

TIME AND CHANCE

Byron C. Bangert

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12; Luke 10:25-37

There is a story about the famous Jewish Rabbi and scholar of the Talmud, Akiba, that goes something like this:

In the turbulent first century, the rabbi once traveled in a strange country where mystery still dwelt. He had taken with him three possessions--an ass, a rooster and a lamp--and had stopped at night in a village where he hoped to find lodging. When the people there drove him out, he was forced to spend the night in a forest nearby. But Rabbi Akiba bore all pains with ease, being heard always to say, "All that God does is done well." So he found a tree under which to stop, lit his lamp, and prepared to study Torah briefly before going to sleep. But a fierce wind suddenly blew out the flame, leaving him with no choice but to rest. Later that night wild animals came through and chased away his rooster. Still later, thieves passed by and took his ass. Yet in each case, Rabbi Akiba simply responded by saying, "All that God does is done well."

The next morning he returned to the village where he had stopped the night before, only to learn that enemy soldiers had come by in the night, killing everyone in their beds. Had he been permitted to stay there, he too would have died. He learned also that the raiding army had traveled through the same part of the forest where he had slept. If they had seen the light of his lamp, if the rooster had crowed, or if the ass had brayed, again he would have been killed. And how did Rabbi Akiba respond? He simply replied as he always did, "All that God does is done well." [Cited by Belden C. Lane, "Rabbinical Stories: A Primer on Theological Method," *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY*, Dec. 16, 1981, 1308-09].

This is no doubt a good story from Rabbi Akiba's point of view! At the risk of sounding impious, however, I would ask, "What about all those unsuspecting townspeople who were murdered in their beds? Can it be said, on their behalf, "All that God does is done well"?"

We must not assume from this story that God was responsible for what happened in the village. God is credited only with the action by which Rabbi Akiba was saved. But, if God could save Akiba, why could God not also save the village? And if God could save the village, why did God not do it? Moreover, if God could engineer a wind to blow out Akiba's lamp, a bunch of wild animals to drive away Akiba's rooster, and a band of thieves to steal Akiba's ass, would it not have been easier for God to direct Akiba to make his bed in some other part of the forest? Maybe Akiba's deliverance was all a matter of coincidence, a stroke of very good luck!

To pursue this line of argument any further would be an act of unnecessary cruelty. The story was never intended to bear such scrutiny. Unfortunately, the story is not even able to bear its own point. Akiba may be right, "All that God does is done well," but one would never know it from this story! The problem, of course, is that we really do not know all that God does. We cannot specify where the action of God begins and where it ends.

I invite you to consider a fact of life that has been a source of considerable embarrassment to traditional Jewish and Christian piety. I am referring to what we call accident, or coincidence, or luck, or chance. These are very common words in our vocabulary. We use them almost every day. They denote those events or happenings in our lives that occur, so far as we can tell, without any discernible purpose or intention toward us. Such happenings may very well be the result of purposive activity, but this purposive activity does not envision the event that we speak of as accident or chance. If someone runs into me with an automobile, I may assume that the resulting effects are attributable to his actions in maneuvering the car, but I would ordinarily also assume that those actions were not directed against me. I would regard myself as a victim, not of hostility or ill-will, but of an accident. Presumably no injury would have occurred had I not been where I was when this other person happened, for whatever reasons not having to do with me, to maneuver his car in an unfortunate way. His running into me was a matter of luck – bad luck, in this case – a chance happening that would not have happened had I not been there to get run into – an accident.

As everybody but the strict determinist knows, accidents do happen. And we really would not want to blame God for all of them. Luck, favorable and unfavorable, good and bad, is a fact of life. Things happen to us by chance. This does not mean that they happen without cause, but that they happen, in effect, at random, indiscriminately, or without any discernible intention or meaningful design toward us. Whatever our theology tells us, our experience argues that everything that happens is not necessarily for the best. There is an enormous amount that happens to each of us that simply cannot be explained or accounted for except as luck or accident or chance.

