

RHYME OR REASON

The context of the parable itself tells that only a few of us (the seed) take root – that is, figure out what is going on here, and grow and bear fruit for God. Why do others of us miss the point? Why do others of us remain asleep or unconscious to the major purposes of life? Well, that is what the parable is about.

And afterward, talking to His disciples, Jesus is lamenting this strange kind of spiritual unawareness that plagues humankind – this defensive/rebellious attitude toward God and spiritual realities. We feel we are awake. We try to be aware. Yet there is also something intentional about it all: a five-year-old-playing-possum kind of sleep; a refusal-to-open-our-eyes kind of blindness. Why do we fight so hard against the very thing we want most? Because we are afraid, or we think it will all turn out to be false, or we suspect it is some kind of plot to get our treasures away from us. So our minds are hardened. We fall asleep to the glory that awaits us every day.

“You may listen and listen, but you will never understand; you may look and look, but you will never see. For this people’s mind has become dull; they have stopped their ears and shut their eyes. Otherwise, their eyes might see, their ears hear, and their mind understand, and then they might turn to me, and I would heal them.”

How can I represent in a few words what I think has happened to our thinking? In primitive times, the connection between outer events and the will of God – or the gods – was nearly absolute. If God was angry, displeased, or defied, bad things happened. If God was pleased, happy, and obeyed, good things happened. Mostly this was seen on the collective level – God blessed or cursed the tribe. Maybe the chief or the king might come under special notice, but for normal individuals, there was more anonymity. You had to be a good member of the tribe, you had to be loyal and obedient to the king and the priest, but mostly you fared as the tribe fared. The exception was if you became a great hero or a particularly evil villain. Then God would notice you personally and bless or curse you as the occasion demanded.

Nevertheless, it was certain and clear: Good things happened because people deserved them by pleasing God. Bad things happened because people deserved them by disobeying God. That was the truth formula. It was comforting. There was rhyme and reason to life.

A person could learn in a world like that – and improve life, especially if everyone else would cooperate. Do you want life to be better – more success, more prosperity, longer life, less pain? The formula was clear: Serve and please God better. If natural disaster strikes, war comes, or plague hits, we must be doing something wrong. We better figure it out and change it, or we will get more of the same, maybe worse. If the crops are good, the babies are healthy, and things are going rather well, we must be doing something right. We better know what it is and keep doing it.

This way of perceiving life lasted long enough to get planted solidly in our genes. There is a lot of residue left. When things go wrong, we still have the old first reaction: What did I do to deserve this? (And on occasion, don't you find yourself thinking that some people should be asking that very question more often than they do?) Even more familiar, if less famous: When things go right, we are sure it was our own hard work, our intelligence, or our exemplary faithfulness that pulled it off.

We live now in a world which has, for the most part, abandoned the old formula. Our genes and instincts may still fall into the old ways of thinking at times, but on the conscious level we no longer believe it. We no longer believe that sickness is God's punishment, even though it is so clearly enhanced by bad living and wrong attitudes. We no longer believe that accidents are divine retribution. War is a failure of human diplomacy and understanding, or caused by human greed. Famine is impersonal weather patterns and the equally impersonal success of an oversexed species. Whatever the causes of overt conditions and events, most people in our culture today do not believe the cause was God, at least not in any direct or personal way.

For example, a modern historian looking back at Israel's defeat at the end of the sixth century B.C. would conclude that Babylon was huge, rich, and powerful and extending her influence against the possible threat of Egypt. Israel was small, poor, and weak and caught in the corridor between two great powers. It was nothing personal; she just happened to be in the way. Of course, Jeremiah and the prophets did not give any weight to such minor details, though they knew them. To them, the defeat came because Israel had broken God's Covenant, and God had withdrawn protection. The fact that Babylon had fifty times the military might was a minor detail.

For a while, the loss of the old truth formula merely shook all the foundations. For the most part, our culture felt it was going from one orderly system that was familiar but false to a new orderly system that was unfamiliar but true. Scientists were the new priests, and of course it was still God behind the principles and rules that they were revealing – at least for a while. It was not God “doing” all the blessing and cursing; it was the principles of Creation working themselves out in natural law. We were only turning from “God the personal” to “God the author of natural law.” We turned from theology to science. It was no longer as important to know God as to know the *principles* God had used to set things up. If we could understand how it all worked, we could still get the blessings and avoid the curses. We stayed optimistic about this new formula of truth until sometime in the mid-twentieth century.

