

How God operates in the world

It is quite evident to a Christian that God intervenes in a special way in the world on occasions. The incarnation, miracles and resurrection of Jesus are major examples. Clearly God specially intervened in other parts of the biblical story and he can do so today. This paper is not a denial of such special, miraculous intervention, including in answer to prayer. I have no problem whatsoever with believing in such intervention. However, it does not seem to be the usual way in which God relates to the world.

It seems that God normally works out his purposes through “the changes and chances of this mortal life.” God is not constantly busy with manipulating and altering these changes and chances. However in a remarkable, naturally-supernatural way, they work out his purposes. God’s sovereignty is not normally *imposed* on creation but is simply inexorably worked out through those changes and chances. The awesomeness of God’s sovereignty is that he does not need to manipulate or to dominate. In a wonderful way, completely beyond human understanding, circumstances work out God’s purposes, whatever the changes, chances, choices, motives and actions of human beings and the world in which we live.

Prayer

What is the place of prayer? Does it change things or is it simply a devotional exercise which develops our relationship with and faith in God? Sometimes God will specially intervene in answer to prayer. But most of the time it is helpful to regard prayer as one of the changes, choices and actions of life. It forms part of the way in which God’s purposes are worked out, as do the many other factors. God works through prayer in a way he wouldn’t have done, had prayer not been offered. Life is not the same without prayer as it is with prayer, just as it is not the same without particular changes, chances, choices, motives and actions of the natural order. Life is moral and spiritual as well as physical. Motives and actions have moral and spiritual effects in the on-going warp and woof of reality.

William Temple said: “When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don’t, they don’t.” This is a profound statement which expresses well what I believe to be the case. God works through “coincidences” but the coincidences are affected by prayer as well as other factors, such as obedience to God.

To the person without faith it seems as if all that happens is simply the changes and chances of life – nothing to do with God, part of the physical warp and woof of on-going reality.

God’s sovereignty is discerned by faith. That is the way God intended it because faith is essential to a proper relationship with him, and to salvation. Sometimes we cannot understand why God doesn’t specially intervene e.g. to help someone we wouldn’t dream of not helping. This is part of the challenge to faith and it can leave us with unanswered questions.

God does not normally prove his existence, therefore, but leaves open the apparent possibility that he does not exist. Jesus used parables so that only those open to God would understand his message (Matt 13:10-16). He also didn’t make it obvious that he was the Messiah. So God is not busy trying to prove his existence to human beings.

Obedience and blessing

Because life is moral and spiritual as well as physical, motives and actions, as well as prayer, have moral and spiritual effects in the on-going warp and woof of reality. Obedience to God has a similar effect to prayer on the world. It can be described as eliciting a level of divine blessing and special (not absolute) protection for the obedient from the negative changes and chances of life (i.e. it is an act of grace).

Paul describes the intimate relationship between believers freely choosing to obey God and God sovereignly working in them (i.e. free will and predestination). He writes to the Philippians: “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose” (Php 2:12-13).

Special intervention

Salvation is more than the effect of prayer eliciting a level of divine blessing and special protection for the obedient from the negative changes and chances of life. It also involves special divine intervention in terms of the new birth by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8). Acts describes how the Holy Spirit “comes upon” those who hear the message (Acts 10:44-45; 11:15 cf. Acts 2:1-3, 38-39). Paul was concerned this hadn’t happened to some disciples (Acts 19:1-5).

Salvation is itself dependent on God supernaturally intervening in the incarnation, ministry (attested by miracles), sin-bearing death, resurrection and ascension of his son.

Throughout history, God has specially intervened showing, as Jesus said, that “the Kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). It is shown in miraculous healing (Luke 10:9, 11) and exorcism (Matt. 12:28). It is not something which can be observed (in the normal sense) but is nevertheless “in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21). It will, however, appear in the future (Luke 19:11) in the end times (Luke 21:31; 22:18) when the King returns (1 Thess. 4:14-17; 5:1-4; 2 Thess. 1:6-10). Meanwhile God sometimes shows ‘signs of the Kingdom’ in miraculous intervention in and through the lives of individual Christians and the corporate church.

Disobedience and judgment

On the other hand disobedience may eventually elicit the removal of that divine protection and blessing from the persistently or seriously disobedient. This divine protection and blessing is part of the ‘givenness’ of creation, part of the warp and woof of reality which is not only physical but moral and spiritual.

God can, and eventually will, certainly intervene supernaturally in judgment, but much of the time his judgment takes the form of removal of divine protection and blessing which leads to vulnerability to natural disaster, sickness, human violence, warfare, oppression, crime, economic disaster, etc.

So Paul writes in Romans Rom 1:21-32 that because people reject God for idols God “gave them over” to immoral behaviour and they “received in themselves the due penalty for their error” which led to social chaos – “wickedness, evil, greed and depravity ... envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice no fidelity, no love, no mercy.”

The Old Testament describes God as doing what, in practical terms, was caused by human failing and action. Because of Israel’s persistent disobedience, God used Assyria to judge them. Isaiah says God planned Assyria’s invasions long ago (37:24-27, cf. 1 Chr 5:26) as a judgment on Judah, yet the practical cause of the invasion was Assyria’s selfish ambition. The same is true of the Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders whom “the Lord sent ... to destroy Judah (2 K 24:2).” Similarly “the LORD raised up against Solomon an adversary” (1 K 11:14, 23) but the practical cause was political and military rivalry. Also when Rehoboam rejected the people’s request for fairer treatment “this turn of events was from the Lord.” But the practical cause was Rehoboam’s arrogant stupidity (1 K 12:15). 1 Chr 10:14 states that the Lord put Saul to death, but the practical cause was defeat in battle. God is seen as working through the changes, choices, motives and actions of human beings. However God judges his agents of judgment for their selfish negative motives in attacking Israel. So God spoke of bringing Assyria to punish disobedient Judah (Isa 8:6-8). It was the rod of his anger (Isa 10:5). But then God foretold judgment on Assyria because of its arrogance and destructive motives with respect to Judah (Isa 10:7-19). The same is said of Babylon (Isa. 47:5-7) and of Moab and Ammon (Zeph 2:8-11). These judgments too were brought about by practical causes, as were the judgments on Judah.

One of the challenges to faith, though, is that these negative factors can, and do, affect many ‘innocent’ people. After all, we live in a world where, not only are there natural disasters, but also where nature is red in tooth and claw (see my paper *How does the Genesis account of the Fall of Man relate to Evolution?* on this latter subject).

In his inscrutable wisdom, God does not always intervene supernaturally to protect the ‘innocent.’ So, for example, ‘innocent’ people can be caught up in God’s judgment of the guilty – it is an example of collateral damage. This happened in the history of Israel. Because of this some people might dismiss the idea that

divine judgment comes through natural events. But prophets like Amos tell various disobedient individuals or people groups to recognise God's judgement in such experiences.

A parallel can be drawn with the "signs of the end" Jesus refers to in the gospels. They include wars, rumours of war, famine etc. This is not to say that these are all examples of divine intervention, or that they indicate the End is to happen soon afterwards. They are natural traumas which are meant to be seen as reminders or signposts of the approaching End, which, of course, includes divine judgment. (It is perhaps necessary to add that the first reaction Christians should have to such events is one of active compassion, seeking to alleviate the suffering and, if possible, to remove the causes of it. We are not just to read them as evidence of divine judgment or signs of the End).

All such recognition of judgment is a reminder and prophecy of the final judgment for all humans, which will be supernatural (although preceded by natural or man-made traumas). So when the prophets quote God as saying he will take some action in judgment they are normally saying we should recognise the coming traumas as divine judgment and as a solemn reminder of the final judgment we will face. (That is not to say that God has never intervened supernaturally to bring about a natural trauma, which would not otherwise have happened, as an act of judgment).

However, when the 'innocent' are caught up in the collateral damage of God's judgment on the guilty, we should remember two things. Firstly, God will bless those who suffer in this way. In the case of the exile, the Lord said "I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jer 24:5-7). However, in the case of King Zedekiah and his officials, etc., who do not repent, they will face only judgment (Jer 24:8-10).

The 'innocent' suffering collateral damage should also draw attention to the eternal nature of God's justice. God's justice is on a bigger scale than this life. If that were not the case then God's action would sometimes be unjust. It is easy to dismiss this as a cop out – pie in the sky when you die. But the New Testament makes it clear that it is fundamental to the eternal nature of salvation.

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"
(Rom 8:18).

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor 4:17-18).

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:3-6).

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