

CALVIN'S REALLY BIG MISTAKE
Ephesians 1:9-11

In the movie, *Adjustment Bureau*, Matt Damon plays politician David Norris. At one point he meets dancer Elise Sellas, played by Emily Blunt, and they experience an immediate spark between them. Yet it seems circumstances keep them apart. Norris perseveres and pursues Sellas until he encounters some unfamiliar men wearing suits. These men inform him they are from the Adjustment Bureau and it is their job to see to it that people's lives proceed according to a plan that has been drawn up by "The Chairman." According to this plan Norris and Sellas must never get together. Norris objects that he has lived his life according to his own plan only to be informed that he only has "the appearance of free will."

Are our lives lived according to some predetermined plan, or do we make them up as we go along, as seems to be the case? That's the question that movie asks. The matter actually has significant influence on how we think and on our ability to be at peace in life. It is also a question that has some bearing on how we think about the elections that are occurring this week.

Laurie and I were on a walk when a neighbor driving by stopped and asked us, "Do you have groups in your church meeting to pray about the election?" The answer to that I suppose is yes and no. We have groups that meet and they certainly are praying about the election. But it became clear that this person was pretty tense about the whole thing as are people in her church. Last week we recalled that what we're really about is the kingdom of God and that should help give us perspective on election outcomes. But this week we're going to look at another crucial truth from the Bible that can give us peace. That truth is found in Ephesians 1:9-11.

THERE IS A POINT TO HISTORY

Paul started praising God in Ephesians 1: 3 for the fact that he has "**blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.**" Then he began to describe some of those blessings and got so carried away he ended up with one of the longest run-on sentences in the Bible. It starts in verse 4 and goes all the way through verse 12. Verses 9-11 make up a segment of that long section of scripture. The grammar is pretty dense and a little difficult to unravel.

I have written a paraphrase of it that might help a little. "God has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his desire. That mystery, which he decided in Christ, was a plan for all of history. The plan is to sum up everything in Christ,

everything in heaven and everything on earth. In Christ also we were chosen by God and predestined according to the purpose of the one who works out everything according to the decision of his will.”

The passage starts with the idea that God has made known to us the mystery of his will. Paul used the term “mystery,” literally *mysterion* in Greek, in the way it was commonly understood in his day, a way that is different from how we normally use the word. Today we think of a mystery as an unknown thing to be solved. While we were on vacation I read a mystery novel by John Sandford. In it the central character was a detective sent to a town in Minnesota to discover who was responsible for making pipe bombs that killed a couple of people. He went through several suspects before finally figuring out who the perpetrator actually was. That’s an example of how we think of a mystery. It’s something we must solve.

In Paul’s world a mystery wasn’t something that humans solve. Quite the opposite. A mystery to Paul was a mystery precisely because humans could not understand it. It was something that we would never be able to solve because it is beyond us. A mystery was something we could only know by having it *revealed* to us. What did happen to Amelia Earhart? Were the bones found on that island near her proposed flight path actually hers? That’s a mystery we can study and maybe solve, but that’s not a true biblical kind of mystery because a biblical mystery can be known only if God reveals it to us.

What this passage tells us is that God revealed a mystery. He let us in on a secret that we would not otherwise have known. The only way for us to know it was if he told us, which he chose to do. The passage makes it clear that God didn’t have to tell us. He did so out of his own desire, clearly because he cares about us. So what is the secret? It is that God has a plan for history. History is going in a particular direction. There is a point to it.

You and I wouldn’t know there is a plan for history if God didn’t tell us. You will not conclude history has a point just by observing it. It looks awfully random. Cambridge University president G. N. Clark said, “There is no secret and no plan in history to be discovered. I do not believe that any future consummation could make sense of the irrationalities of preceding ages.”

Philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote in his book, *A Free Man’s Worship*, “Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving...his

origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.”

Let's be real clear. Paul calls this a mystery specifically because you won't be able to discern it purely with human reason. We make the mistake of trying to understand the reason for everything. When something bad happens we tell ourselves it's always for some reason, that it is setting up something better that will happen later on. Sometimes that does happen, but there are an awful lot of things that happen that seem completely random and completely unhelpful. That's because there is a mystery at work. God in fact has a plan. It is one that we can't always discern from following events on the ground, but it is there.

