relationship," "personal guidance," and "personal growth" vocabulary that makes his spiritual and intellectual focus the same as found among Buddhists in the East and Gnostics in the West. Thereby these fellow Christians embrace something of an oddity, for they believe two opposing views: Everything is in order under a sovereign deity, and everything depends for righteousness on their spiritual efforts of prayer, obedience, and sacrifice. But that is not what the Bible teaches or what Jesus exhibited and lived or what the apostles taught in Corinth, Athens, or Rome. There is a God, and he created a real universe outside himself. While we are related in our material bodies to the rest of the material world, in our minds, souls, and persons we are first related to God in heaven. He made us as persons in his image, not in the image of nature. For in nature there is no personality. If we were surrounded only by nature and there were no God, we would be misfits in that nature. We would be alone and without an adequate explanation of the life of our mind, thoughts, and language.

The God of the Bible, God in heaven, speaks from outside human culture to give imaginative and daring ideas about what should be. The Bible does not just approve or sanctify what already is. Instead, starting with what already is, the Bible speaks of two possible expansions. The first is

that of human creativity. Man was to have dominion. He, not God the Creator, would give names to the animals. Adam and Eve would have to shape their relationship, for God would not do that. It was theirs to create, out of two equal human beings, male and female. They were to have babies, make a living, speak, and design a life of their own making, for they were in the image of the Creator.

The second expansion starts after the fall of Adam and Eve, when with a certain playfulness they are faced with a broken and damaged reality beyond their imagination and creativity. In addition to what is, they now also have a moral obligation to struggle for what ought to be. This invitation to work toward what ought to be tells us what is to be done, chosen, and created. Of course, it also informs us about what is to be resisted, rejected, and destroyed in our normal historic culture. All of life is evaluated from what the Word of God says about that life. Without the Bible we would not know that anything is really wrong in the real world. We would only think there is something wrong and would be invited to change our thinking. But the Bible calls us to change the real world.

There is, however, a shift in theology and in practical belief confessed by many Christians in American churches, the result of two distinct changes in perception. The God of the Bible is first transcendent. That means he is not found in creation, which he had made outside of himself. (All of reality is present to God, but God is not present in all reality: You can continue to eat your sandwich, for God is not in it!) Creation is outside of God because he is eternal, and creation thus has a beginning. God made the universe distinct from himself, looked at it face to face in various stages, and saw it as good. He was pleased with what he had made. Into such a creation he acts through powerful intervention, miracles, additional creative acts, and his Word, both written and living. Prophets and apostles spoke and acted as God's Spirit directed them. Jesus came into the world and became flesh in order to bear our sin on the cross and to be raised again from the dead. Transcendent does not mean that God is finished with his creation. There is no room for a deist view of things, which proposed that God once made the world but then left it to function according to its own laws and program. The God of the Bible is intimately involved with and personally active in creation, history, and the future of man at every moment. Yet the Creator is always the eternal, infinite, and personal God of the Bible. The creation is always limited, for it had a beginning and was made in the shape and with the definitions imagined and spoken into existence by God.

In this view the knowledge of God comes to us through language, his Word, from outside of what we see around us. We do not create the knowledge of God, but his Spirit informs us what is on God's mind. "Man does not live by bread alone" suggests that there is more to life than the stuff you find lying around and what nature produces. The more is "every word that comes from the mouth of the lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4). Concepts, meaning, moral directions, definitions, and explanations about purpose are not found in nature but in the mind of the Creator, who communicates them through language, grammar, and syntax.

This transcendent view has now, however, been replaced by a greater emphasis on God's immanence. By that is meant that God is seen no longer as acting into history from the perspective of his own moral character and will; instead God is somehow linked to the flow of history itself. God is found in nature, in the choices of man, and in the events around us. Nature

now speaks to us and gives us clues about meaning, manners, and morals. What happens is seen as divine. The outside critique or reference of the Word, which allowed us to evaluate all events, has been replaced by an inside reference system of events. The transcendent God of the Bible has been supplanted by the immanent gods of powers, feelings, occurrences, and various life experiences in the flow of time.

