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THE PROMISES OF GOD

The God Who Arranges

Read Daniel 2:47–49

“The king responded to Daniel and said,
‘Your God truly is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of secrets,
since you have been able to reveal this secret.’” (v. 47)

To encourage their small children along the path of discovery, parents often assist behind the scenes. And they do the same to shield them from danger. Such arranging is part of a parent’s job—and joy. The Bible indicates that God is at work behind the scenes as well.

Parents and children may have very different perspectives on activities they enjoy together. Take the traditional Easter egg hunt. With wicker baskets, children launch out to find the eggs “hidden” by their parents. In a child’s mind, the eggs really are hidden—meaning they are beside a rock, in the fork of a small tree, underneath a shrub, or partially covered by a leaf. But, in the parents’ mind, the eggs are not hidden at all—they are “arranged” so they can be found. The goal of the hunt, after all, is to find the eggs. Squeals of delight erupt as parents call out hints: “What’s that in the plum tree, Anna?”

The difference in perspective between God and humans is similar to, but far greater than, the divide between adult and child. God’s footprints in history, while not always seen before the fact, are plain to the observant afterward.

Take the story of Daniel, for example. He and his friends were taken to Babylon in 605 BC after God allowed Judah to be overrun. But God did not abandon His people in exile; rather, He used them to influence one of the most powerful empires the world has ever known. The series of events that unfolds in the first few chapters of Daniel is nothing if not God-ordained, as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (also known as Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) distinguish themselves by remaining true to their God. How else would we ever read of

the powerful King Nebuchadnezzar saying, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings” (Dan. 2:47 NIV)? Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Daniel and his friends was about as complicated as a child “discovering” the golden egg perched on top of a rock.

Regardless of how complicated or perplexing the events of life may become, we must remember that they are not so to God. He is moving ahead of us—ahead of the whole world—working out His plan and purposes in all things, for all people, for all time.

GOD’S PROMISE:

What He arranges for His glory
is also arranged for your good.

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REFLECTIONS

A teaching letter encouraging believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart



BEING AT PEACE WITH OTHERS

Father, You have taught us that relational harmony is so important that it must be achieved before effective worship can take place. As far as it depends on me, may I seek to be at peace with others and to pursue prompt reconciliation by lovingly speaking the truth. May I develop a greater capacity to forgive, so that I will not allow wrongs to be barriers to my relationships. And may I not seek to defeat or humiliate my opponents, but to win their friendship and understanding. Let me look for and build on areas of common ground, and seek to clarify meaning and build understanding, so that I will pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of others. May I be a peacemaker and an other-centered servant who is more concerned about the needs of people than about winning arguments.

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THE DISCONNECT: EXPECTATION V. REALITY

BY STUART MCALLISTER

WHAT IS THE MAJOR CHALLENGE to the honest communication of the gospel? I would propose it consists in models of belief that *distort the core claims of the message*, that *deny certain (uncomfortable) aspects of reality*, and that *offer naïve hopes as easy answers to difficult questions*. We must not idealize our faith or offer solutions that may be driven by sincerity but are not defined by reality and truth. The gospel addresses the human condition, but it does so in a way that leaves little room for romantic notions. Let’s briefly consider some of the results of these distortions.

LIVING IN A BROKEN WORLD

Far from indulging in wishful thinking, Scripture is very realistic about pain, suffering, and sin. There is no need to adopt a view that implies, “Believe in God and everything is guaranteed to go well.” Listen to Ecclesiastes 7:15–17 (see also 4:1–4). For many, the basic problem is an unrealistic view of life in a fallen world. A sentimental view of salvation balks at the thought of faith co-existing with pain and suffering.

However, any careful examination of Scripture, history, and life cannot accept that conclusion. The gospel promises salvation by final resurrection and until then we journey by faith, perseverance, and hope (Romans 8:24–25).