A number of years ago Laurie and I were visiting our friends, Mike and Dee Riley, up in Oregon. Mike is the coach of the Oregon State football team. He invited me to sit in on a film session. It proved to be very enlightening for me. I have stood on the sidelines at a game and have learned that from that vantage point you get a feel for the speed and power of the game, but it's difficult to see what is going on. The ball is snapped and there is a confusing burst of activity that almost appears chaotic. The film we watched was taken from behind the offense. Now in a football game as you are watching from the sidelines when a play starts with 22 players on the field it is impossible to watch all that is going on. During the film session they would go through each play multiple times in slow motion and point out what was happening. As they did so I could begin to see the design of the pass plays. I learned that each play was designed so that the various pass patterns the receivers ran would influence defensive players to move in a particular way that would open up a hole in the defense, a specific place for the quarterback to throw the ball at the precise time a receiver arrived there. Just watching from the sideline I could not see those patterns. It was only as I watched from the particular perspective of the camera with the coach pointing out how the play was supposed to work that I could see it. Only then was the mystery revealed. We are like someone standing on the sidelines of life trying to figure out what is going on and how a play is supposed to work. We get a vague sense of what is happening, and sometimes understand some of it, but we don't see all that is going on nor do we see the design. But that does not mean that the design is not there. It only means we can't see it from our perspective. The mystery is revealed. There is a design, a plan for history.

In his book, *Secrets In The Dark* (p. 173), the late Frederick Buechner wrote, “Life is not just a series of events causing other events as haphazardly as a break shot in

pool causes the billiard balls to careen off in all directions...Life has a plot the way a novel has a plot...events are somehow or other leading somewhere.” Most of us know this. In his book, *The Good Life* (p. 319), Chuck Colson wrote about a video he had seen in which people were randomly interviewed at a mall. They were asked if they felt their lives were directed by a power beyond themselves. He said, “To my amazement, no one said no. Instead the interviewees almost unanimously expressed their confidence that some force was guiding their lives.”

If it is true that there is a plan for history, where is it going? What is the point? One of my favorite comic strips was *Calvin and Hobbes*, the story of a precocious 6-year-old boy in whose imagination his stuffed tiger, Hobbes, is alive. In one strip Calvin says to Hobbes, “I’ve been thinking, Hobbes.” Hobbes responds, “On a weekend?” Calvin says, “Well, it wasn’t on purpose. I believe history is a force. Its unalterable tide sweeps all people and institutions along in its unrelenting path. Everyone and everything serves history’s single purpose.” Intrigued, Hobbes asks, “And what is that purpose?” Calvin proclaims, “To produce me, of course. I’m the end result of history.” Hobbes says, “You?” Calvin goes on, “Think of it, thousands of generations lived and died to produce my specific parents, whose only reason for being, obviously, was me. All history up to this point was spent preparing the world for my presence.” Hobbes comments, “Hmm. Four and a half billion years probably wasn’t long enough.” Calvin concludes, “Now I’m here and history is vindicated.” So Hobbes asks, “So now that history has brought you, what are you going to do?” In the final frame the two of them are sitting in front of a television laughing as they hear, “you wascally wabbit.”

JESUS IS THE POINT OF HISTORY

According to these verses Calvin had one thing right. History is a force, sweeping all people and institutions along an unrelenting path toward a single purpose. Unfortunately Calvin made the same mistake that nearly every human does. Though we would never voice Calvin’s idea and though we mentally know it can’t be right, we feel and a good part of the time operate as though all of history has aimed at producing me! We think, “I am what life is all about. I am the point of it.”

These verses tell us the mystery that nothing could be further from the truth. All of history will be summed up in Christ Jesus. He is the point of all of it. He is what history is all about. Philippians 2:9-11 says of Jesus, “**Therefore, God highly exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God**

the Father.” Revelation 5:12 depicts many thousands surrounding the throne of Jesus in heaven singing, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” That is where history is going.

Talk about a broken road, history is it. God launches a key component of his plan with a guy named Abraham. He has been unable to have children, yet God says he is going to make his descendants the vital players in his plan. At the age of 100 when it was physically impossible for Abraham to father children, God gave him a son. What was the point of the miraculous birth? It was to eventually allow Jesus Christ to make his appearance on earth and to demonstrate that he is rightfully the Lord of all the exists.

Isaac, Abraham’s son, would give birth to twins, neither of whom would be a sterling example of godly and wise living. But one of them, Jacob, a conniving scammer, would finally surrender his life to God. He would father 12 sons. One of them, Joseph, was rather full of himself and was despised by his brothers. They finally couldn’t take him anymore and hatched a plot to sell him as a slave. He ended up a slave in Egypt, and after being falsely accused of attempted rape he was thrown in prison. Yet through miraculous circumstances he became the second most powerful man in Egypt. When a terrible famine struck he was able to save his family because of his position, thus protecting and furthering God’s plan. The point of it was to make the appearance of Messiah possible.