We recognize such a view usually under the designation of pantheism. It assumes that God (*theos*) is in all (*pan*) things. There is a kind of animistic pantheism in African tribal religions. Roman, Greek, and Germanic views of the mysterious forces in nature as divine share this characteristic. In our own historic and cultural backyard this view replaced biblical teaching with the concept of manifest destiny, of God's own country, of the inner light, of personal convictions, faith, and directions. In his perception the individual person becomes the prophet of his personal gods. History is the divine script. Events are themselves the outworking of God's will.

An inside, subjective access to and interpretation of truth has then replaced the outside source of information about the why and how of life. The Word of God in the Bible is assumed to be the same as "my favorite text from the Bible" or a poem for that matter. By first making God immanent and then understanding what follows subjectively, the biblical notion of truth has been insidiously removed. First, personal interest filters both truth and meaning. Then the filter itself is taken to be the voice of God to each person "personally."

This is a tragic shift in many areas, as we have discussed before. First of all, it is not what the Bible teaches. The Word of God was not always personally liked, understood, or applied. Think of how often the prophets were reviled and rejected. The rich young ruler walked away from Christ without believing him. The apostles argued the Word, preached it, expounded it, and with it exhorted, encouraged, and clarified the views of their audiences. Any personal element of it was either on the side of God being a real person with ideas, feelings, and the power to act, or the Word was personal on the side of man in that we each have to respond to it as only a person can, because neither animals nor things have the capacity to do so. They are not persons but rather programmed creatures. Human persons have to read and comprehend it, distinguish it from other words, and then apply it by choice to their lives and work. The reason to do this is that it is true, not because it is liked.

The second harmful shift lies in the assumption that events, history, and life itself is a manifestation of the will of God. For then the moral distance between God and a fallen creation is abolished. The Bible clearly stated (and here again it is unique in all religions and worldviews) that we now live in an abnormal world. Sin has destroyed what God had in mind and what he had, successfully of course, made. There is a real moral and existential chasm between the original creation and what is the result of sin. Death among human beings, for instance, was not part of creation and will not always be a part of creation God created us to live forever. The work of Christ, the Messiah, will make that possible again in the future. Sin, death, and the consequences of sin were not part of the plan or will of God. He warned against them before the Fall.

Death among people did not exist as a part of God's creation. He grieved over Adam and Eve after they turned against him and rebelled. They produced, by their choice to rebel, a new

situation that affected all creation. They responded to the serpent's temptation and brought death into the perfect world, which God had finished creating at the end of the sixth day.

This understanding distinguishes the Christian and the Jew exclusively from the view held in every other attempt to explain life. Only the Bible frees all of us from the bondage to fate, to normal history as the will of God. All other religions outside of the Bible, whether spiritual or materialistic, teach that what is now was meant to be. Only the Bible shows a grieving God who fights a war to conquer what man has done with a perfect creation. Only in the Bible does God judge the situation now as in need of correction and then engages himself to redeem it. God never allows himself to be simply aligned with whatever happens. The Christian and the Jew always asked, in the middle of whatever circumstance, whether what was happening should happen or not. Related to God on the level of spirit, personality, and identity, we should always wonder and ask what the right thing to do is. There is no room for just going with the flow, the majority opinion, or the outworking of power in history. God's Word, not the events around us, inform us about righteousness, justice, and purpose.

The Bible portrays a God who runs after Adam to offer salvation, who promises his Son as judge and sacrifice. He declares that death is an enemy and not a normal occurrence, though it seems to be just that statistically. We are told to pray for God's will to be done on earth, as it is being done already in heaven, for it is not yet done on earth. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they would not come to him as Messiah. He could not do miracles in Capernaum because people did not believe there that he was God.

The Bible describes a moral distance between God and history. God is sovereign in that he alone determines the outcome in victory and will accomplish it. He knows all things from the beginning but experiences them existentially from moment to moment. He is not surprised because of prior ignorance. But he passionately acts into a battlefield of sin and death to redeem and restore his creation. Often these are direct acts of God in the form of miracles and answered prayer and powerful interventions. But just as real and interfering is his Word in its effect on the mind of men. The Holy Spirit has given that Word and uses it to inform, to explain, to remind us of what is right and true in the midst of a history that is often very far from being just, right, and true.

