

THE WAY OF FAITH, PART 9: CONCURRENCE

Luke 22:1-30, Colossians 1:21-23 (NASB)

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18 December 2011

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Many years ago I tried repeatedly to read *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien and failed. I could not get past the long description of hobbits, their habits, and their hairy feet. When I finally made it through, I felt that the plot bordered on the absurd. Bilbo Baggins got into impossible situations over and over again, and every time he got out of them in some implausible way.

The story is that dwarf King Thrór of old had lived under the Lonely Mountain in great splendor and accumulated riches in caves and carven rooms. The dwarves were attacked by a dragon which killed many of them. And for several generations the dragon simply lived on a heap of the dwarves' gold and jewels, preventing its recovery. But Thrór's grandson aimed to take it back, and on advice of the wizard Gandalf, he hires Bilbo Baggins as his burglar to steal it back through a secret side entrance to the caves. He sets off on a quest with the dwarves to recover their treasure.

As they travel to their confrontation with the dragon Bilbo gets separated from the group and ends up underground, in grave danger of being eaten by a slimy creature named Gollum. When he is just about to get caught he trips in the dark, and his hand just happens to land on a golden ring. He slips it on and it just happens to make Bilbo invisible and permit his escape.

When the group is reunited above ground they find themselves being hunted by wolves. In an attempt to conceal themselves they climb very large trees. Inevitably, they are discovered, and their enemies set the trees on fire. The flames and smoke lick upward, leading to their doom...and then giant eagles swoop in and pluck them out of the trees to safety. They also get attacked by giant spiders in the woods. Bilbo slips on his ring, becomes invisible, and slays the spiders with his little sword. Gradually Bilbo warms up to the idea of being the hired burglar for the dwarves, and he begins to use the ring in a more planned and determined way to seek their quest.

By the end of the book Bilbo has become a full participant in the quest and a bona fide hero. By an amazing set of circumstances, the dragon is slain and the dwarves' treasure is recovered. But the reader is left feeling that it was all too neat. Until we get to the very end when Tolkien finally gives us the tip we needed all along. He sets it up by having Bilbo exclaim: "Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!" (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965, p. 286).

And then the wizard Gandalf explains the true theme of *The Hobbit* at the very end of the very end when he says: "Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?" (p. 286). And here we learn that Tolkien has been teaching us about providence and its related doctrine, concurrence, all along.

In context I believe that Tolkien was leading us to seven conclusions. First, there is a plan above your plan. Second, that larger plan is not all about you. Third, the fulfillment of the prophecies which confirm the big plan are often different than what we expect. Fourth, freely chosen human activities are

part of the fulfillment of the greater plan, often in an unknowing way. Fifth, your results are not due only to your own work. Sixth, your rescues in life have not been accidental, no matter how they seemed at the time, and you could not have succeeded without them. Seventh, and finally, your success comes to you as you stick to the plan as you know it.

CONCURRENCE DEFINED

This series of studies has been about the way of faith: How do we move through life by faith? How do we accomplish things by faith? In answering these questions we have learned the crucial concept of providence, which is the action of God to oversee all things toward the accomplishment of a plan of his own making. R. C. Sproul defined its sister doctrine this way: "Concurrence refers to the historical events in which the work of Providence has been acted out through human agencies. ...At the same time human agents are acting, God is acting in and through them" (*The Invisible Hand*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Puritan and Reformed, 1996, p. 79).

This answers the challenging question: If we are part of God's plan, and God always has his way, do my human decisions matter at all? Concurrence teaches us that every decision we ever make matters and we have responsibility for every one. That entails the truth that while human beings are not autonomous, we have a measure of freedom assigned to us by God in which to make those decisions (cf. Sproul, p. 82). The Westminster Confession asserts with great clarity that "the liberty or contingency" of such "second causes" as human decisions are in no way demolished by divine providence.

This sounds like a contradiction, but it is not. It is mystery. A contradiction is something which cannot happen, while a mystery is something which is possible that we do not understand. Sproul gives the example that you cannot have both an irresistible force and an immovable object in the same universe. We usually hear this question stated as: Can God make a rock that is so big that even he cannot move it? No, that is a false question because God is an irresistible force. If he could not move something, he would not, by definition, be irresistible. That is a contradiction.

