

Sermon

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Can God Change God's Mind?

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I want to begin by returning to a recent sermon I preached on the agony of decision-making, one that subsequently morphed and made its way into *The Quill* under the heading "Finding God on Every Path." My sermon began with a personal confession, namely, how I struggle with popular sayings like "God has a plan" along with its corollary "everything happens for a reason."

I offered three reasons why: First, claiming that God has already mapped out our every detail of our lives nullifies our freedom. It reduces us to puppets who merely play out what God has already orchestrated.

Secondly, I argued, it makes God responsible for the bad things that occur in our lives. How, I wondered, can we trust in a God who harms us as part of His mysterious plan or who punishes us ultimately for our own good?

Third and finally, believing that God has from the beginning determined every single moment of our lives, I claimed, has little, if any, basis in Holy Scripture.

Let me explain. Instead of using phrases like "God has a (single) plan" for everything, or that "everything happens for a reason," the Hebrew Bible speaks of God's "intentions" (Gen. 50:20), or of the multiple "plans" God has for Israel or Israel's enemies (Jer. 29:11; 49:20). In the New Testament, when the language of "plan" appears, it refers to God's plan for our salvation, or God's plan with regard to our eternal destiny (see Eph. 1:10, 3:9). God, we might even say, has a **dream or vision** for the world's future, one that human beings can certainly delay but can never thwart, one where God realizes – at the end – the original intention God had for creation before sin entered the world according to Paul in Rom. 5:12.

As you can see, the language we find in both Testaments **resists** reducing God's relationship to the future to a single, unwavering plan for each and every detail of our lives. God does not micromanage God's creation. Instead, God has a **vision** for the world, one that ends with God being "all-in-all," as Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:28, yet one that in the meantime includes a variety of intentions, plans, and purposes that change with the circumstances as they unfold in history. God responds to the various situations in which we find ourselves, adjusting and accommodating as necessary.

Two Exceptions

Now you know why I struggle as a pastor, a theologian, and a person of faith with phrases like God has a plan or everything happens for a reason. Perhaps you struggle with these too, and if that is the case, I hope the sermon I preached a couple of weeks ago brought you comfort. That was my point. I wanted to help alleviate the burden of difficult decision-making by saying that, assuming we are free to choose, say, the college we attend or the trade we pursue, God promises to meet us on every path.

But what about the counter-argument? What reasons support the idea that everything in our lives reflects a plan God had from the beginning? For one thing, believing that God has already determined the course of our lives brings millions of people comfort. “There must be a reason for our suffering,” they say. Faith, in turn, means accepting the fate that has befallen us as part of God’s mysterious plan, one we will be given to understand after we die.

Beyond the comfort talk of “God’s Plan” brings, it also (the argument goes) has Scripture to support it. Consider, for example, Psalm 139:16. “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,” says King David to God, “when none of them as yet existed.” Notice, secondly, what the Apostle Paul proclaims to the Athenians according to Acts 17. From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the time of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

These passages are perhaps the closest we come in Scripture to *fate*. God, David and Paul affirm, certainly **brackets our existence** the way God limits the sea “so that the waters might not transgress His command” (Prov. 8:29) Yet even these passages fall short of claiming that God has pre-orchestrated every detail of our lives. Indeed, Paul assumes human beings have at least some degree of freedom between birth and death when he says, in response to the lifetime God has allotted to them, “**perhaps** they would grope for him and find him.”

Why, then, do people **insist** that God has pre-ordained everything that has come to pass? The answer, I submit, comes in part from a man whose initials are “JC” – not Jesus Christ or even John Carter of Mars, for those who know the story, but the 16th century Protestant Reformer John Calvin.

Rethinking Providence

John Calvin and Martin Luther both **correctly insisted** (in my view) that salvation belongs entirely in God’s hands, not ours. To them, it’s not that we must accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal savior; instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we should trust that God in Christ *has accepted us*. God has claimed us. God has chosen us.

For Luther, this conviction brought immense comfort. Why? Because he could never be sure *his* faith, often assailed by a raging sea of doubt, measured up to God’s expectations. “But now,” he writes, “since God has taken my salvation out of my hands [and] into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by own work or exertion but his grace and mercy, **I am assured** and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and that also he is too great and powerful for any[thing] . . . to break him or to snatch me from him” (*Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2 ed., p. 193). God’s unshakable grace, in turn, should **free us** (according to Luther) to love others instead of worrying about our eternal destiny.

Unfortunately, Calvin, who lived a generation after Luther, took matters further. For him, God has not only chosen us by grace according to God's plan of salvation or what Luther calls God's "published mercy" in Jesus Christ. God has foreordained everything that happens to us here below as well. Indeed, the Lord has absolute power over every single moment of our lives. "He" controls every gust of wind, every clap of thunder, and "every drop of rain." Nothing occurs apart from His fixed, immutable, or unchanging will.

