

WHAT'S GOING ON?

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the great controversies that has raged in the church for many centuries is the disagreement between Christians about whether we really have free will or not, whether we are able to direct our destinies by our own choices or whether we are in the grip of an inexorable fate that determines what is going to happen to us whether we like it or not. If you want to put this rather theologically, the question would be, "Are we predetermined to be Arminians, or do we have a choice as to whether we are Calvinists or not?"

In examining the miracle in the Gospel of John of the raising of Lazarus after he had been dead for four days, we are facing the greatest miracle that our Lord performed outside of his own resurrection. This is the clearest testimony to the claims of Jesus, and as such it had tremendous impact upon the people who saw it occur. John now traces the effects of that miracle in the closing section of Chapter 11. In this account he gives insights into this question of whether we really have free will or whether we are bound by the sovereignty of God.

We will begin with Verses 45-46, where we have a clear example of men exercising free will:

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him; but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.
{John 11:45-46 RSV}

That is, they opposed Jesus. Rather than believing, they took steps to set in motion the enmity of the Pharisees against him. The amazing thing in this account is the resistance of these people to this miracle. I do not understand their opposition to it. I am sure that if I had been there, and had seen Jesus by a simple word of command call a man back to life after he had been dead four days -- and doing so with the clear backing of the Father, i.e., the power coming from God himself -- there would have been no doubt left in my mind that Jesus was what he claimed to be. Yet so obstinate and stubborn is human unbelief that it can persist even in the face of overwhelming evidence such as this.

In Luke, the 16th chapter, Jesus tells a story which relates to this, the story of the rich man and the beggar who both died and went to their respective places; the rich man went to hell, and the poor man (whose name, by the way, was Lazarus), went to Abraham's bosom. The rich man, "being in torment" {Luke 16:23a RSV}, according to the account, "saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom," {Luke 16:23b RSV}. And he called out, "Send Lazarus to my five brothers so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment," {cf, Luke 16:27b-28 RSV}. Abraham's remarkable response was, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them," {Luke 16:29b RSV}. "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead," {Luke 16:31b}. This incident with Lazarus in the Gospel of John is a clear example of that stubborn, obstinate unbelief that will not believe even though the evidence is absolutely overwhelming and constitutes one of the most remarkable phenomena of all time.

The point of the passage is, these people did what they did without any coercion. Nobody forced them; they made their own decision; they operated from their free will; they did what they felt like doing. Those who believed did so because they were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, that he was indeed the Promised One from God, that he did have power over life and death. That conviction drove them to action; they believed on Jesus; they committed themselves to him. On the other hand, those who refused to believe and instead set in motion machinery to oppose Jesus and threaten his life did so because they chose not to believe. And they did this of their own free will. Notice the point John clearly makes here that there is no pressure, there is no exhortation from Jesus, there is no choir singing sixteen verses of *Just As I Am*. There is no finger shaking, no dire warning from Jesus that they are headed for hell if they do not believe. No, all are left perfectly free to decide according to the way they choose.

But -- and that word is one of the most important in the English language; it always means you have turned a corner; things are not quite the same -- men are free to choose, but they are not free to choose the consequences. This is where you have a harmony, if you like, between free will and the sovereignty of God. We are free to choose -- as these men and women did, we can go for or against Jesus -- but we cannot choose the consequences. They will invariably follow according to the program and sovereign choice of God. That is what this account teaches us.

This decision of some to resist sets in motion certain inescapable results. John sets these before us in the following verses:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death. {John 11:47-53 RSV }

The first reaction of the Pharisees is to call an emergency session of the Sanhedrin. Things are getting out of hand. They have become desperate. The polls now indicate that Jesus is so far ahead, that the liberal left is almost hopeless. So they come together in an emergency session to take drastic action.

We will not understand this account fully until we see that John here records three separate views of the same events. The first two are natural, human views that would still be shared by many today if we were involved in these events, and yet both of these are horribly, fatally wrong. The third is God's view, which is always realistic, which ultimately becomes historic, and, amazingly, is always redemptive.

