

DOES GOD RULE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 22, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Did God wind up the world like a clock and then go off and leave it to run down? Is he even aware of what is going on in the world today? Does he guide the affairs of men? More important, at least to me, is he aware of me and what is happening in my life? Does he care? Is there any way to reach out and make contact with God? Does he hear my prayers? These are some of the questions that men are asking today about God. Likely, all of us at one time or another have asked some of these questions. When life becomes hard, when our problems seem insurmountable, inevitably we will ask questions like these.

The answer to all these questions is that God does continue to concern himself with our world. He created it; he sustains it. Most meaningful of all, he is deeply concerned about every person who lives--young or old, rich or poor, great or small. In the long ago Jesus said, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pence? and not one of them is forgotten in the sight of God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not: ye are of more value than many sparrows." (Luke 12:6-7). Jesus was saying simply that if God is concerned about the relatively unimportant sparrow, he must be deeply concerned about man,

I like to repeat the familiar words of John Greenleaf Whittier, in his poem, "The Eternal Goodness,"

I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies.

I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

A Drift Toward Humanism

In recent years there has been a strong drift toward humanism, which emphasizes man's reliance upon himself, with absolutely no consideration given to God. Far back in the 15th century, a movement began which credits man's achievements solely to his own aptitude, skills and expertise. Known as humanism, this system denies that any source of either assistance or restraint, higher than man himself, even exists. The humanist denies the very existence of anything divine. Man is a genius, and that is all there is. Harvey Cox, in his widely read book, *The Secular City*, defends the modern God-less trend in urban living. In his book there is the sentence, "There is no reason that man must believe the ethical standards he lives by came down from heaven ..."

How different it is with the writers of the scriptures. Just the opposite view was expressed by David when he said, "Jehovah is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Jehovah is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps. 27:1). I also remember the stirring words of the apostle Paul when he said, "... for I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12).

The Sure Promises of God

As we read the scriptures, we find constantly recurring evidence that God does continue to be concerned with the world and its inhabitants. Very early in the book of Genesis we find this significant passage, "And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh upon the earth." (Gen. 9:16). God reveals himself to be a covenant God. He has blessed man with an infinite variety of blessings, showing himself to be concerned about man's every need. Then, he has said to man, in effect, "Let me guide you away from pitfalls and dangers. If you will follow my directions your life will be happy and you will know the full measure of blessings. If you choose to go your own way, you will find yourself constantly in trouble." If man is willing to accept God's covenant, willing to obey God's directions, he finds himself blessed, but if he insists on going his own willful way he often finds himself in deep trouble. Obviously God could not be a covenant God, concerned about man's response to himself unless he continues to be involved in the affairs of our world.

Another evidence of God's involvement in history is found in the story of Abraham. At one point the scriptures read, "Now Jehovah said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 12:1-3). Evidently, God intended to be in close touch with Abram, not only throughout his life but through generations to come.

To Jacob, God said, “And behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.” (Gen. 28:15). This is another example of God’s continuing concern.

To the entire nation of Israel God said, “Know therefore that Jehovah thy God, he is God, the faithful God, who keepeth covenant and lovingkindness with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations ...” (Deut. 7:9). At another time God said, “If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then I will give your rains in your seasons, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time, and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will cause evil beasts to cease out of the land, neither shall the sword go through the land ... And I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and will establish my covenant with you.” (Lev. 26:3-9). As a loving heavenly Father, God is deeply concerned about the welfare of his people.

The New Testament

Not only do we find passage after passage in the Old Testament which indicate God’s intimate concern for man’s well-being, but we also find similar evidences of God’s love in the New Testament. For example, Jesus once said, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him, that knocketh it shall be opened ... If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good gifts unto them that ask him?” (Matt. 7:7-8, 11).

No study of this kind, desiring to point out God’s intimate relationship with man and deep concern for man’s good, would be complete without mentioning Paul’s statement, “And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28). A few chapters later in the same book of Romans Paul said, “Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God.” This, again, clearly indicates God’s hand in the affairs of men.

