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Be Still, My Soul: The Christian and the Providence of God

RON HIGHFIELD

The scope and character of God's providence cannot be limited to an academic discussion among professional theologians; nor is it merely a curiosity for the amateur. It touches us where we live every day. The Bible can be read cover to cover with the theme of providence in mind. Even where it's not focused on providence, it exemplifies divine planning, working, and executing and fulfilling the divine will for creation and salvation. Sometimes the scriptures speak retrospectively about what has happened and, thus, makes sense of obscure happenings in view of God's plan that has now been fulfilled. And sometimes God's past care and his promises for the future are used to inspire comfort, confidence, hope, perseverance and trust for the journey into the unknown future. I hardly need to point out how significant these existential stances are. Just contrast them to their opposites: fear, disquiet, despair, anxiety, doubt and resignation. So, the doctrine of providence deals with a theme that makes the difference between a life of joy, peace and meaning, and one bereft of those blessings.

Maintaining the basis of the confident life described in scripture is one of my main concerns in thinking about the doctrine of providence. I feel compelled to reject any theory that would rob us of confidence and hope on the human side or of love and sovereignty on the divine side. Most of the controversies in the doctrine of providence arise in reconciling this strong affirmation of human confidence and divine sovereignty with human responsibility and the presence of evil and suffering in the world. If God controls what happens in a way that inspires total confidence, where is human freedom? If nothing escapes God's sovereign rule, how can we account for the presence of evil . . . without attributing it to God? In a recent book I address both problems; but here I can address only the most important: the issue of suffering.¹

TWO REACTIONS TO SUFFERING

Everyone sees the problem of suffering through the prism of their own suffering. I am no different. Two incidents in my life stand out in my memory. My dad was and is the most influential human being in my life. I had just turned seventeen and was attending summer school at Freed-Hardeman College. On the morning of July 12, 1968, I received a phone call from our local preacher saying that my father was gravely ill and that I should come home immediately. I did not have access to a car and had to wait four hours for a ride home. Those four hours and the 180-mile trip were the longest hours of my life. Upon my arrival my uncle met me at the door and said, "Your daddy is dead." My burden of anxiety instantly became heavy grief. I grieved for a year afterward. I still grieve. But—and this is no credit to me—I do not remember being angry with God or even questioning him. I knew then and I know now that only he can help.

The second incident happened in May of 1982. I was just about to turn thirty-one, had been married for five years and had a one-year-old son. As I sipped my midmorning cup of coffee I suddenly felt faint and sensed that my heart had slipped into an irregular beat. I drove home from work. Being young, a runner and

1. Ron Highfield, "God Controls by Liberating" in *Four Views On Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 141–64.

“immortal,” I thought it might clear up if I took a little jog. I did not get far and barely made it home. My wife—who is a nurse—found me lying on the couch, very pale. Taking my blood pressure and measuring my pulse, she said, “We need to go the emergency room now.” The doctors and nurses wired me up to a heart monitor and put in an intravenous line. Shortly thereafter my caretakers wheeled me to the x-ray room where I promptly fainted. I was told that I was experiencing “atrial fibrillation” and that my blood could clot and cause a stroke. I was admitted to the hospital at 2:00 am. After my wife left and I lay there alone, I thought of her and our little boy. “What if I die?” Then—again it is not my doing—I felt an incredible peace. I felt complete confidence that if I died that night, God would take care of my dear ones, because I sensed as never before that God takes care of them whether I live or die.

Not everyone reacts the way I did to suffering. The late nineteenth-century social reformer Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the literary light Henry Adams dealt with suffering by embracing atheism. In a letter to her son, Stanton wrote: “How anyone, in view of the protracted sufferings of the race, can invest the laws of the universe with a tender loving fatherly intelligence, watching, guiding and protecting humanity, is to me amazing. I see nothing but immutable inexorable law, grinding the ignorant to powder.”² Reflecting on the death of his sister, Henry Adams protests, “The idea that any personal deity, could find pleasure or profit in torturing a poor woman, by accident, with a fiendish cruelty known to man only in perverted and insane temperaments, could not be held for a moment. For pure blasphemy, it made atheism a comfort.”³