The way toward expressing God's sovereign will is filled with battles and scars, which requires our moral discernment concerning what is good and evil, right and wrong. History is not a clear flow or stream of God's design and purpose. It is also the result of sin, rebellion, stupidity, and accusations powerfully carried out by Satan. The book of Job draws open the curtain for us to see something of this battle in the heavens.

Thus the Christian and the Jew never had to bow blindly to circumstances. For both of them, whatever happened in history was always to be checked again through the moral and defining lens of God's Word. They prayed for deliverance, for a change of kings and battle lines. They interceded against the sins of people, so that God's will would be done where it was not yet being done on earth.

This allowed the Christian and the Jew to contribute to the creation of history rather than just to submit to it as final or to tolerate it spiritually. The believer is the one who engages himself against nature's hostility, against the injustice of men, and against sickness and death in a broken world. There was never a reason for fatalism, resignation, or unquestioned submission in the teaching of the Bible or in the life of the church.

How tragic, if not perverse, it is then that fatalism, resignation, and spiritual submission to an assumed will of God, seen in the events and course of history, have become Christian virtues! What was characteristic of Islam, of African tribal religion, of the teaching about the inevitable march and cost of history in Marxism, or of the stars determining the experiences of your life and telling you about this in horoscopes has entered as a mind-set in much modern Christian teaching.

Perhaps it is from a desire to have no loose ends in life that such determinism has been made acceptable. The lack of freedom and creative responsibility is readily minimized for the benefits gained when we can be untroubled by unfinished, unresolved historic situations. We want to know that everything is in its right place. This is a way of avoiding uncertainty and chaos. It removes all tentativeness from life when we are able to look at events and call them good, justified, unavoidable, or necessary.

In the past people were in general fatalistic because they saw no way to change a situation. They were too small in their own eyes, too weak in their power to question or to change things. They inherited a long history of ideas and governmental or social structures, and with them often suffering and hardship. Their hope was focused on life after death. Platonic and Gnostic thinking, perhaps later even mixed with Islamic views of life after death, was always a temptation to the church from St. Paul's time on. Such fatalism, a willingness to have life be run by fate, is the common view in all religions outside of biblical Judaism and Christianity. It seems much stranger that now our Christian neighbors even in America, where there have been far fewer constraints from a long and painful history, have become fatalistic, even though their powers and tools to change things and their imagination of alternatives are so much more encouraging.

Perhaps we are more prepared to accept a closed and fatalistic position also from our habit of expecting clear and final explanations about how things operate in all areas. We expect solutions, explanations, and coherence. When we buy a modern convenience, we expect it to work without flaws. In the owner's manual there is an explanation for everything and a section on troubleshooting to remove every handicap. We think we deserve this in all areas of life. But acceptance or fatalism as an attitude is less the result of designing a better machine than of saying, "I will be satisfied with a simpler one if it only works and causes me no more sleepless nights."

Finally our culture, through careful scientific observation and experimentation, has been able to explain a multitude of problems as the first step toward a solution. This is so in the field of medicine, technology, and society. We could name vast linkages of conditions that produce anticipated results. We have widened the areas of life in which we have adequate explanations. We can measure results from various conditions. Determinism seems to rule the day. Health and

behavior, intelligence and the stages of development are all influenced and almost determined. Little wonder that it takes only a small step to assume that everything is already programmed and part of a larger flow. We bow easily to the proposition that finally everything in real life is like a machine. Christians see it as God's machine.

Yet according to the Bible and our experience, our choices are like a step into an open space. We assume that there will be ground under our feet, that we will be safe as we step forward. But the reality is that we cannot be sure. In real history we have not just interlocking pieces of a puzzle, but actors, persons, choice-makers who influence what will happen. Our security is that God has made a real and lawful world. He loves us and will redeem us. His promises are sure. But all this takes place in the context of a real history of choices, moral and immoral actions, obedience and disobedience, wisdom and foolishness. Our security lies in God, not in events of history, whether they be prosperity or death. History after the fall of Adam starts always in the seat of the accused, exposed to accusations and judgments from God and us. History continues around us, but it is not merely to be noticed uncritically. God is sovereign, but he is not the only player in history.

