

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Handwriting on the Wall

Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another. The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spake, and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. Then came in all the king's wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof. Then was king Belshazzar greatly troubled, and his countenance was changed in him, and his lords were astonished. (Daniel 5:1-9)

With the fifth chapter of Daniel we move from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar's rule over Babylon. Our present chapter highlights the Babylonians' decadent insult against the temple vessels that Babylon took from Solomon's temple when they defeated Judah. Unlike "Raiders of the Lost Ark," the power that distinguished Judah did not reside in the temple vessels, not even the Ark of the Covenant. The power was then, as it is now, God's, not sacred pieces of furniture or temple dishes.

This chapter reinforces a point we considered earlier in our study. Babylon's victory over Judah, even including their desecration of Solomon's temple and taking many temple dishes and furnishings with them as booty back to Babylon, did not reveal Babylon's victory over God, but rather God's judgment against His own people for their stubborn sins against God. Babylon will face her judgment day soon enough, but Judah faced her divine sentence with her defeat and the Babylonian exile.

One of the unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions of all religious worldviews has to do with the philosophical question of evil. If God is all powerful and all good, why does He either "allow" or cause all the evil, the sinful, depraved acts of fallen humans, in this world? Interestingly, no one asks the opposite and possibly more logical question. Why do good things happen to bad people? Scripture affirms what is obvious to all. Man is sinful and self-centered at his core. If God is all powerful

and all good, why does He not immediately and irreversibly punish every sinner rather than allowing His rain and sun to fall on just and unjust alike? Why does He "allow" other beneficial things to happen to wicked people? If we approach this question from a truly balanced philosophical perspective, is not this question just as valid as the first? Yet we never raise this question as an objection against God. Perhaps this glaring habit itself demonstrates the self-centered and self-serving sinful bias of fallen and sinful humans as fully as any depraved and isolated sinful act committed by man against his fellow.

In our recent study of Paul's letter to the Romans we occasionally examined Paul's reasoning that rather directly addresses this problem. (Romans 3:1-8) In this passage Paul repeatedly emphasizes that divine "orchestration" does not resolve the question. In fact it imposes logical and actual guilt onto God. Paul repeatedly affirms that, if God orchestrates our sins to enhance His righteousness, then God is personally responsible for our sin and He, not we, should face the final judgment for our sins.

There can be no doubt that on occasion, perhaps far more frequently than we care to consider most of the time, God in fact does intervene in the affairs of human activity. A study of the Bible provides multiple such examples. There can be no doubt that on occasions God uses weather or other natural forces to impose His righteous judgment against blatant sins that

people practice. A study of the Bible equally affirms this point. However, based on Paul's reasoning in the third chapter of Romans, as well as many other Scriptures, God does not either cause or "orchestrate" every single act of sinful, depraved humans or every natural event. Thus when a depraved terrorist high jacks a commercial airplane and crashes it into a high rise office building in New York City, we cannot automatically conclude that God was thereby "judging" our country and culture. When a massive hurricane crashes ashore along the gulf coast of our country, we cannot automatically conclude that God was thereby judging our nation or its people.

How then do we sort out all the options and problems that we encounter in this complicated world? Our answer must build on a basic worldview. What kind of world do we believe exists from God's perspective? A number of common views exist.

1. We live in a highly controlled world in which God causes every event that occurs. This view, however much it equivocates, cannot evade the insurmountable problem that eventually compromises and destroys God's moral character.
2. God doesn't cause every event, but He does orchestrate every event that occurs. Unless God intends to use a sinful or destructive event for His glory, He simply does not "allow" it to occur at all. Therefore advocates of this view must necessarily hold that every act of depraved man and natural disasters are divinely orchestrated for a greater good than we can comprehend. This view as hopelessly compromises God's moral character as the first. It also contradicts multiple Scripture passages that specifically refute its fundamental premise. Advocates of this view occasionally offer such passages as Psalm 76:10 in support of their view. "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain." However, they fail to acknowledge the simple language of the verse. David did not choose words to address every act of man or every motive of fallen, sinful man. He quite selectively addresses one human motive, man's wrath. Paul affirms that man's primary motive in his indulgence in sin is not anger against God, but rather satisfaction of his sinful appetite. "Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind

earthly things.)" (Philippians 3:19) Further the verse (Psalm 76:10) does not indicate that God absolutely prevents any other act from occurring than acts that praise Him. He rather indicates that God restrains other actions of man. That is, He imposes limits on what man can do. Daniel gives us a classic example of man's wrath praising God in the fiery furnace lesson. To embrace this obvious truth does not conclude that every act of depraved humans and demons are so robotically controlled and "orchestrated" by God that nothing occurs unless He intends to turn it to His own glory. Interestingly Jeremiah repeatedly addresses the fatalistic attitude of his fellow citizens who remained in Judah during the Babylonian exile and who adopted a fatalistic attitude toward their present distress. Consider all the things that Jeremiah tells us that God did not command or orchestrate. (Jeremiah 7:9-10, 18, 31; 19:5; 32:35 as just a few clear examples)