So it went. Through Moses leading Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the land of Canaan. Through victories and through more frequent unfaithfulness and resulting judgment and defeat for Israel, God’s plan moved forward. Eventually came the long promised Messiah, arriving as an insignificant baby born to an anonymous couple living in a backwater town. He would ultimately be rejected and executed, yet he raised from the dead to continue the plan. All along the plan was to declare him the Lord of all. Throughout the two thousand years since that happened there have been dark ages, reformations, renewals and awakenings. There have been plagues, wars, natural disasters. There have been many attempts to destroy the church, silence the message and disrupt the plan. There have been repeated failures by the church, yet through all of it, the plan continues to roll forward.

At the end of all of history all of creation, every being that exists, will look at it and conclude from it that Jesus Christ is Lord. Every being will bow before him and admit that he deserves both his position and all praise for he is wise, good, fair,

holy, loving and full of grace and power. That is what the whole thing is about. God will use surprising events, twists and turns of plot, all to make the point more powerfully and vividly. In the end it is all about the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord.

THE PLAN INCLUDES EVERYTHING

I want you to notice the last part of verse 11. It says that we have been chosen and predestined, “**according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.**” In other words, everything that happens is a part of his plan for history. This means that the outcome of the election this week is included in his plan. Whether your candidate wins or not, that outcome is part of God’s plan and in some way that I cannot begin to fathom is playing a role in bringing about God’s summation of history, the declaration that Jesus is Lord.

Proverbs 16:9 says, “**In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.**” That’s true of every single person. No matter what they plan, it is God who determines what will happen. Proverbs 20:24 says, “**A man’s steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand his own way?**” That’s exactly the point. We can’t understand all that is going on because we’re not God, and he is the one who sees the plan and makes sure it occurs. This is true of everything that happens in this world every moment of our lives!

That just can’t be right, can it? Everything is worked out in conformity with the purpose of his will? What about all the bad things that happen? Last Sunday morning we had a real treat as the kids came in costume and sang for us. Anna, our children’s director did a great job in putting that together. It was a fun day, a result of some work on her part. That afternoon Anna and Toby wanted to enjoy the beautiful day so they took their dogs and went to dog beach in Del Mar. They had a wonderful time. When they returned to their car they found that someone had smashed the front passenger window, broken into the car and stolen Anna’s purse which she had hidden out of sight under the seat. Anna had to deal with the annoyance of closing their bank account and opening a new one, getting a new driver’s license from the DMV, always a delightful experience, and getting the window fixed. Of course their auto insurance deductible was higher than the cost of the window so they had to pay out of pocket to get it fixed plus she had gift cards worth several hundred dollars they had received as wedding presents in her purse, so they lost all those. Is that something being worked by God as part of his plan for history? How does that fit as part of that plan?

It sure doesn't seem like it fits, does it? It's awfully hard to see how that could possibly be part of God's sovereign plan for history. I suppose you could come up with some sort of explanation for how it could fit in with that plan. Perhaps it is part of God's sovereign plan to teach Toby and Anna how to trust God and be at peace no matter what happens. Maybe it is part of his plan to display his glory through their faith as they give thanks to him even when something bad happens in their lives. Perhaps he will use this to enable them to minister to someone else who faces a setback in life at some point. Maybe he is using it as a prelude to something really cool that will happen in their lives, like the authorities will catch the guy who did it and they'll be able to share God's grace with him and turn his life around. It could be any of those things, or all of them, or none of them. We don't know the reason for that specific event. We don't know exactly how it fulfills the plan. At the end of the day, I'm standing on the sidelines and I can't make out the design of the plan, but the plan exists despite the fact that I can't see it.

So many random things happen in our lives. When Laurie and I went on vacation we boarded a plane at 10 A.M. down at Lindbergh Field. Getting on planes now makes me nervous because the airlines have been pretty sketchy on the matter of getting us to our intended destination. Yet this flight took off on time and was actually one of the smoothest I've ever been on. There were practically no bumps. During the flight we heard some loud voices and commotion a couple of times coming from far back in the plane but thought nothing of it. After more than 5 hours we arrived at our destination. I wanted to get off that plane. I was tired of sitting in that seat, but the flight attendants asked us to remain seated even though we were at the gate. Pretty soon two burly men boarded the aircraft and headed to the back. Then the commotion really started. Pretty soon they came forward, one of them carrying a piece of luggage and the other "escorting" a loudly protesting woman off the plane. She was really making a scene. It was obvious that she was drunk. We found out from other passengers who had been seated near her that she had been a major annoyance throughout the flight and that the whole experience had been upsetting and disturbing. As they took her off the plane the passengers in the back began cheering and applauding the security guys. Was that part of God's sovereign plan? Will that somehow demonstrate that Jesus Christ is Lord? Yes, it is part of the plan, but I have no idea how it fits. I don't have to. God does not explain the details of his plan to us.