Many Christians link their version of sovereign determinism with the teaching of John Calvin, the sixteenth-century French reformer in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvinism is identified with the will of the sovereign God being expressed in whatever comes to pass in history. It is sometimes identified with a broader label of Reformed Theology. It is not limited to certain denominations but is seen as a mark of profound spiritual insight and an expression of faith everywhere.

If all things occurring were already the will of God, there would logically be no place for prayer, petitions, or intercession. The incontinency between acceptance and prayer for intervention has nurtured a reaction in the Openness of God school of thought. Neither the extreme deterministic outlook of a portion of Reformed Theology nor Openness of God theology do justice, in my understanding, to the Bible. The expressed teaching and solid implications of the Bible give a different and far more ordered dynamic than is found in the orderliness of Calvinism in its extreme form or the dynamic of Openness theology. Calvinism in this form presents a God with power but without moral consideration; the Openness school honors a moral God who lacks power.

Calvin brought the biblical teaching to Geneva at the invitation of William Farel after centuries of Roman Catholic control of thought and life. Viewing the countryside from the towers of St. Pierre Cathedral, you can imagine Calvin's desire to announce to the population a different God and a different attitude to life than what they had had in the midst of constant insecurity about life and salvation. Low life expectancy, scientific ignorance about the plague and other diseases, and arbitrary courts and law in an insecure geography made life totally unpredictable.

The knowledge of God was mediated through a church that judged, like Job's friends, on the basis of events. People believed that God would solve such insecurity and eventually would heal, give eternal life, and administer justice in heaven. Yet it all depended on being able to deserve God's favor now, before one could count on God. What hope could the common man have when acceptance by God was a matter of an undefined quantity of merit, not a free gift from God in Christ? Forgiveness, justice, and peace with God were not here now but were held out as rewards

on the basis of religious merits. One could constantly earn and then again lose salvation and God's favor. "If you did this, then perhaps; but then again, perhaps not, unless..." How much was enough? How long would it last? What if it was lost again?

Into this context Calvin preached from the Bible and comforted the people with words of assurance and grace. "God knows your situation. He loves you. He has already chosen to offer you salvation by faith in Christ." God has elected to give his grace in the death of his Son, just as he had given his Word, the Bible, by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul opens his letter to the church in Ephesus by pointing to such signs of God's favor, who in his very being is gracious. In Christ we have all spiritual blessings already in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 1:3). In the beloved Son of God we are chosen, adopted, redeemed, and confirmed. In faith we respond to the grace of God, freely given and not merited by works, "so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:9). Calvin's teaching stressed the choice of God for us in Christ against the insecurity of the Roman Catholic view. Our comfort does not lie in God's program of selection, as one would choose this or that refrigerator and reject others. Election in the heart of God was not a choice to abandon his precious creation, but rather to establish a new creation through Christ's finished work on the cross. After the seventh day, the day of rest, the fall of Adam and Eve started an eighth day, on which God set out to accomplish an additional work of salvation in Christ. He ran after Adam and sent prophets and even his Son to accomplish the resurrection on the first day of the new week, the eighth day!

More recent Calvinism and much, though happily not all, Reformed Theology have hardened this into a system of selection, individual predestination, and determinism. The beginnings of this go back to a student of Calvin's, Theodore Beza, and the discussions at the Synod of Dordt in the early seventeenth century, about eighty years after Calvin's Institutes. In Dordt they changed the teaching of the Bible into something quite similar to the Koran in the view of God's sovereignty and his relation to history and creation. The texts they cited were taken out of context (e.g., Romans 8:23ff., Romans 9—11, Ephesians 1—2) in order to "prove" the total "control" of God, which makes all things "willed" by God.

If everything is finally willed by God, all opposition, critical rejection, or interference is out of place. Fatalism inevitably results, dressed up as spirituality. Material history is then made something both less and more than what the Bible describes. Work within it is of little importance. And yet history also unrolls as the expression of the will of God. Your spiritual and personal attitude about events in history then alone matters, just as it does in Eastern religions, Islam, and materialism.