Today popular phrases like "everything happens for a reason" or "God has a plan" confirm the enduring appeal (or shadow) of Calvin's perspective. And it makes sense. In times of loss or trial, it can be extremely comforting to believe God controls every detail of our lives, even if it undermines our freedom or implicitly makes God responsible for evil and suffering.

But here we have to ask ourselves, Is it biblical? Does it come to us from Scripture alone? Once again, we have a couple verses in Scripture that *seem* to suggest it does: Malachi 3:6 and Numbers 23:19. **God's Mind** Malachi 3:6 has God declare to Israel, "I the Lord do not change. Therefore, you, O children of Jacob, have not perished." Numbers 23:19, on the other hand, describes God from a third-person perspective. "God is not a human being," its author writes, "that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind."

On the surface, the implication seems pretty clear: we can assume God has a plan for everything from the beginning because God never changes God's mind. God knew and foreordained all that would come to pass in history. How silly to believe that God adjusts to changing circumstances "on the ground" or in our lives. No, no, as the author of Hebrews says concerning Jesus, God remains the same "yesterday, today, and forever" (13:8; see also 1:12).

But, we might wonder, what does it mean to say that God does not change? Could it be, for example, that God's **character** never changes, that God can be trusted because God's **love** always remains the same for us, enduring from age to age and somehow "holding on" even after we die (see Rom. 8:38-39)? If so, then what may have been a stumbling block for some of us in Exodus 32, our first reading for today, suddenly becomes acceptable. Let me explain.

What Scripture Says

Exodus 32 makes it clear from a biblical perspective that God *can* change—not necessarily in reference to God's **character**, but clearly in reference to God's **disposition**. Like a parent, even though God will always love God's children, God can become angry. The core nature of God, however, remains love.

Thankfully, after seeing the threat this anger poses to the survival of his fellow Israelites, Moses intervenes, reminding God of God's core nature, of God's *essential* identity. He implores God to turn from God's wrath and change God's mind. Then the

most surprising thing happens: God concedes! “And the Lord **changed his mind** about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Ex. 32:14).

Do you see that? God’s plan changes just like it does according to the Book of Jonah. You remember the story of the prophet Jonah, right? God sends him to tell the Ninevites, the people who live on the other side of the tracks, with the message that unless they repent of their wicked ways, God will destroy them. You might also remember how the Ninevites respond *affirmatively* to the prophet’s message. They repent. Then what happens? According to Jonah 3:10, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”

This raises a crucial question: **how can we talk about God having a fixed plan for everything from a biblical perspective if God, at least according to Exodus and Jonah, changes God’s mind in response to circumstances as they unfold “on the ground”?** Well, a Calvinist might reply, the problem is one of translation. The text simply says that God relented, that “When God saw what [the Ninevites] did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (NIV). Even here, however, the implication remains: to have compassion in response to their repentance and “relent” from punishing them implies that God’s *disposition* toward people can change.

The original Hebrew in Jonah 3:10 is even more striking. When God sees how the Ninevites sought forgiveness, God has a **change of heart** – not just a change of mind. “God,” as the King James Bible translates it, “**repented** of the evil that he said he would do to them; and he did not do it.” God felt remorse, and because of it, God altered God’s “plan.”

We can see here why Blaise Pascal, a famous Christian author and mathematician, insisted that the God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Pascal says this because Plato and Aristotle, long before Calvin, likewise insisted that God cannot change. Naturally, they had their reasons – and some of them were quite good. Calvin had his, too. Neither, however, aligns with the God of the Hebrew Bible who could change His disposition, if not his character or essential identity.

The Gospel

Now we turn to the gospel – not the last of our three readings for today, but the good news we find in Exodus 32 and Jonah 3. How, we wonder, is God’s capacity for change “good news”? What difference does it make in our outlook, our understanding of God, if not our ordinary, everyday lives?

Let’s answer this question in three ways: First, we regain our freedom. Instead of seeing God as a tyrant who controls our lives, we can affirm a kind of interactive relationship with God, a God who can change according to our changing needs.

Second, we bring both Testaments together. Instead of seeing “the Old Testament God” as one of wrath and “the New Testament God” as one of mercy and grace, we can affirm the two are one. The “faith and love that are in Christ Jesus,” as our reading from 1 Timothy 1 puts it, confirms the experience of God as *ultimately* merciful and forgiving according to Exodus 32 and Jonah 3.

By confirming, thirdly, that all of Scripture witnesses to the same God of love, a God who “desires everyone to be saved,” as our reading from 1st Timothy next week will claim, we can do our part to fight the anti-Semitism that prevails today in some of our churches as well as in parts of our country.

The good news, in short, is not just for us. It’s for **all people**, especially those of the first covenant who have been harmed by our tradition. God’s grace in Jesus Christ does not fulfill what we find in the Old Testament; it confirms it. May we rejoice, therefore, in the good news of God’s mercy and love that comes with the affirmation that God can indeed change God’s mind, even as God’s character and ultimate intention of “abundant life” (John 10:10) remains constant for all people as well as all creation.

In Jesus’ name,

Amen.