Such Christian philosophers as Gregory Boyd and William Hasker make sense of suffering by limiting God’s control over what happens in the world. They argue that God does not want us to suffer and that human suffering plays no part in his plan. Besides, much suffering in our world is demonstratively gratuitous, that is, wasted. It brings about no greater good that makes the suffering worth it. Our suffering, they explain, results from living in a fallen world, where disease and death have the next-to-last word and human beings are given the freedom to do good *or evil*. God cannot prevent suffering without depriving us of free will or reversing his decision to create. Hence God is not responsible for the suffering we endure.⁴ As the account of my suffering has already made obvious, I find this line of reasoning deeply unsatisfying to my mind and unhelpful in my suffering.⁵

MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

In my suffering I found that I continued to believe that God created all things from nothing and is my creator. He created me for a reason, and there is no power that can defeat his plans for me. I never lost faith that God is able to guide and govern the world he has made. I was and am certain that he knows how to work all things for good even if I cannot see the way. Though severely tried, I could not let go of my faith that God is trustworthy and good. The image of the crucified and resurrected Son of God gave me hope in the darkest night of my life. For me, the suffering and death of Jesus is the Christian answer—the only answer—to the problem of suffering. In addition, I was helped by the thought that this present world is not God’s final goal. My present life with all its joys and sorrows is not the end; therefore I should not live for this world alone and need not worry about the future.

In my hour of suffering I returned again and again to certain texts of scripture in which I found comfort and hope. Space forbids quoting at them at length. I reproduce only two, one from Jesus and the other from Paul.

2. Quoted in James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 207.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Gregory Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); William Hasker, *Triumph of God over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

5. I would go as far as calling it a “theology of despair.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?” (Luke 12.22–26)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us . . . And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Rom 8.18–28)

I also relied on Romans 5.1–5; Ephesians 1.11; Philippians 2.12–13; Hebrews 11, 12.1–3; 2 Corinthians 5.6–10; and many of the psalms.

SOME HARD QUESTIONS

When people experience their own suffering or the suffering of a loved one, they often ask some hard questions: Why do good people suffer along with the bad? Why did this suffering happen to me or to my loved one? Why did God let this happen to me? If God could have prevented this tragedy, why didn't he do so? Before we deal directly with these questions, a few observations are in order. First, a moment's reflection will help us realize that we do not ask these questions because we seek an *explanation* for suffering but because we want it *removed*. And since not all suffering can be soon removed, we need ways to cope and maintain hope in the middle of it. Second, we need to distinguish between “pain” and “suffering.” *Pain* is a sensation. I've experience four kidney stones and made three emergency room visits to deal with the pain! In excruciating pain, pain is all you can think about, and all you want is its removal. *Suffering* is spiritual pain that may not be accompanied by physical pain. In suffering we experience a feeling of loss, despair, meaninglessness, helplessness, abandonment and disorientation. For physical pain there is physical help but for suffering, since it is spiritual, only a spiritual resource will help.

SAYING SOMETHING

What should we say when the sufferer asks, “Why did God let this happen to me?” First, remember that this question does not ask for information. It is an expression of perplexity. The best answer is not: “God had nothing to do with it” or “God could not help it” or “God wanted to teach you a lesson.” The best answer is: “I don't know.” Why is it the best? Because it responds to the heart and speaks the truth! Importantly, it implies that there is an answer even if we cannot grasp it. It simply trusts God and does not speak presumptuously, as if we knew the mind of God or could see right through his providence. Most of the time, the best thing you can do for the sufferer is be present, because—remember—suffering is not the same as pain. Suffering is a feeling of loss, despair, meaninglessness, helplessness, abandonment and disorientation. So your presence can help supply some of the antidote to these things.

How do you deal with your own suffering and loss? (1) Remind yourself that we live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 4.18). In faith, trust that God loves you and knows what he is doing. (2) In prayer, seek God's presence. Paul called God the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1.3–7). Sometimes in our hour of need, God is there for us and we are not alone. But we need to prepare for that hour with a life of prayer and awareness of God. (3) The presence of other believers is so important. We need to develop deep and loving relationships within the community of believers. (4) Cultivate hope. Hope is the antidote to despair, which is the heart of suffering. Hope defies the present in name of the future God promises us.