Yet another way of recognizing God’s deep concern for our good is found in a statement from the apostle Paul concerning our daily temptations, “There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it.” (I Cor. 10:13). James reminds us, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning.” (James 1:17). Later in the same book, we read, “Come now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into this city, and spend a year there, and trade, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow ... For that he ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall both live, and do this or that.” Obviously, God does concern himself with the affairs of men, He continues to sustain our world and offers his help to us in the living of our lives.

Evidence of God’s Hand In History

Statements from the scriptures such as we have just mentioned may not be as convincing to some as they are to me. Are these just idle words, or is there evidence that God’s promises of helping man in difficult times really have come true? The answer is that we have many evidences of the hand of God operating in human history. Let us note a few prophetic statements of God, which ultimately were fulfilled in complete detail.

Here are the words of the prophet Ezekiel concerning the city of Tyre, a famous city of ancient times along the western coast of what we now call Syria. Ezekiel wrote, “Thus saith the Lord, Jehovah, Behold, I am against thee, O Tyre, and will cause many nations to come up against thee, as the sea causeth its waves to come up. And they shall destroy the walls of Tyre, and break down her towers. I will also scrape her dust from her, and make her a bare rock. She shall be a place for the spreading of nets in the midst of the sea; for I have spoken it saith the Lord Jehovah; and she shall become a spoil to the nations.” (Ezek.26:3-5).

How has this prophecy turned out? The answer is quite impressive. Long before the time of Christ Nebuchadnezzar assaulted the city and pressed about it so strongly that the people abandoned the city on the mainland and fled to an island one-half mile out in the sea. Two and one-half centuries passed before Alexander the Great besieged this city. In order to reach the new island city one-half mile off shore, Alexander built a causeway to the island. He built it of stones, columns, and other debris that he could find from the ancient city on the mainland, eventually even scraping bare the earth to find more materials for his causeway. At last he was able to take the island, and to destroy it as a city. Alexander scraped the land clean where the ancient city had been, so much so that in modern times archeologists have found no ruins of ancient buildings on the original site. Today, quite interestingly, the island and causeway are desolate except for fishermen who use them to spread their nets to mend and to dry them.

Other Prophecies

A different kind of prophecy is that concerning Saul of Tarsus, who was one of the foremost persecutors of Christians. When Ananias, a cautious preacher who knew something of Saul's devastating persecution of Christians, was afraid to go and talk with Saul, "... the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel; for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake." (Acts 9:15-16). The story took an immediate turn, and Saul, rather than continue his persecution of Christians, became a foremost Christian himself. The remainder of his life was spent in preaching the gospel of Christ to Gentiles, to kings, including even the Emperor in Rome, and to the Jews. Through it all he suffered many persecutions. What a beautiful example this is of the way God's plan was fulfilled in the apostle Paul's later life.

Let us take one example more. The apostle Peter, late in his own life, wrote concerning the final consummation of all things, the end of time. In part he wrote, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up." (II Pet. 3:9-10).

Until a few years ago this seemed like a rather fanciful description of the end of time. With the coming of the atomic and hydrogen bombs, however, man is much better able to understand how easily our earth may be dissolved with fervent heat. Perhaps you can remember the report of an early atomic bomb blast in one of our own western states in which the steel tower holding the bomb was vaporized, leaving nothing behind. It may be that you can also remember the detonation of a hydrogen bomb in the South Pacific, in which a small island three miles long and one mile wide simply vanished into the sea. Today, we do not feel that it is unreasonable to think that our earth could be dissolved in fervent heat. While we do not believe that this will be done by man's incident, we can confidently expect it to happen in God's own time and in God's own way.

The passage of scripture which we have just been reading continues, "Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy living and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? But, according to his promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." (II Pet. 3:11-13).

Conclusion

The extremely accurate fulfillment of hundreds of Bible prophecies with their attendant effects upon men in various ages, should be sufficient to build complete faith in all God's utterances. Material things will pass; only the spiritual will survive eternally. Notice the words of the apostle John, "The world passeth away and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever." (I John 2:17). One of the most chilling passages in all the scriptures is the statement from Paul, "We must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad." (II Cor. 5:10). How vitally important it is that each of us be ready when the end of life or the end of time shall come. This means that each of us must become a Christian while there is still life and opportunity.