Such a view makes Christianity no more different from Islam than if you were merely to add Jesus to Allah. The wonder of the Bible informing us that we do not always find the will of God in history but in his Word as a judgment in and information about history is thereby removed. The moral distance between God and what people and Satan do against God is abolished. There remains no more room for protest, no mandate to seek justice, and finally no prayer to change history. This turns out to be an insidious merger with Islam on the level of theology, coming to a common view of God. It is at best pathetic and culturally superficial. In any case it is an abandonment and destruction of the uniqueness of Christianity and the Bible.

Many Christians unthinkingly embrace a viewpoint antithetical to the Bible's view of God and man in the name of religion and theology. This can only affect dramatically the way we live, think, and order our lives morally. In many countries this has already contributed to an outright rejection of Christianity, for such a view of Christianity removed any grounds to oppose some of the more openly evil events in the twentieth century.

After the Roman dominance of all of life, the Reformation reestablished a very different view of life. It stressed individual responsibility to know God, to understand the text of the Word, to take responsibility for work in a wider world. It taught a relationship with God as persons. From him individuals should draw encouragement, hope, and love in good faith to work for peace and justice in the broadest sense. That view gave a gutsy courage to people, an inquisitive mind, an entrepreneurial attitude, and dignity to life and love and work. Yet somewhere that understanding has been perverted in two ways in many of our churches. First, there exists an unfounded supremacist attitude of being one with the will of God: "Let me share Jesus and my personal relationship with him with you!" Second, we have all heard in Christian circles one of these comments: "It was the right time for her to die." "God must have had something better in mind." "God in his grace took him home to himself. God allowed it to happen. He made it come to pass. God must have wanted it that way." These phrases all express a resignation in which again everything is the will of God already. Thus the petition in the Lord's prayer, "Your will be done on earth," is meaningless since, if this view is true, his will is already being done here in the same way it is being done in heaven!

These comments are typically heard in an Islamic context. Do we now also hear and read them in wide circles of the contemporary Christian church? They have a ring of familiarity about them. Both Muslims and many Christians state that everything is already right in their lives. Both supremacist and resignation statements remove all tragedy from history. Such words are used to comfort each other. But what comfort lies in hearing that everything is all right? These words invite the mourner to reject grief and the believer to reject judgment of what has happened. It invites him or her to become callous about some of the very things about which Jesus was agitated, if not even angry.

When Christians agree with these statements and find them a comfort, they have moved from a biblical perspective to an Islamic one. The change can be gradual and insidious, but they have redefined God for the sake of peace, a longing to make life in a fallen world less absurd existentially. They have found a way to make the experience of brokenness acceptable. It ties life up with a bow and turns it into a pleasure. They have found closure, when for the Christian and the believing Jew nothing is closed until the dead are raised again. They assume grief is a personal, not a moral cry: They assume it was acceptable to God. They have the doubtful pleasure of finding resolution or closure though the God of the Bible is still at work, "until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy ... is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26). "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10).

Worse yet, such Christians have redefined God to meet our emotional needs. Our unwillingness to face evil head-on and to seek to do something about it has turned God into the one who willed the evil! In order to not have to face an unfinished, unresolved situation, an open wound, we turn

God into one who is at peace with a broken world. Though good and evil still exist in the real world for real people, God now becomes the one who in some way authors and orchestrates good and evil. We declare our inability to understand, then turn around and suggest that he must have thought it to be good. We are no longer partners of a God who is at war with a fallen world, who grieves over death, and who has pity and compassion for people caught in a horrible situation after the Fall. That God has been banished.

We may not have noticed this subtle but radical change in the thinking of much of the church. It leads finally to immoral consequences. Where Islam considers doubts and questions to be blasphemy, it is equally blasphemous for Christians to stop the complaint about death in its many forms and to assume that God identifies with everything that happens. When we do that, we have in fact become friends of the friends of Job. Such persons overlook the fact that much on earth is not right. It is even absurd, disjointed, and full of contradictions. There is a war going on in heaven, with consequences in the life of Job and each believer. Life during war is a mess, and the just suffer without cause. How can we justify calling this the will of God or providence?