Isn't that one aspect of the message of the book of Job? Could the things that happened to Job possibly be a part of God's sovereign plan for history? It certainly doesn't seem like it, does it? Job couldn't see how that was possible, nor could his

friends who came to “support” him. What I find interesting about Job is that in the end he never does see the plan. God doesn’t reveal to him how the tragedies he experienced were part of the design. All that happens is that God reminds Job of who the Lord of all is, and of who Job isn’t. Job essentially grasps that he doesn’t have to understand how the events of his life fit in the plan. He only has to grasp who God is and accept that he has a wise plan. We only have to grasp who God is and remember he has a plan. So it is with the upcoming election and whatever happens as a result.

Isn’t it interesting that there were two aspects of what happened to Job that he could never have understood? First was that something was going on in the spiritual realm that Job never saw. God was using Job and his faithfulness in the midst of tragedy to display something to all in that spiritual realm. He was using Job to show Satan that he was losing and God was winning. It’s hard for us to grasp that the same thing might happen in our lives when we suffer those mystifying setbacks. Perhaps something is happening in the spiritual realm that we know nothing about.

Another aspect of Job’s story that Job never had any inkling about was that his story was recorded. Aren’t you glad you have his story? Job’s story has served to comfort, to encourage, to strengthen, and to teach people for thousands of years, but Job had no idea that was going to happen. He never knew how important his story would turn out to be. God knew it would happen and in his wisdom wove it into his sovereign plan for history.

Imagine that you are a devoted friend of Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ and one of the world’s first missionary church planters. He has been used by God in powerful ways in your life and in the world around you. He is incredibly effective in ministry. And you have both unlimited admiration and personal affection for him. Then some people bring false charges against him and he is thrown in jail. He stands trial, everyone knows he is innocent, but he isn’t released because his judge demands a bribe. For the next 4 years at least he remains in jail. You pray for him, but God doesn’t answer. How could this be part of God’s sovereign plan? How could it be part of God’s plan that this great man of God who is so powerful at winning people to faith in Jesus, would be inhibited from continuing his ministry through an unjust imprisonment? Paul himself looked around for reasons. He decided that it must be because he ended up in chains in Rome and as a result he was able to reach people inside Caesar’s administration, people he never would have otherwise been able to have contact with. I suppose that was indeed part of

God's sovereign plan. But I don't think it was the most important part. What neither you as his friend nor Paul himself would know is how those events actually fit in God's plan. Because of that unfair incarceration the only way Paul could encourage and minister to some of his disciples was by writing letters. We are studying part of one of them today. Neither Paul nor his friends could have known how that imprisonment would result in letters that are crucial to our faith now 2000 years later.

APPLICATION

WE ARE NOT ROBOTS

I have a laptop computer that when I first got it I was pretty sure was demon possessed. I was very pleased when I got it, but quickly became concerned and frustrated because it would do things I didn't want it to do. The cursor would jump to strange places on the screen, fonts would suddenly change of their own accord, new documents would open. It was bizarre. I was sure that I had a deeply troubled computer.

However, Toby, who has experience as an IT wizard came over to look at this troublesome machine. What he determined was that the machine was just fine. It was the operator that was the problem. Unfamiliar with this new instrument I didn't realize that I was putting my hands on the touch pad that is on the keyboard and inadvertently sending commands I knew nothing of and did not want. The computer, unfortunately, is unable to discern whether I really mean it when I give it a command. It simply does what it is programmed to do. It has no other choice. It cannot recognize an oops and decide to ignore it.

Are we robotic like that? If God is working his will in everything, if he is directing our steps, does it not follow that we really have no choice but to do whatever God has determined for us, so that whatever we do must be what he has chosen for us? If he didn't choose it for us, we wouldn't be able to do it, right?

That is quite logical by human logic. However, there is a divine logic that transcends human logic. The Bible tells us there is another mystery, and it is that he can do things we cannot even begin to comprehend. He can be one being, but three persons. That sometimes drives me crazy because I want to understand it, but I can't. Jesus can be both God and man. He can pray to the Father, yet say he and the Father are one, if you've seen him you've seen the Father. I don't understand that. All the fullness of deity dwells in him according to Colossians 2:9. So Jesus

was fully God with omnipotent power and omniscience. Yet he said even he didn't know the time of his second coming. How can that be? I don't know. And God says he has a sovereign plan, he directs our steps, yet our choices are very real and meaningful and we will be held accountable for them. I don't understand how those go together. But God does, and that's all that matters.