Since then, confusion and concern have mounted. Natural law has turned out to be far more complex than we had hoped. We are no longer sure that we are capable of understanding and controlling its endless, interwoven powers and cycles. Moreover, all that we learn merely shows how much more is to be learned. Human agreement on appropriate policy and procedure seems less and less likely and more and more remote. On top of that, our studies of natural law keep leading us back to considerations of the Creator. Just when we thought God was dead and we were through with all that primitive superstition stuff, from out of the heart of our most advanced studies of physics, chemistry, biology, medicine, and psychology comes the eerie realization that the last door we opened is right next to an old door marked “God.”

That may all be a problem for the experts. *Our* problem is that we cannot afford to wait for them to figure it all out. Somewhere in the switch from the old truth formula to the new one, a lot of people like us stopped thinking that God was very important to the here and now. God became the landlord and then the absentee landlord, while natural law took care of his domain. From there it was easy to suppose, or at least to suspect, that the events and circumstances of life are really a matter of random chance. There is no rhyme or reason to it. There is no plan or pattern. Natural law operates, but for us it is like a giant roulette wheel – and no god fixes it to favor any number.

This is part of the conceptual dilemma of our age. Why bother to get more conscious – to advance in either science or theology – if the game is roulette? Yet so many things seem to show pattern

and purpose. Sometimes it almost looks like there is still a principle of reward and punishment operating. That is our dilemma: either we have a meaningless universe without rhyme or reason, or we are back to the necessity of finding out what God is doing and what God wants of us.

If the universe is run on random chance, then there is nothing to learn – nothing to be learned. You live in a safe, prosperous neighborhood because the dice came up that way; it doesn't mean a thing. If you get fired tomorrow, it has nothing to do with your performance. If you get promoted – same thing. There is nothing to be learned. There are no compliments or reprimands; there is just a mush of unconditional love. You may think you have learned to play the odds, but that's just your private conceit – your personal attempt at “blind faith” to hold back the dark. If this place runs on random chance, the wheel is too big for odds.

If on the other hand there is rhyme and reason – if there is something to be learned from experience – then we are right back into theology. God is behind it. Some things work; some do not. We are being punished or blessed and always corrected (guided), and God is leading us in certain directions to match a given purpose. That, of course, puts us right back into Scripture and the prophets, and we are right in the middle of holy history again.

So we cannot have it both ways. Either we have a God blessing and punishing – guiding and correcting – or we have random choice. Caught between these two formulas for truth, and amidst the chaos of such vast worldviews changing, sometimes we get overwhelmed. We like neither alternative. We try not to think about it. We wish the experts would come up with a definitive solution that was beyond dispute. But we are alive now, and we are making our choices today and tomorrow.

Meanwhile, back at the church ... well, you know the church. The church tries to please everybody. The church needs members, so the church tries to tailor its truth to be palatable so that nobody will get angry or leave or drop their pledge. We hire ministers to preach what people want to hear, and if we don't like a truth, we either ignore it or take a vote to change it. Or we let it be known that if we hear about it again, we will not be back.

What happens to the real issues in a context like that? The church backpedals up the back slope just fast enough to try to get ready to go with whatever fad hits next. And we have come out with a theology that sounds like this: “God is love – meaning, God is always nice. God always forgives us, whether we ask for it or not. God never punishes us personally. No matter what bad things may happen, God is not personally or intentionally doing it to us. God wants only the best for us, but God does not personally intervene – so probably no blessings can be directly attributed to God either. God never coerces or controls; therefore, though God is extremely important and we should all love God very much, in actuality God doesn’t really matter since God has no effect on anything whatsoever.”

Ah yes, the new theology to match the new truth formula. In the words of Peter de Vries (a prolific American author who wrote for *The New Yorker* magazine for over forty years): “It is the final proof of God’s omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us.”