Concurrence, on the other hand, is not a contradiction, but a mystery. God has so designed the freedom of the human will, albeit limited, so that it is responsible. And yet, since God has oversight of all things, he is able to work his perfect will in and through those decisions. For example, we believe in the verbal plenary inspiration of the Bible. That means that all of the Bible is inspired down to the specific words, and yet the human authors wrote according to their own knowledge, vocabulary, and literary purposes. Moses sounds like Moses, and John sounds like John—and it all sounds like God.

How is it possible for God to achieve this without making them into robots? Concurrence gives one part of the answer: the writers of the Bible were doing exactly what they wanted to do in writing it, and God was doing exactly what he wanted in using them. In the same way, Pharaoh wanted to persecute the Israelites. The fact that God hardened his heart does not remove his responsibility for his own decisions. In the same way, King Cyrus of Persia wanted to send the Israelites back from captivity to Jerusalem for his own reasons, and yet we say that God delivered them. Traditional Calvinists and Arminians are agreed upon the principles of the responsibility of the human will and the sovereign oversight of God. They differ in where they locate the mystery, but mystery it is.

CONCURRENCE IN THE LIFE OF JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES

A passage in Luke's gospel reveals the interplay of providence and concurrence in the life of Jesus Christ and his disciples. **"Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was approaching. The chief priests and the scribes were seeking how they might put Him to death; for they were afraid of the people"** (Luke 22:1-2). In order for Christ to make atonement for sins, he had to die as the perfect sacrifice. The prophecies say that he was hated without a cause to the point that the Jewish leaders wanted to kill him. Were these men robots for God, acting out a kabuki theater version of human will? If so, that means that God took all hope of salvation from some people, used them to crucify Christ, and then cast them into destruction. But no. They wanted to kill Christ.

The text then leads us to the problem of Judas Iscariot: **"And Satan entered into Judas who was called Iscariot, belonging to the number of the twelve. And he went away and discussed with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them. They were glad and agreed to give him money. So he consented, and began seeking a good opportunity to betray Him to them apart from the crowd"** (Luke 22:3-6). You might get the impression that Judas became a mere pawn of Satan. There are many books on spiritual warfare which give the impression that believers can become instruments of the Devil against their will. And what happens to the responsibility of human decisions under this theory? It goes away completely.

On the contrary, Judas had every opportunity to become a genuine Christ-follower. He chose not to do so. No one forced him to betray Christ. He chose that as well. These responsible decisions placed him in the realm of the Evil One. No regenerated Christian need ever be under the power of Satan. The Scripture says: **"Resist the devil and he will flee from you"** (James 4:7). It does not say "maybe." Judas was surely playing with forces beyond his control, but embracing them was his own doing.

In the next part of the text we see a sample of how the disciples followed the Lord faithfully in spite of not really knowing what he was doing: **"Then came the first day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. And Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover for us, so that we may eat it.' They said to Him, 'Where do You want us to prepare it?' And He said to them, 'When you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house that he enters. And you shall say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, 'Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'" And he will show you a large, furnished upper room; prepare it there.' And they left and found everything just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover"** (Luke 22:7-13).

Surely the big plan of God for redemption was obscure to the people who made all these arrangements for the Last Supper. But I love the attitude of Peter and John when Jesus sent them to prepare the Passover: "OK, Boss. Just tell us where." They meet a man with a jug of water at exactly the right place at exactly the right time, and Jesus knew it all. Then they meet a homeowner who agreed to let Jesus use his large guest room for what would turn out to be a pivot point in redemptive history.

How often we struggle with confusion about what the Lord is doing in our lives! We wish we had a triptych or a running order, but most of the time we do not. We are required by our Lord to become comfortable with the reality that there is a great plan above ours, and we will never fully

understand it in this life. But because of concurrence, our human decisions are a means for God to push his plan forward. It may not seem like we know as much as we would like at the time, but it is our job to say about the parts that we do know: "OK, Boss." Later in this passage we will see just how important it is for us to stick with the Lord and his plan by following his instructions to the letter.