I want to look at this account from these three points of view.

First, there is what we would call the Pharisees' view. In the council of the Sanhedrin there were two parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were what we would call today "fundamentalists." They were the religionists, the party that took literally everything in the Law. They tried to carry out the commands of the Law, and boasted in their ability to live according to it. We get their point of view in these opening verses. It is they who say, as John records, "What are we to do?" Actually, what they literally said was, "What are we doing?" You can hear the panic in that: "What are we doing? Things are getting out of hand. This man is performing all these signs." Then, typically, they projected into the future: "If we let this go on everybody is going to believe in Jesus, everyone is going to accept him as the Messiah." They saw that as a tragedy. In their view, the Messiah would lead a political uprising and that would result in the wrath of Rome coming down upon them: "The Romans will come and destroy both our temple and our nation."

As we look back from our vantage point, some twenty centuries later, the remarkable thing, of course, is that they were totally wrong. In fact, when they did put Jesus to death it had the effect they were hoping to avoid. That very choice they made to crucify Jesus was the reason why, 40 years later, the Romans were knocking at the gates of Jerusalem. The city was overwhelmed, the temple was destroyed, torn apart stone by stone, the Jews were slaughtered in terrible numbers and many others were led away into captivity; the nation ceased to exist. All that came about because the Pharisees and the Sadducees did what they did.

What they did not know, or what they forgot, was that Israel was not being preserved by their clever political manipulations. This nation had been preserved all through its history because of the sovereign hand of God's protection upon it. They were a people whom God had said he would guard if they would walk in any degree before him. What was keeping this nation a nation, and keeping the temple central in their faith, was the hand of God. When they put the Messiah to death God removed his protection, and the nations, which had been hovering like birds of prey waiting to pounce upon them, came in and fulfilled the predictions of Jesus himself

that the city would be destroyed. Now we can see that these religious zealots, these fundamentalists in their view of Scripture, were wrong. They thought they were right, they did what they felt was only necessary to do to preserve themselves, but they were terribly, horribly wrong.

More than that, John goes on to give the Sadducees' view, in the words of Caiaphas, the high priest. Caiaphas, who belonged to the party of the Sadducees, had won this office of high priest for just one year at a time by being the highest bidder for the job. By this time the Romans determined who would be high priest. They put the office up for sale, so that whoever among the Jews could come up with enough money got the job. (Caiaphas, by the way, continued in power as high priest for some 18 years; he evidently had considerable financial resources at his command.) But he speaks here as a Sadducee who does not believe in God particularly, who does not believe in anything supernatural, who denies the miracles, the existence of angels or a life after death. He had a typical, what we would call today, secular human point of view.

Notice how arrogant he is. This is always typical of those who deny the invisible realities. He is arrogant and contemptuous. He says to the council, "You don't know anything. You know nothing at all." This is a rude introduction, not designed to make his words very welcome. Josephus, the Jewish historian of this period recorded, "The manners of the Sadducees are far rougher than the Pharisees, both to each other and to their equals, whom they treat as strangers." You can hear that rudeness and roughness here in his language: "You ding-a-lings, you nincompoops, you don't know anything."

But Caiaphas' philosophy, you will notice, is very much up-to-date. It is the philosophy of the Mafia, for one, today. It is simply, "Eliminate Jesus. Wipe him out. Waste him. It's better that one man die than that we lose Cosa Nostra, our thing." What an utterly ruthless, but from his point of view, practical and necessary philosophy! This viewpoint has continued through the centuries since. People still think this way. They view a situation according to how it affects them and make their judgments on the basis of what they think is the right thing to do to defend themselves.

But, as we can see from our vantage point, these men are terribly wrong. What they are doing is reckoning without the knowledge of all the factors involved. In other words, Caiaphas was short-sighted, and, therefore, unprincipled. He was hideously wrong because he did not reckon on all the factors that bore upon the problem he faced. In First Corinthians the Apostle Paul writes, "We preach a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory," {cf, 1 Cor 2:7-8 RSV}. There is something secular wisdom does not know and cannot see because it lacks essential knowledge of the facts. Men continually make decisions which look right to them but are really terribly wrong and have disastrous effects upon themselves and upon society.