The will of the Lord is not yet being done on earth in the same way it is already being done in heaven. The Lord's Prayer encourages us to pray for a future time when there will be no such discontinuity. In the world today that disconnect is real and painful. There is no tidy world in the Bible. Tidiness was there at creation and shall be again after the resurrection but is not present now. We are not allowed to bow to fateful circumstances but are to question them and resist them, where that is morally demanded. Even Joseph did not resign himself to being sold to Egypt. Though God would turn to good what his brothers had meant for evil, Joseph rightly asked the steward to remember him before Pharaoh, lest he be left to rot in prison alone. The cause of the tragedy was not the will of the Lord.

The view that God wills all things on earth may often come from a genuine search for spirituality. We want to obey, to believe correctly, and to give God the glory. The trouble is that this is the wrong way to go about it. Obedience is not blind but informed. Faith consists of believing certain things about God and the world, informed by Scripture. The glory of God is identified with his holy character, a distinct, moral, and resolute personality who fights evil, death, and confusion.

Spirituality is not the opposite of thoughtfulness, but its companion. It is not an embrace of alternate categories and priorities. Spirituality is not irrational. It is also not an antithesis to material concerns. Spirituality in the Bible is the response with our spirit to what God's Spirit has told us in the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 2:6ff.) and confirms to us by his presence. When we are filled with the Spirit, we have more, not less discernment (Eph. 5:18). The Spirit of God will lead us into truth, not away from it. He will make us more sensitive to wrong as we read his Word and compare it with the reality of life. This includes wrong ideas about God. He will remind us of what he, the Spirit, has revealed through the prophets and apostles (2 Peter 1:19ff.). Christ was grieved, deeply moved in spirit (John 11:33-35), and wept, troubled about such a hideous reality as death in his created world after the fall of Adam. To be spiritual, then, involves the courage to oppose the results of the Fall and to complain to God, not against him. You will show your submission to him in your refusal to accept as final, inevitable, and good the outworking of man's rebellion in reality. God's world is spoiled. History is not holy, normal, or approved. We

are called to be holy because we are not so yet, being part of a fallen nature and history. God is at war against sin, and he will win.

There is no way to make peace with normality in a fallen world. The church has in the past championed truth through doctors, judges, teachers, soldiers, journalists, and others within her who dared to stand against the silence of nature and of the normal. The trouble except to those who want a quiet public in silent resignation. Justice is our concern, not peace at any price. For the only way to be at peace at present in our fallen history comes at the price of detachment, indifference, and ultimately in death, where you may, as inscriptions on gravestones attest, "rest in peace."

The temptation to find a way to approve whatever happens is great. None of us likes an unresolved situation. But life in the fallen world will remain unresolved until Christ returns. Only then will there be everlasting righteousness.

We must not make God the author of life in the real world after the Fall, as if he allowed and approved of all events in life. Foreordination speaks of both his intimate involvement in events and of the rational coherence of cause and effect in his creation. It does not include his moral approval of Satan's rebellion or the sin of Adam or the drunken driver down the road. He has ordained that punishment will follow evil, but not that evil will be chosen in his good creation. He is not distant but passionate. He not only observes—he acts. Yet other actors' choices also have ordained consequences that cannot be avoided. It is not as if even though God could have stopped something evil, he didn't and so is responsible in some way for the evil. We are also not to believe and affirm that something contrary to the being of God is still somehow right. Some see in all this a higher purpose, inaccessible to us, rooted in the inscrutable counsel of God's holy will, in which he has determined that a child should die and Hitler should live a little longer with his program of genocide. Some Christians end up believing something like this because they wish to have cosmic mystery like every other religion. But this is not the way to escape the moral accusation of worshiping an immoral God.

We cringe but are still told to accept it all in deep "humility." We don't understand, but we must see it "spiritually." We argue with it but are told that we are face to face with a "mystery"! We are told this is all part of the "sovereignty of God," as if that answers all questions of good and evil, judgment and righteousness, life against death. Yet there is nothing mysterious about the morality of God in the Bible. The only mystery in the Bible concerns the Messiah, and he has now been revealed!

The Bible demands that we reject this submission to tragedy. There should be no insidious acceptance of Islamic thought by making resignation a virtue. This line of thinking identifies God with whatever comes to pass. Yet the God of the Bible is removed from what comes to pass in two ways.