Next, in the Lord's Supper, we are confronted with the question of whether Judas was a puppet for God: **"When the hour had come, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. And He said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, 'Take this and share it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.' And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. But behold, the hand of the one betraying Me is with Mine on the table. For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!' And they began to discuss among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing"** (Luke 22:14-23).

It is obvious that Jesus Christ knew the plan for the crucifixion and he was following it because he was in charge of it! Earlier we asked whether Judas had been taken against his will to do the Devil's work. Now we must ask the question whether Christ was merely using Judas to accomplish the atonement. The final atonement for sins through the perfect sacrifice of Christ was in the sovereign purpose of God from eternity past. Nothing could stop it from happening. The question is whether God achieved that certainty by making Judas into a puppet, using him, and then discarding him into eternal punishment against his will.

Again we say no. That is not how providence works. That theory would make providence into determinism and fatalism, as is often heard in the expressions *Si Dios quiere* ("If God wills") and "If it is the will of Allah." These are ways of saying that God will do whatever he wants no matter what we decide. A thousand times no! The dignity of mankind in the eyes of the Creator is too great for him to abuse us in that way. The responsibility of human choice in its limited arena is one of the ways we most resemble the God who made us. And so it was for Judas. Divine providence worked to bring about atonement without violating human will. Judas wanted to betray Christ, and his later remorse never rose to the level of repentance. That is how concurrence works.

We are then faced with what at first seems a totally out of context issue among the disciples: **"And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called "Benefactors." But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves"** (Luke 22:24-27).

Several insights about providence and concurrence which Tolkien built into his fantasy tale are just screaming out of this text. Just as Bilbo Baggins had to be rebuked by Gandalf that the unfolding of

providence was not all about him, so the disciples were still obtuse about the centrality of Christ in the unfolding plan of God. Jesus had to tell them that the plan of redemption was not all about them even at that late date in his earthly ministry. This is a great lesson for all of us! When things do not seem to be going in the direction of our prayers it would be well for us to recalculate and think: *Maybe this is about something greater than me, and I am just a small part in it.*

The second insight about concurrence is that the fulfillment of the prophecies which confirm the plan of God are often different than we expect. Bilbo Baggins imagined that because he had a part in the fulfillment of the prophecies that they were not coming out exactly right. For the disciples the idea of a servant Savior had still not broken through the false theories of first century Judaism of a warrior-king who would deliver them and create an administration where they might become royalty. Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies right in front of them and they were not seeing it. We should assume that this is true of us as well. Perhaps God is answering our prayers, but our expectations keep us from seeing it.

Finally, we see in our text the most important principle for making sure that our freely-chosen human activities are part of the fulfillment of God's plan: **"You are those who have stood by Me in My trials; and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel"** (Luke 22:28-30). What is this great principle to align ourselves with the plan of God and thus receive the greatest blessing? Stick with Jesus no matter how hard it gets. By so doing the disciples would receive the very thing they were desiring in a purified form, namely, rule and reign with Jesus in his coming kingdom.

So Paul wrote to the Colossians: **"And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach--if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister"** (Col. 1:21-23). How does any person overcome the mess we are all in because of sin? How do we receive the blessing of God in our lives? How do we know what to do to stay in the plan of God? Stick with Jesus Christ. Do not move away from faith in him no matter how hard it gets, and never back away from the gospel which is the very power of salvation. This is the way of faith.

I can do that. So can you. J. R. R. Tolkien, in his characteristic understated fashion, showed us these principles in a fantasy book, only tipping us off at the end: "Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?"

How do we deal with concurrence? First, know that there is a plan above your plan. Second, know that that larger plan is not all about you. Third, know that the fulfillment of the prophecies which confirm the big plan are often different than what you expect. Fourth, understand that your freely chosen human activities are part of the fulfillment of the greater plan, often in an unknowing way. Fifth, accept that your results are not due only to your own work. Sixth, know that your rescues in life have not been accidental, no matter how they seemed at the time, and you could not have succeeded without them. Seventh, and finally, embrace the reality that your success comes to you as you stick to the plan of God, no matter how hard it gets. If you will do this, the rewards of the Lord are yours.