But now notice the divine view, which John gives in Verse 51, speaking of Caiaphas, the high priest: "He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." What a confirmation this is of the prophesy of Isaiah! He had said there was One coming who would bear the sins of the nation: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all," (Isaiah 53:6). The high priests, of course, did not believe that. They were blinded to this factor. So they uttered statements that, though they confirmed it, were not what they themselves understood.

Here in this passage we can see the sovereignty of God, the unseen hand of God in human history. Men could do their worst but they could not alter the divine plan. I once heard Richard Halverson, who is now Chaplain to the United States Senate, put it very exactly, in these words: "Nothing men can do will thwart or alter the will of God; and nothing God ever does sets aside the sovereign choice of man." That is a balanced statement of the truth. It is not a question of one or the other: Do we choose free will for man or the sovereignty of God? The biblical position is, it is both, but man is so limited, so ignorant, so blinded, so selfish that, even allowed to exercise free will, he will invariably choose the wrong thing. That is why the exercise of free will only carries out what God has said will happen when a deformed and twisted will is allowed to make choices. I do not think anything demonstrates that more clearly than this incident.

Free will is a very inadequate vehicle to carry out the divine program. It does not see enough. Although Caiaphas himself was a scalawag -- an unprincipled, ruthless unbeliever -- because he was the high priest, his office made him a prophet, and God spoke through him anyway. This is a remarkable description that John gives us of how God can use men even against their will and without their knowing they are being used. In fact, if you read through the Gospel of John carefully you will see a number of places where John calls our attention to the fact that the enemies of Jesus prophesied in spite of themselves. Verses 27 and 35 of Chapter 7 give evidences of that very thing.

This unseen hand of God in human history is what men ignore, and that makes their free will a total disaster. That is why John tells us, in Verse 53, the ultimate result: "So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death." It is no longer whether, but how. They were determined to eliminate Jesus. All their meetings from here on, in the words of one commentator, were simply "meetings for Messianic murder." That foolish, and from our twentieth century vantage point, clearly wrong viewpoint and decision was inevitable when they refused the evidence of the resurrection of Lazarus. They made a free will choice to say no and turn their backs on what God had clearly indicated was true.

When you reject truth, you become unable to see clearly at all. This is the terrible danger of free will, as Scripture points out. It is a totally unreliable instrument. Scripture everywhere warns us against this. Proverbs 3, Verses 5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your path," {cf, Prov 3:5-6 KJV}. It is absolutely impossible to understand what is happening in life unless you see life from God's point of view. There are factors involved that you will miss, there are realities that you do not see, that nobody sees. I am always amazed at the arrogance of the mind of man today who boasts of his ability to control his destiny. The media thrusts this upon us all the time. Every commercial, every advertisement informs us, "You can do what you want. You are in control. You make the choices. You decide and you can be whatever you want to be." If reading commentaries makes the angels laugh, listening to commercials makes them roll in the aisles! How wrong men can be! Nothing reveals this more than the hand of God in history.

But it is also true, and we do not want to miss the point of this, that despite man's ignorant unbelief, the divine purpose is always redemptive. God does not allow man to suffer the full results of his ignorance. He seeks to redeem that. As John points out, even the high priest is made to utter a prophecy that Jesus will die on behalf of the nation, and not only that, but on behalf of all the children of God scattered abroad. There, you see, the Spirit of God is looking beyond the bounds of Israel to the whole Gentile world, and twenty centuries, at least, of gospel preaching, and saying that the death of our Lord Jesus made possible the gathering of Jew and Gentile together into one flock, one body, one being: the Church; and that is what God would accomplish by man's ignorant folly.

I do not think there is anything more clearly representative of the way God works than this account. You can see this in what we sometimes call "coincidences" today.