Hopefully we are finally getting confused enough to return to Scripture and study and prayer, and letting each be informed by the other. I think it goes like this:

A.) We return to the former view that *everything* has a purpose, that God is Creator, and that God apprehends us in and around and through everything that happens to us – all day, every day. No matter how much things may seem like random chance or accident, we reject that view. We live in an organic, meaningful universe. Everything is connected. Everything pulses with the same energy and meaning and purpose. We assume that everything can connect us with this meaning and purpose. Often the meaning will elude us for a while, but it is there. Everything bears a message if we can discern it. Everything is in process. So we pray *and* work for the ears that hear and the eyes that see. That is, hear and see God’s presence – God’s will and purpose.

That means blessing and punishment are with us again; they are real again – ask any true parent. We just need to remember that punishment is only for correction. That does not take the pain away; to be alive is to know pain. But we must remember that death is not our end, so death is not an ultimate punishment.

In any case, that is the affirmation – at least mine. God is with us, in all things, everywhere. We will not be embarrassed to affirm and believe and bear witness to it. Rather, we will work to remember, to be aware, to stay awake – all day, every day.

B.) However, we will also change some of the old expectations that used to come with this view. What we were taught with the old formula is not true. The good is not instantly rewarded. The wrong is not instantly punished. That view is dumb and wrong, and it always has been. Positive thinking does not keep Jesus from the cross, Jeremiah from the pit, or Daniel from the lion's den. You *can* "keep a good man down" – unless you look at it from the eternal perspective. In short, God does not always get his way in this world. (Even *you* do not always obey him, do you?) That is why suffering, testing, patience, hope, and faith are such powerful, personal, and essential Christian concepts. They are only good for a world where things do not always go right.

Sometimes we suffer for the right. Sometimes we get instant rewards for the wrong. Often when we are most tuned in and willing to be faithful, it does not work well at all, as far as we can tell. The project, the plan, or the dream falls through. We hit dead ends and blind alleys. Things die for want of support; so do people. Sometimes we are at fault, but sometimes it is the other people involved who are too frightened or greedy or unaware to take the risk God is asking of them. Sometimes we run into a negative force bigger than our mistakes or the foibles of our compatriots. We do not always win, and we certainly do not always win in a smooth or predictable pattern. Sometimes our work and our love come to nothing, as far as we can tell (at least for the foreseeable future).

Nevertheless, there is still an inner level where the old formula stays true. Whatever the outer circumstances, the soul is happy when it is in tune with and serving God. The soul is happy when we are doing what God wants us to be doing. And conversely, no matter how nice things may be on the surface of life, when we are not in tune with or doing God's will for us, the soul within us is miserable. On that level, the blessing-and-curse principle remains. It is like a beacon for our correction and guidance.

So we return to the first formula. It is God with us everywhere and all the time. We trust that and try to learn from that all the time. But it is not simplistic reward and punishment – one good deed and you get an ice cream cone; one year of working hard and you get a raise, or vice versa. Sometimes it seems to work that way for a while, when you are with other faithful people. But it does not last on life's outer layers.

That leaves us in a dynamic, uncertain world: in God's presence, but with lots to learn; always uncertain of the specifics, but certain that God is working His purpose out and that we are part of it. I don't really have as much complaint with that as I used to. Or at least I don't as long as I keep awake and keep praying. How about you?

What I am trying to say is that a lot of people have stopped praying or have made their prayers weak and tentative because they now carry a worldview – a truth formula – that says God has little or no impact on anything that happens to us here. Partly that is because people do not keep track of their prayers. They ask, but they forget to say thank you. They have no record of all the times they and God have connected and agreed and it has happened. People ought to keep at least as close a track on their prayer lives as they do on their checkbooks. If you make a request, write it in the book and keep the stub to see if some payment is eventually made on it. How else are you going to know what's going on?

The secret is that because God made you, many of your best and truest desires are also God's desires for you. In fact, God has been urging and waiting for you to wake up and want some of those very things. Then the two of you can become a team together to bring them to be. If you are not too impatient, given a little time, you and God are a hard team to beat!

Time to come back to our prayers in simple conviction.