The Bible consistently calls us to obedience to God's commands. It calls on us to heed his instruction and follow his will continually. Is he directing our steps? Yes. Nevertheless you and I both know that we have choices and they are very real. I know that I can choose to be patient with others, to forgive them when they hurt me, to love them, to put God's glory above my selfish interest, to keep my thoughts pure, and I can choose to do the opposite of all of those things. My choices are very real and I must never forget that.

WE CAN HAVE CONFIDENCE AND PEACE

There's a lot of uncertainty floating around right now. What is going to happen in the upcoming election? Who will win, and what will be the result? The politicians and the media fan the flames of fear. If the wrong man is elected, disaster is sure to follow. Whether that disaster be an economic collapse or war or some other disaster in foreign relations, we are warned of terrible consequences ahead.

God has a sovereign plan, and whatever happens in this election will, without fail, serve as one more step in the accomplishment of that plan. Suppose that the election doesn't turn out the way you want and as you fear the consequences are dire. Perhaps it leads to the disintegration of our economy. Or maybe we gradually lose our freedom and our nation as we have known it unravels. Whatever the thing you most fear, suppose that it happens. Here is the crucial question: are those results somehow outside the sovereign plan of God? Has something happened that he cannot direct or control?

In Isaiah 46:10 God says, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." Nothing can thwart God's plan. I may not like what happens. I didn't like it when Anna's car was broken into. There have been many things that have happened in my life that I have not liked. I won't like it if our national debt destroys our economy. I won't like it if we are all reduced to poverty. I don't like losing some of my freedom. I won't like it if we have another war or if brutal terrorists launch more attacks against us. But my confidence isn't rooted in a strong economy, or in American military power or my lifestyle. It is rooted in the

sovereign ability of God to work his perfect plan for both my individual life and for the entire history of the human race.

WE SHOULD GET WITH THE PROGRAM

So what should I do today? I should remember what all of history is about. It is about summing up all things in Christ. What then is my life about? It should be about summing up all things in Christ. When that day comes that my life reaches its end, whenever that may be, what do I want people to conclude about my life?

I should desire that anyone and everyone should say of me, “He was about the fact that Jesus is Lord.” I should long for them to say that I lived with Jesus as the Lord of my life, choosing to obey him as a habit of life, and that when you sum up the message of my life it is that I wanted people to see the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and submit to him as Lord.

This is what God is doing in all of history. It is what he is doing in your life. So you can either cooperate with him or you can fight against him as you pursue some other purpose. May I suggest that latter option is a really bad one that you would be wise to reject?

We were staying in a hotel that when we checked in gave us two keys to our room, a key for the gate that led from the property out onto a public beach, and a parking card key, along with other material. For me it seemed a lot to keep track of. The parking card should have been the easiest to not have trouble with. You put it in your car and leave it there, only using it when entering the parking lot. The next morning Laurie and I were walking out to our rental car in the parking lot and we noticed a parking card lying on the ground by the entrance to the hotel. Now our normal response would have been to pick it up and turn it in at the front desk knowing that someone must have dropped it. For some unknown reason neither of us did that. We just kept walking out to the car. We got in the car, I looked down and realized our parking card was not in the car. We both looked at each other and it hit us at the same time. That was *our* card lying out there by the entrance to the hotel. Somehow I must have been carrying it and dropped it. I jumped out the car and hustled back to the entrance only to find the card was gone. I went to the front desk to ask if anyone had turned it in, but no. I hadn't been gone 3 minutes and it had disappeared. The fine for losing a card was \$25. That's not a big sum of money, but it's painful to pay something like that for being stupid.

How should I respond to those annoying events? I should say, “Well, God is sovereign, so I need to just be at peace with this and give thanks. He could have kept me from losing it in the first place or ignoring it in the second, but he didn’t. So I have an opportunity to just trust God, be joyful and thank him despite the little annoyance.” Yes, I suppose you could use that as an excuse for being an idiot – it’s God’s fault that I lost that card because it was his plan – but no one who loves God would do that. Instead, we accept responsibility but trust him and move on in joy.

Whatever happens this week let us not forget that God works all things after the counsel of his will. In the end, somehow, though we may not know how, the events of this election and its aftermath will be summed up in this: Jesus Christ is Lord, and that’s good news.

Let’s make sure that in the way we respond to difficulty and disappointment, in the way we relate to other people, in the message and the priorities of our lives what people should see, is that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is what our existence is about. Let’s make sure that truth rules all that we are and do.