First, God created a universe outside himself. He is not in it and does not identify with it. It was good before the Fall. Second, that good creation has been affected by the sin of man. It is no longer good but broken. It is no longer in all its parts the reflection of the character of God. Consequently we must ask God to what extent he agrees or does not agree with the way things

are now. What should we do about life in a fallen world? What is God willing to invest anew? Does he approve of the ways of history? Where and how shall we oppose evil powers, fatalism, and death?

The Bible reveals a God who does not have other gods beside or behind himself. There is no one else to call the shots or to whom God needs to bow. He will accomplish fully what he has planned. He will do this in his own moral way. All details are known by him. He is intimately, personally, and directly involved in the whole process. He is not surprised by anything that happens. He knows the end from the beginning.

But, and this is an important "but," God's sovereignty in no way implies a total functional control. There are events that occur without God's hand being the only one at the tiller. For example, our prayer can effect a change. At no time is God's sovereignty limited by free moral agents, but his actions are affected. Prayer, like any action, changes things in history not only for us, but also for God.

Sovereignty also does not suggest that God can do all things at all times but chooses not to. Some things are impossible even for God at this time. His infinity is not a characteristic, but a measure of his personality and existence. His attributes are inexhaustible. His love or justice will never come to an end. But he cannot lie and still continue to be God. He is able to direct all things but will not be able to bring the resurrection until the return of Christ. His sovereignty does not imply that he could do all things by tonight. But he will be able to do all things in time, as he continues to work on our behalf, and his.

Some things he can do now, others later. He could raise Lazarus from the dead, but he could not give him a resurrection body yet. He cannot yet create a world in which five-year-olds never get run over by a truck. We wait for the return of the Lord. Until then we weep, but not as those who have no hope, because they do not have a sovereign God. We test all things and accept only what is good. We oppose evil with concrete measures, without thereby opposing God or defying his will.

Sovereignty is not a control mechanism. The Bible speaks of God being accountable only to himself. He is able to bring about what he has planned. He is victorious over sin and death. But the Bible does not leave a doubt about the agony, the effort in time, the grief of God in the midst of the battle to bring that about in the end. There is a prince of this world for a while. He has real choices, as do we. He is not yet bound, but he will be at the end.

We do God no honor when we deny the tragedy of human existence in this world. We are exposed to the results of sin from the past. We live in a world partially reshaped by Adam's choices. Why do we deny this, or at least belittle it by our approval? It is a false comfort to make God responsible for what happens, for then we deny that anything is really wrong. He is the real comfort as the one who will correct, not merely add to, the fallen world with the resurrection.

I suggest that the reason many like to identify God with what is happening in their lives is a fear of a loss of control. They make themselves believe in a closed sovereignty, for they do not like the unfinished situation found in a fallen world. Consequently while they advocate the control of

God over the events in history, they abandon God to immorality. He becomes the author of whatever comes to pass. At least he allows what, in their eyes, he could prevent, if only he chose to. But since it happens, he must have decided not to want to help, even though he could have.

We abandon the basis for much personal and social effort in the fight against sickness, death, injustice, and fate when we submit to the idea of God's wanting every situation we experience. Job's friends held to that line of thinking. Perhaps the diminishing interference, the guilt about real grief, or the lack of passion in general in the face of any evil by many in the church in the course of normal but tragic events of human life shows that in their heart and mind they have become Muslims. When all events are the will of God, the only remaining effort is to make people believe that.

Perhaps that also explains why many in the church focus on personal faith and private spirituality, following some discipleship program for personal growth. The weighty issue of making a statement by our words and life for the existence of a God at war with a fallen world is easily neglected. When the proposed solution is to accept the status quo or to embrace normality, the focus will be on psychology and meeting personal needs rather than on serving the Lord.

Yet disciples will declare the existence and character of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came in the flesh to oppose evil, despair, false teaching, and death itself. The freedom of the children of God is not found in trained indifference to the reality of a broken world. It is rather the freedom to stand up and to enter the battle with spiritual armor, and to be found standing.

Christ did not model for us a way of accepting death. He came to fight for our life. In his death he won over guilt; in his resurrection he overpowered death. Healing comes when we recognize the difference and exhibit God's moral stand for life against death.

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