THE SEEMING FUTILITY OF EVERYTHING

There is no book in the Bible quite like Ecclesiastes. Here, we are forced to face the futility of much that passes for human existence and ambition. Not only that, but we are drawn into a vision where “everything is viewed as meaningless,” and even wisdom is carefully circumscribed and limited (8:16–17). The final conclusion is that all is in “God’s hands” (12:13–14). The worldview of Ecclesiastes is an important correction to the idealized, romantic, and impractical vision that masquerades as “life” (and at times as faith) in the 21st century.

THE APPARENT SILENCE OF HEAVEN

In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrestled honestly and angrily with the loss of his wife, Joy. Lewis had of course “theorized” about suffering, and had thought deeply about it.

As these words remind us, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹ However, Lewis wrestled mightily with his emotions and what he perceived to be God’s indifference through the trial with Joy. By God’s grace, he emerged on the other side of pain, but not without scars.

We must be accurate and clear as to the nature of the world we live in, why it is as it is, and therefore, what we can expect in it and from it.

THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR REALISM

Eugene Peterson writes well about inhabiting the tensions of the Christian faith: “The world is no friend to grace.” He elaborates, “The world, though, is protean: each generation has the world to deal with in a new form. World is an atmosphere, a mood.” Peterson then goes on to unpack how this “world” works in terms of its influence on Christian life. “We know that the spiritual atmosphere in which we live erodes faith, dissipates hope and corrupts love, but it is hard to put our finger on what is wrong.”² In short, the life we are called to involves struggle, discipline, diligence, and constant resistance.

THE CALL TO PERFECTIONISM IN ITS VARIOUS FORMS

An honest desire for personal improvement is not always tantamount to moral improvement. As Langdon Gilkey learned from observing life in a Japanese prisoner of war camp:

“This then is the religious meaning of sin, far different from the usual meaning given it by the legalist mentality.

Sin may be defined as an ultimate religious devotion to a finite interest; it is an overriding loyalty or concern for self, its existence and prestige, or for the existence and prestige of a group. From this deeper sin, that is, from this inordinate love of the self and its own, stem the moral evils of indifference, injustice, prejudice, and cruelty to one’s neighbor, and the other destructive patterns of action that we call ‘sins.’”³

Instead of looking to and concentrating on Christ, we make self-righteousness the aim rather than resting in His righteousness as the gift of grace (2 Corinthians 5:21). One way leads to rest and authenticity, the other to striving and hypocrisy.

— The Christian hope rests in what Christ has done and in who He is today. —

HOW MUCH CHANGE SHOULD WE EXPECT?

The answer to the above question is some, but not as much (perhaps) as is sometimes claimed. Dallas Willard speaks of the goal: “Transformation is possible because our inner

being is an orderly realm where, even in the disorder of its brokenness, God has provided a methodical path of recovery. Grace does not rule out method, nor method grace. Grace thrives on method and method on grace.”⁴

Willard and Simpson define spiritual formation as the “Holy Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ. To the degree spiritual formation in Christ is successful, the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression of the character and teachings of Jesus.”⁵

If we have not settled the love question—who or what we love, and how seriously—we will not see much progress in this journey or desire for real change.

FORGING A REAL WORLD FAITH

In the book of Hebrews, we see several exhortations to hold on to or maintain confidence (Hebrews 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 10:35). The Christian hope rests in what Christ has done and in who He is today (Hebrews 8:1–2). We face many trials, temptations, and tests on our journey, but the good news is that “God is with us.”

The Christian faith does not ask us to live an illusion or to embrace unrealistic expectations about life or reality. It calls us rather to engage with all of life by the grace, mercy, and help of God. In short, Christianity does not promise us an easy journey, but a safe and sure homecoming.

May we all choose to live honestly and courageously before God and before others.

Cover and interior art by Kenneth Boa

¹ Clyde Kilby (Editor), *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, Inc., 1968), p. 175 ² Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 15 ³ Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride and Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity In Theology and Psychology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 20 ⁴ Dallas Willard and Don Simpson, *Revolution of Character: Discovering Christ’s Pattern for Spiritual Transformation* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2005), p. 19 ⁵ Ibid., p. 16