The Bible, interestingly enough, does not contain the words luck and accident. It does, however, contain the word chance, though only in a few places, two of which are this morning's texts. Religion, of course, is not primarily concerned with accident but with design, not with luck but with the actions of God. Unfortunately, religion has tended not only to ignore but also to exclude luck and accident from its view of things. In Jewish and Christian tradition, at least, the tendency is to make God responsible for everything that happens. This may be true in the very special sense that nothing would happen were it not for God. God may be present in every action and event. But we can hardly say that God intends for everything to happen precisely the way it does. The events of our world are constituted not only by design but also by chance.

We know that there is good luck and bad luck. Just so, the fact that the events of our world are constituted by chance bears a positive aspect and a negative one. Consider first the negative aspect. I recall the story of a Michael Phipps, a picture of whose car was carried by the national wire service and printed in many newspapers. One day he was driving down the street when he swerved to miss another car. As it happened, he hit a fire hydrant instead. Bad luck that there was a car to be avoided, bad luck that a fire hydrant lay in the path of his avoidance. Doing what any conscientious citizen would do, Phipps parked his car and went across the street to call the sheriff's department. Meantime, the water rushing from the hydrant created a sinkhole, and wouldn't you know it, when Phipps returned to his car all that was visible was the roof, the rest of it being submerged under water and mud. And it wasn't even Friday the thirteenth!

Chance means that much of what happens to us is clearly irrespective of our deserving, or our effort. I like the way the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all" [Eccl. 9:11]. One may raise some minor objections to this statement. We know, for example, that the runner who does not train is not likely to win the race. But there is a profound truth here, nonetheless. So much of anyone's success is a matter of luck, of factors beyond one's control.

There is a well-attested story that Charlie Chaplin once entered a "Charlie Chaplin look-alike" contest and came in third! Jascha Heifetz, in the days of his fame, played his violin in the streets, receiving no more attention than any blind fiddler. Great literary masterpieces are known to have been turned down by dozens of book publishers in succession before finally being accepted. No doubt many never gained acceptance. Occasionally, an already acknowledged masterpiece has been submitted under another name and summarily dismissed for being deficient in the very qualities for which it has been acclaimed. A signed Picasso will attract a thousand viewers, while an unsigned one may be passed by with scarcely a glance, or even sneered at as a poor imitation of the master. Columnist Sydney Harris once observed that "Nothing succeeds like success." It is the reputation as well as the talent, and often more than the talent, that is rewarded [clipping "Fame's the name of the game"]. The obvious corollary is that success is not merely a matter of accomplishment but also of luck. It is a matter of time and place. Someone has defined good luck as preparation meeting opportunity. This is so, but it also means that even the best preparation, in the absence of good opportunity, will meet with failure: "The race is not to the swift, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all."

The author of Ecclesiastes has often been accused of taking a rather jaundiced view of life. He has even been painted as a religious skeptic who doubts the goodness of God. I am not at all persuaded of this, however, and find it possible to regard his instruction in an altogether different light. Consider the first verse of our text, where the author, Koheleth, speaks of "how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God." This is not a questioning of God's goodness or justice. Koheleth is not a skeptic about God, he is a skeptic about religious piety. He draws upon wisdom to refute the conventional wisdom. His teaching is a protest against the conventional piety that we get what we deserve in this life. He confutes the religious view that one can draw a direct lesson from the fortunes we experience in this life to the Divine dispensation. The configuration of events in this life does not mirror the justice of God. "As are the good, so are the sinners . . . (T)he same fate comes to everyone" [9:2, 3]. This is to say that life is not fair. The wicked indeed often fare better than the good! But, this is also to say that we are not stuck with the oppressive dogma that the way things are in this life is the way they are with God!

Religion, whenever it turns self-righteous, tries to draw its morals from the way things are "under the sun." Are you successful? You must be living right! Are you a failure? It is the wages of sin! Really bad things don't happen to really good people. The righteous prosper, the wicked perish. This is the conventional piety of every religion of the status quo. To this Koheleth says, "Vanity!" Everything under the sun is vanity. There are no morals to be drawn concerning the ultimate

disposition of things from what we can observe happening under the sun. After all, in this life we will all end up dead!