SEEMINGLY SPECULATIVE MATTERS

It is common to hear well-meaning people say things like this on the occasion of someone's death: "God took your child . . ." Or merely "It was God's will." When others hear this kind of talk they think, and sometimes say, "What kind of a God would kill or cause pain in a child?" As I said earlier, some people react to such claims with a denial of God's existence, and others say something like this: "God did not will it, had nothing to do with it, and could not help it." I do not think either of these statements is a Christian thing to say. Consider this: When we think of an event—say an auto accident, a period of sickness, or a heart attack—we think of segment of time, a discrete beginning and end, relatively separate and isolated from what came before and what comes after. We call it an "event" and we give it a name, such as my "heart attack" or the "accident of May 5th." But a little thought reveals that an event is just something we cut out of something larger and continuous. How can we completely isolate an event from all its causes, which come "before," and all its results, which come "after"?

Now think about the death of Christ. What if we determined the meaning of that "event" only what happened to Jesus from the moment of his betrayal to his burial? In ordinary language that would be an "event," which we might name, "The suffering and death of Jesus." In this case, the event would have to be interpreted as tragic reminder of evil and death, which has the last word in this world. But Christians don't view the death of Jesus as an isolated event! We include within in its meaning the divine plan, which came *before* the event, and its results, which came *after*. And what are its results? Our salvation, the future redemption of creation and eternal life!

So, when someone says, "God willed this event"—this accident or illness—they are right and wrong . . . but mostly wrong. We just do not know how far back and forward the event stretches or what the "event" means. Its final results have not been revealed. That is why I brought up my father. He died of a stroke at fifty-two years and seven months old. What if the lives, or even salvation of millions of people, depended in unforeseeable ways on my dad dying at that precise time? What if God willed his death as part of this greater whole? What if an angel had appeared to my father the night before he died and asked him this question: "Curtis, the Lord needs you to do something. It's really important, and the price is high: it will mean your death." I believe with my whole heart that my father would have agreed to put his life into God's hands just as requested. So, it would not be correct to say, "God willed my father's early death." That is not the whole story! It leaves out what came before and after—and it leaves out all the times my father prayed, "Thy will be done."

I believe that every bit of the pain and suffering and sorrow we experience in this world has precisely this level of significance. And it might help us endure it if we can hold on to that thought. Like Jesus, let us say to the Father, "Take this cup from me; yet not as I will but as you will" (Matt 26.39). I want to live my life this way and pray in all sincerity, "Lord, I want to do whatever you ask. Because you love me I am giving you *carte blanche*, complete discretion. Please give me the strength to complete my task."

My dad's death was caused by disease. But much suffering is caused by sin. How can God be involved in sinful human acts? Let's examine the case of Judas. Judas betrayed Christ to his death, and surely that was sinful. But there seems to be a paradox in this event: there is no doubt that from a human point of view Judas's act contributed to the murder of Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God. And the death of the Son of God on the cross provided a way of forgiveness and salvation for humankind. But the scriptures are very clear that Judas was nevertheless responsible for his act and guilty of betrayal. How can God use Judas's sinful act without himself sinning, and why doesn't the good that came from Judas's sin relieve him of his guilt?

Another somewhat speculative idea might help us think about this paradox. Just like an event, an act is not a simple thing: it involves character, desire, deliberation, intention, means, action and results. Judas intended something to happen. Perhaps he thought something good would be brought about or that the

money he got would make him happy. He is responsible for his desires and wishes. But he was wrong about what he would achieve. God allowed Judas to plan and carry out his designs . . . but God had another plan that incorporated Judas's plan. God's plan insured that the results achieved by Judas's act were God's and not Judas's. What human failure! What divine success!

CONCLUSION

The scriptures assure us that nothing can separate us from God's love and that God will work in all things for our good. We are not told that we will always see the divine hand at work. But we see in Jesus the model of how to deal with suffering. Since we know the result of the "event" of his suffering we can be confident that, even when it looks like evil and death have triumphed and all ordinary hope has abandoned us, we can trust the one who saved Jesus from death and through him worked the salvation of the world! When all else fails hold on to this.

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