Just last week I read in a report of Luis Palau's crusade in London that a woman counselor, standing in the rain at Queen's Park Stadium as the invitation was being given, saw a man out of the corner of her eye (it was raining so hard she did not even raise her head), and asked him if he wanted to go forward. The man said, "Yes," and they began to go forward. As they walked toward the front, to her absolute astonishment she looked up and saw that the man was her brother whom she had not seen for seven years! Was that a coincidence? No, that is the divine hand at work in human affairs, that element that we forget so easily and so frequently. One is working in human affairs to bring about the calling out of people from all tribes and races, all nations and families of the earth to believe in the work of the Lord Jesus and to follow him, to be the redeemers of human life instead of the wreckers of our humanity.

The final view John gives us is that of the One in control of the time events. Verse 54:

Jesus therefore no longer went about openly among the Jews, but went from there to the country near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim; and there he stayed with the disciples. {John 11:54 RSV}

(The rest of the verses of this chapter actually belong as the introduction to chapter 12.)

Here we have Jesus again withdrawing from Jerusalem. Why did he do so? Well, it was not because he was afraid. Later in John's account of Jesus returning to the city there is no evidence that he ever was afraid of what he was facing. (Except the struggle, briefly, in the Garden of Gethsemane, but in the event itself he moves with quiet calm and courage through everything).

Why? It was because he understood the way God works. He understood the control of God in history, the invisible factors which were at work in every human situation. As a result, he adjusted his own behavior accordingly.

Why does he withdraw some 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem to an obscure village? Today, nobody even knows where it was located. He did so because the time had not yet come. Jesus knew that he was to be offered at the Passover season. Here, as best we can tell, it is about February. Passover comes in early April, so he had several weeks yet to wait. Thus he withdraws and teaches his disciples. He is there where he can either join the pilgrims coming down the Jordan Valley or those who may be coming down directly south from Galilee. As we know from the other gospels, when the time came he went down into the Jordan Valley and there joined the pilgrims who were proceeding down the valley to Jerusalem; and he went precisely on schedule.

What is this saying to us?

It is saying you and I must understand the times in which we live. God is still at work, still carrying out his program, according to his schedule, moving among men to raise up kingdoms and overthrow kingdoms, to put people in power and take them out of power. We must never forget that this view of history supplies elements that no secular mind can ever see. The rulers of this age do not understand this and so they make atrocious errors.

One of the most astounding statements in Scripture comes at the end of that chapter of First Corinthians which we quoted from earlier. Writing to Christians, Paul says, "But we have the mind of Christ," {1 Cor 2a;16b}. That is what we have if we understand the Word of God. If we know how God thinks, if we know the principles by which he moves through human history and what governs his actions we can understand what is happening in our day and make decisions in our own lives, personally or corporately, that are in line with his working. Otherwise it does not do any good to be religious. To be religious and not understand the mind of God is no advantage. The Pharisees made the same terrible mistakes that the Sadducees made. They both combined together to decide to do the wrong thing, the most terrible decision ever made in human history, so one side did not have any advantage over the other.

How do you have an advantage? It is when you begin to have the mind of Christ, when you know the Word of God, when you look at events through its light -- not when you merely listen occasionally to a message, but when you saturate yourself with the mind and thinking of God until you begin to think biblically.

Those who think biblically face life realistically. They can make decisions that will safely bring them through all the toils and struggles and perils of life and thereby fulfill their purpose for being alive.

I do not think there is anything more challenging in all the Bible than this, that we should so understand the mind of God and, like Jesus, regulate our affairs in step with his purposes through history. That does not require a tremendous education. There is nothing wrong with education. God uses it. The searching of men for knowledge is a very proper procedure. But we must never forget what Scripture reveals: the mind with which we search is a twisted instrument. It does not register correctly. It does not see all the factors. It does not understand always. The most educated mind of all must have the light of the Word of God before it can deal realistically with our present times. Surely that is the message of this account.

Are you seeking that mind?

Are you, like our Lord, understanding the times in which you live, and, therefore, not wasting your days in

pursuit of foolish things that end up in uselessness, as these Pharisees did? Are you using your time to forward the purposes of God, to be an instrument through whom he accomplishes his redemptive work in this world?

I do not know anything more challenging than that!

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