The good news is that God is not giving us a message regarding how good or bad we are in everything that happens to us. God was not trying to tell Michael Phipps, "I don't love you!" When an earthquake strikes in California, or flooding inundates scores of Midwestern cities and towns, or tornadoes touch down in Alabama, God is not expressing an opinion about the inhabitants of those places. When we succeed, or fail, it is not necessarily God's judgment upon us. We must not take our "readings" of God exclusively from our own fortunes.

This hardly means that God has nothing to do with what happens to us. It certainly does not mean that the universe is careening out of control, beyond the reach of all direction and purpose. It does mean that the universe is not all locked up tight. There is elbow-room. There is risk and freedom. Psychologically speaking, we are not under the Divine thumb. There is room for us to be human, to live lives of our own. Life is not put before us mainly as an obstacle course. It is to be savored. As Koheleth teasingly puts it, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment; and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do."

Koheleth aims to free us from a dreary, moralistic interpretation of life. In his own way he affirms with Job the freedom of God. God is not obliged to provide us an explanation for the way things are. God is not accountable to us for the way the universe is put together. Even at those points where we may be able to discern the activity of God, we are not warranted to draw conclusions about our own deserving-ness. As God says to Moses, in Exodus 33 (vs. 19), "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Deuteronomy makes a similar point, in the seventh chapter, where Moses instructs the people of Israel, "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you--for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you . . ." [vss. 7-8]. God, in the biblical view, is free to transcend every human standard of justice. God loves as God pleases, not as we deserve.

Yet it seems to me that Koheleth goes beyond the rest of the Old Testament, as well as much of the New Testament, in asserting a kind of human freedom as well. He does not work this out in a philosophically systematic way. He simply compels us to see that no one can honestly presume to be able to figure out the whole mind of God. He simply points out that the intention and purpose of God are not to be discerned in everything that happens to us. Therefore it is up to us to live our lives as best we can! So far as we can tell, God gives us room to act. We are free from trying to conform every moment of our lives to a specific Divine intention.

This means, of course, that in whatever we do we are taking a chance. We can never be sure that it is going to come out all right. But, it is of utmost importance that we notice what is at stake and what is not at stake in all that we do. What is at stake is the outcome, our own success or failure. What is not at stake is God's love for us. We cannot read God's love for us in our successes and failures. The risks we take in this life are not insignificant ones, they may bear some ultimate

importance, but they do not put in jeopardy God's love for us. We are not the arbiters of God's goodness. We can never be sure what our successes or failures have to do with the ultimate accomplishments of God.

Some years ago major news magazines carried an ad picturing a smiling, healthy baby, and the words, "We're all created equal. After that, baby, you're on your own." The ad went on to say, "Nobody's going to hand you success on a silver platter. If you want to make it, you'll have to make it on your own. Your own drive, your own guts, your own energy, your own ambition. Yes, ambition. You don't have to hide it anymore. Society's decided that now it's OK to be up-front about the drive for success. Isn't that what the fast track is all about?"

For over two thousand years Jewish and Christian theology have been trying to come to terms with the obvious fact that none of this is true. We are not all created equal. Some people are born with silver spoons in their mouths, while others are born unhealthy, unwhite, unrich, unwanted, unloved. One of the hardest things in life is coming to terms with its glaring inequities, its good luck and its bad. The lucky feel guilty, the unlucky feel cheated. There is much good news in Koheleth's observation that this is not God's final judgment upon us. Whoever said life under the sun was fair? Time and chance happen to every one.

There is, by definition, nothing we can do about how lucky or unlucky we are. But there is something to be said about what we do with our chances, however great or small they be. The striking thing is that Jesus said it in the most familiar parable of all, the Good Samaritan. You know the story: A man is beaten and robbed on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and left to die. "By chance," says Jesus, a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan walked down that road. Now in those days, the priest and the Levite would have been regarded as the "lucky" ones, the favored of God. The Samaritan, by contrast, was despised. His ancestry and his religion were corrupted. He was born in the wrong place in the wrong time. But to each of these three, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, comes the chance to rescue the man who lies dying on the side of the road. The priest and the Levite walk by on the other side, but the poor, unlucky Samaritan comes to the injured man's aid. He is the one who does the will of God. He is the one who inherits eternal life. He is the one who makes good on the chance that is given to him. Jesus says, "Go, and do likewise." AMEN.

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