Here is another passage where inspired Scripture specifically states that God did not cause certain things. "Thou hast not brought me the small cattle of thy burnt offerings; neither hast thou honoured me with thy sacrifices. ***I have not caused thee to serve with an offering, nor wearied thee with incense.***" (Isaiah 43:23) Then shortly thereafter Isaiah correctly assesses the cause of self-serving sin. "Thy ***first father*** (Notice the singular form, "father," not "fathers") hath sinned, ***and thy teachers*** have transgressed against me." (Isaiah 43:27)

If we find only one event in human history that God did not cause or orchestrate, this view dies of its own weight, being contradicted by even that single passage. However, we have discovered multiple examples in Jeremiah alone. New Testament passages further refute the claim. (1 Corinthians 14:33; 1 John 2:16-17 as just two such examples) If we consider natural disasters, Scripture equally refutes that God uses every natural disaster for His glory, or He prevents its occurrence. (Luke 13:4-5; Jesus specifically refutes the prevailing religious view of divine orchestration or divine punishment in the falling of a tower that killed eighteen people) An Old Testament example of natural events not involving divine cause or orchestration appears in 1 Kings 19:11-12; notice the

specific observation, "...but the Lord was not in...") President Richard Nixon was forced to resign as president of our country because he was guilty of "orchestrating" the Watergate burglary, though he didn't personally engage in the act itself. Human justice rightly concludes, as Paul concludes of divine justice, that orchestration of sinful or illegal events makes the "orchestrator" guilty of the crime involved in the orchestration. In criminal law the "orchestrator" could be charged and prosecuted for being an accessory to the crime actually committed, the moral point that Paul addresses in Romans 3:1-8. Thus this view as hopelessly compromises God's moral character as the first.

3. God is a moral being, and He will not ever under any circumstance or occasion in any way compromise His righteous character. God also created mankind as moral beings, unlike the animals in creation, possessing a moral compass. God thus holds mankind personally and individually responsible and liable for their personal immoral decisions. However flawed man's moral compass may have become in the fall, man still possesses the intellect and moral sense to know moral right from wrong. This view affirms the Biblical teaching that God holds sinful man responsible for his own sinful actions. If we forsake this fundamental point, how do we explain the final Day of Judgment when God shall judge and sentence the wicked to their eternal prison? This worldview does not forsake God's providential involvement in human affairs or in natural events, but it also does not make God the causing agent of sin, nor does it make Him a moral/criminal accessory to man's sin. It rather holds that God shall hold man accountable for man's sinful choices and actions. Isn't this the major theme and objective of the Bible's teaching regarding the final Day of Judgment? While many ideas exist regarding the precise manner in which man was created in God's image, I believe this moral compass and moral accountability must be considered as at least a major element in man's carrying the likeness of God in his essential constitution. This view holds that God gave mankind moral responsibility and moral accountability for his actions, at the same time imposing certain limitations on

man's sinful actions. If God did not to some extent "restrain" (just as Psalm 76:10 accurately states) man's sinful inclinations, this world would be unbearable and unsurvivable. When sinful humans attempt to cross that divine limitation, God steps in and prevents or restrains their desires. It also holds that God on occasion steps into the lives of His beloved children with kind acts of loving care and protection (Could we imagine a better example than Daniel in the lion's den?). However, it carefully avoids any suggestion that God ever does anything that violates His moral character.

4. A fourth view, the deist view, holds that God created the universe, set it in motion under the various natural and moral laws that exist, and left man wholly on his own. It denies any act of divine intervention whatever. This view, although at times popular among philosophical advocates (Take a look at Thomas Jefferson's personal translation of the Bible. It carefully eliminates all the miracles and all the examples of divine intervention that appear in our valid Bible text), cannot survive the test of Biblical harmony and support. Sometimes advocates of the first or second view above play straw man logical fallacies against those who hold to the third view, accusing them of actually being a deist. They also in this calculated misrepresentation commit the logical fallacy of "horns of the dilemma." If someone does not hold their view that God either causes or orchestrates everything, there is no other view than divine aloofness, deism. There can be no other possible view. In fact there are many other views that advocates of the first two views simply choose to ignore in this fallacious and illogical strategy.

As we develop this lesson from Daniel, we shall see the clear presence of God's intervention. Judah's exile in Babylon was caused by Judah's sin, not by divine and arbitrary orchestration, and certainly not by the false belief of Babylon's leaders that her victory over Judah proved that her gods were superior to Judah's God.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor