

An Ordinary Christmas - God is My Travel Agent

Sign Title: God is my travel agent.

December 13, 2009

With the internet, I book most of my travel reservations on-line. Before booking was popular, I planned my travel with our local travel agent. It wasn't as cost effective, but I was assured, my itinerary was right and everything work out smoothly.

While I no longer have a travel agent, sometimes I still wish I did. How about you? Do you wish there was someone arranging your schedule to insure things work out smoothly?

I have some good news. While most travel agencies are out of business, there is one travel agent whose business is still successful and he gets us exactly where we need to be at just the right time, every time. That travel agent's name is God.

Last evening I was watching 48 Hours on television. As they talked about the murder how did they describe it, "As fate would have it, she was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Some people believe their life is unfolds by *fate*. Others believe life happens by *luck*. As they walk into the casino they say, "I feel lucky" or "Lady luck is with me."

The Bible gives us a very different picture about how life unfolds. It is called, "Providence".

John Calvin said, "Ignorance of providence is one of life's great miseries where an understanding of providence leads to it's highest happiness."

Did you know that if you are miserable this morning, it is might be because you think your life is about *fate* or *luck* rather than *providence*?

Since providence is so important, let me define providence for you.

Providence means God is directing the events of this world toward an appointed end. We get a better understanding of this in Hebrews 1:3 when it speaks of what Christ is doing.

upholding the universe by his word of power. Hebrews 1:3

The word upholding means to carry something from one place to another. It is the same word used to describe in Luke 5:18 when a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus on a bed. It doesn't just mean sustain, it means active, purposeful control over what is carried. Christ has active, purposeful moment by moment control over everything in this universe, because he made it.

Because providence is true, we know there is a lot more happening in life than we are aware of because God is using his invisible hand to guide and direct things toward his appointed end.

This is the second of a special series of sermon in our Christmas series entitled, "An Ordinary Christmas". In this series we are looking at how God loves to use ordinary people, and ordinary circumstances to do his work on earth. Last week we look at Mary, the mother of Jesus, just an ordinary young girl. This morning we are going to see how God used some ordinary circumstances, a tax census, to move Mary and Joseph a distance of 80 miles to the land of Bethlehem for Jesus to be born. The prophet Micah said that the savior would be born in Bethlehem. We are going to see how God pulled this off.

Luke 2:1-7

God guides history.

Notice how God guides history. Who was Caesar Augustus? He reigned 43 years, from 27 BC to 14 AD. When he was about 60, he decided to issue a decree that a census would be taken. Why did he take the census? It was for military purposes and for taxation. He had a rule about how he did this.

Everyone was to go back to their home town. The practice of returning everyone to their home town for a census was not uncommon, archaeological evidence tells us they also did this in Egypt.

Interestingly, a census was also a display of Caesar's power. At his word, everyone in the Roman world shuffled, like pieces on a chess board moving back to their starting position. The Bible says...

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. Proverbs 21:1

While all-powerful Caesar issued the census decree as a display of his power, he had no idea he was issuing a decree to fulfill God's plan for the birth of Christ. All-powerful Caesar was used by God to move a poor unknown couple to Bethlehem so Christ's birth would fulfill the word of God in Micah.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Micah 5:2

We can see with the hindsight of Scripture what Caesar couldn't see it, possibly Mary and Joseph didn't realize God knew exactly what he was doing till much later when they realized it was prophesied Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. You can imagine what the Mary and Joseph may have initially

thought. Another census? The Romans mismanage our money and now they want another census so they can leech more money from us. Joseph might have said, God, my fiancée is 9 months pregnant with your kid. This is the absolute worst time for an 80 mile trip. God, how can you let this happen? Don't you care? What bad luck!

The simple truth is nothing was happening by fate, or luck. God was the travel agent who was in complete control and was moving pieces around on the chess board of the world so the pieces would be where he wanted them to be at exactly the right time. Mary would be in Bethlehem to give birth. The fact there was no room in the inn wasn't a mistake. God was fully in control, just at the time, everyone had a hard time seeing it.

Does God still orchestrate history like this? Was God in control when the stock-market plunged? Did God decide on the exact moment when the real-estate market would implode? Was God fully in control when the planes flew into the World Trade Center? Sometimes we see glimmers of God's purposes when we look back but most often we don't see them. Many times life looks haphazard, unrelated and senseless but God is behind the scenes, directing events toward his appointed ends. God guides history.

God guides human events

Joseph also went up from Galilee... with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.
Luke 2:4

God doesn't just guide history but he guides very personal events. The Old Testament predicted not just where Jesus would be born but who he would be born to. The Old Testament says Jesus would be born in the tribe of Judah

from the line of David. That was a narrow stream from which to fish Christ's human ancestry. Satan knew there were not many who could fulfill this prophecy so he tried to thwart the providence of God.

2 Kings 11 tells us of an evil woman named Athaliah, who wanted to become queen; so when she had the opportunity, she killed 70 of her grandchildren, all of David's royal descendants. Athaliah thought she succeeded and for 6 years everyone else thought she successfully destroyed the line of David. But the Bible tells us God had a trick of his own. God providentially saved one descendant, a little boy named Joash was hidden in a closet with his nurse while his grandmother killed the rest of David's descendant. Little Joash stayed in hiding 6 years in the temple until his grandmother was overthrown and he became as king 7 years old. Joash's nurse, an ordinary woman, had no idea God used her to save through her arms the only remaining descendant through whom God could fulfill his promise of the Christ. God was watching over his word. No matter how hard Satan or Athaliah tried, they could not thwart God's word.

So while Joseph was the legal father of Jesus who came from David's line, evidently, Mary was also from David's line so Jesus would be a biological descendant of David. Think about how tightly God controls humanity. God knew who Judah would marry, he knew who his grandchildren would marry. God knew exactly who would marry who for hundreds of years. He knew the exact way the DNA would unfold so Joseph would be Jesus' legal father and Mary would be his biological mother, both from the line of David. God knew how and when Joseph

would meet Mary, he knew Joseph would propose and they would eventually marry. God interlocks all of those events together for the birth of Christ.

Do you realize God also knows all about you? He knew all about your parents. He decided who your grandparents and great grandparents would be. He knows all that went into you as a person.

your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Psalm 139:16

All the talents and abilities we have are decided upon by God. He chose to give them to us.

What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? 1 Corinthians 4:7

Your gifts and abilities are not a chance happening. God puts us where he wants us to be and he chooses the gifts and abilities he wants us to have when he puts us there.

For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Esther 4:14

God made us just the way he wanted us to be, our height, our looks, our mind even the basic attributes of our personalities and he did it because he is directing everything toward an appointed end, sometimes we may see what he is doing, many times we can not see it.

God guides nature.

Tuesday night, like many of you, we were watching the weather channel trying to figure out if our children would have school. We watched the weather man throw up charts, radar pictures and national weather maps all in a prediction

of what *might* happen. The weather man was talking about the way mother nature might work. The Bible says, there is no impersonal mother nature, the weather, like everything else is the very work of God.

For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth,'... and cold from the scattering winds. By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. Job 37:6,9,10

Who is the real weatherman? The Puritans had a more accurate way of looking at the “laws of nature”, they called them “the customs of God.” God works in a customary way, but it is always God working, not an impersonal force of nature.

For example, when a baby is born and we see the perfectly formed fingers and toes, we heard the baby cry as he or she breathes in their first breath of air, who do we instinctively give credit to, an impersonal force of nature or God. God created the child, he did it in a way he usually does, with a father.

When it comes to the birth of Jesus to Mary, that was even more miraculous than the birth of any other child because God conceived Jesus in Mary’s womb without an earthly father.

God weaves the strands of history, human events and nature together to accomplish his purpose. Life isn’t random chance, God is the ultimate travel agent who is in control.

A few observations.

History, humanity and nature work together to serve God’s purpose.

For the birth of Christ, everything worked together so Christ would be born exactly where God said he would be born and nothing was left to chance. That is

called providence. The reason you are here this morning is providence. God worked history, humanity and nature together to bring you here to hear about Jesus Christ and there is no such thing as luck or fate but that God is in control. Some of you may already know Christ, for others of you this is the first time you heard God is fully in control

There is comfort providence.

Remember that Calvin said an understanding of providence leads to our highest happiness while an ignorance of it leads to great misery? Why is providence so important to happiness?

Have you ever been with someone who is living through a time of fear and difficulty? Someone says to them, “Just trust God.” Trust God, they say, last time I trusted God, everything went wrong. Does trust in God mean things will get better? Does trust in God mean our problems will dissolve away? No, when you trust in God, things may get worse. Here is what providence teaches us.

You can be having a very bad day, but because of Providence, in God's sight, it might be a very good day.

We see this in the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis. He was having a very bad day. His brothers sold him into slavery. That has to be one of the worst days possible. But later on after God had risen him to second in command of all of Egypt he said...

God sent me before you to preserve life. Genesis 45:5

You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20

Sometimes we can look back and see what God was doing in his providential plan. Sometimes, we may never understand what God was up to, we just know that for God's children, since we are the object of Christ's affection, even the adversity he allows into our life is for our good and his glory.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28

The adversities we face are not given by God to make us bitter, but God intends them to make us better. The adversity God allows his children to experience is intended to teach us greater dependence on Christ, to teach us to find our greatest joy in our identity with Christ, in short, to make us more useful for God's glory while on this earth and to nurture our longing for a richer enjoyment of Christ in heaven.

Conclusion

When I was growing up my parents had a clock on the piano with a precision brass mechanism inside of it. The side of clock had glass panels so I could watch the gears in action. Watching the clockworks in motion gave the appearance they were pointless. Some wheels were moving backwards, others were moving forward, still another was spinning back and forth. But you and I know the gears were working together so the hands on the clock would be exactly where they should be, right on time. This is the way God's providence works for us. Just like the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph, there is nothing about the lives of God's children that is fate or luck and everything is designed for our good and to bring about God's glory. He has us just where he wants us to be right on time.

When Jesus Christ came, history, human events and nature worked together for him to be born. The Bible says Christ will come again. History, human events and nature are working together to prepare for His return. When he comes the Bible says every knee will bow and every tongue confess Christ as Lord. Those who have trusted Christ as their savior will experience the full realization what it means to be the object of God undeserved affection through Jesus. Those who have rejected Christ, will discover the full realization of what it means to reject God's only offering for sin and they will experience God's fully deserved wrath for our sin.

Sin, evil and God's wrath against it; none of it is outside of God's control. God will even use evil for our good and his glory.

the Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble. Prov. 16:4

If you are here this morning, you are not here by mistake. If you have never asked Christ to forgive your sin and asked him to be the treasure of your heart, today is the day. Is God tugging at your heart even as I speak? I am going to close in a simple prayer. If God is drawing your heart to him today, pray along with me ask Christ to be the sacrifice for your sin and ask him to take the rightful place as the center of your life.

Father, thank you there no such thing as fate or luck but you are in charge of everything. You arranged for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. You arranged for me to be here this morning. Christ, I ask your death to pay for my sin, I ask you to be the center of my life. I thank you that when I am your child, I can know for certain that no matter what happens in my life, it will ultimately be for my good and your glory. Amen.



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