

## ***Loving an unpredictable God***

Over Chinese food my friend Joe asked me if my faith in God was in tact. I was getting divorced, broke my neck, and was just diagnosed with cancer. He was concerned for me and wanted to know how to best be a support to me in my *dark night of the soul*. I'd loved Jesus for nearly forty years and had no intention of breaking up with him now. But I told him that though I didn't question God's *character*, I wondered if he had very "good judgment." I'd been Joe's friend and pastor for many years, and he wasn't used to hearing me talk quite that way, but since he asked, I thought it best to answer honestly. With flushed face he promised to pray for me, which I obviously needed and gratefully welcomed. That horrific season of my life did alter a lot of my thinking about God – and as far as I can tell – for the better. You can be the judge of that yourself if you decide to read on.

I now believe that though God has good judgment he is "inconsistent." I should qualify this. He's surely "consistent" with himself, within his own character. He always acts like *himself*. It's not that he doesn't keep his word or that he lacks integrity in any way. In fact, there is no one in his universe with more integrity than him. I'm convinced that the God of the Bible is completely consistent with the way he's always been, but my point is that he doesn't act as *uniformly* as I had previously believed. So unless I slip, I no longer say things like, "*God always...*" or "*God never...*" unless it has to do with his character (i.e. he always loves, he never lies, etc.). But when it comes to the *expression* of his character, how he acts; in my current way of thinking he's not as predictable as I had once thought. In fact, I think he's downright *unpredictable*.

I believe that I can count on him to always be *himself*, always act like God acts, consistent with his character and wisdom. But how he expresses this good character of his – what he does as a God of integrity – is up to him and his good judgment at the time. Let me unpack this a little bit.

*"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us... that we may follow all the words of this law." Deuteronomy 29:29*

*"Have faith in God." Mark 11:22*

*"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" Romans 11:33*

*"Be strong and let us fight bravely for our God... The Lord will do what is good in his sight." 1 Chronicles 19:13*

To my mind, it's more an *adolescent* faith than an *adult* one to think that God can be predicted. I'm sure we think we know more than we actually do when it comes to God. The "secret things" about him infinitely outnumber the "things revealed." I wonder if we're ready to concede that our faith is more founded upon what we *think* we know about the ways that God works or in the "magic" of our spiritual spells, rather than in the wild and unpredictable Person that he is. Jesus told us simply to "*Have faith in God*," which I take to mean that we're to trust in him as a *Person*. He wants us to believe in the God who *is*, not the one we wish he was.

**God always acts like *himself*.**

It's immature to try to "program" him or to set "defaults" for him to abide by. He seems resistant to our "preferences" that we try to establish for him. He warned us that his paths can't be "traced out," and his mind cannot be completely known; and yet we tend to want a God that we can, if not *control*, at least *calculate*.

## **TRUSTING THE "SOMETIMES" GOD**

(Before you freak out, please be assured that I'm not implying that God is "sometimes God," and then sometimes he's not! I mean something else, which you'll have to read further to find out.)

That season of anguish to which left me, albeit temporarily, jaded in my view of God. Everything that I had previously believed was called into question, and for a time, I became quite cynical about the way he was either doing things, or refusing to do them. He seemed kind of fickle to me, often failing to do for us what good friends would typically do for those they love.

I could tell I was beginning to heal emotionally by the way I responded to a story I heard about a family during the deadly 2009 earthquake in Haiti. My friend Mitch was sharing with me an account of how a father and daughter were miraculously spared as one beam of their house leaned up against another, protecting them from the collapsing roof. In another part of the house the mother was crushed to death under the crumbled adobe walls. I noticed that my usual cynical response wasn't ready at hand. During that season I would normally have blurted out something like, *"What's up with that? Why would God save one and not the other?! How does that work? What's his twisted thinking on that? Why does he sometimes and with some people intervene supernaturally, and at other times with other people chooses not to?"* But I noticed that my default of cynicism wasn't there. I even tried to call it up, but it only made a feeble and fleeting appearance. Instead of being annoyed with God for allowing it, compassion kicked in for the family's tragedy. With no idea why God would save some and not others, my heart simply ached for the suffering.

I'm not saying that I "understand" suffering any better than before. I'm just not as consumed by the reasons for it. I still hate that people suffer. Earthquakes, hurricanes, rape, and genocide all make me terribly sad, but I'm just not so frustrated about how a good God could permit such things in his world. Honestly, I think this shift in thinking has freed me to be more compassionate toward those who are suffering. Because I'm not expending so much emotional energy being ticked off with God for seeming so random in his distribution of miracles, I have reserves left to truly empathize. As my cynicism has dissipated over time, space has been created for compassion. I'm grateful for this.

**God doesn't like it very much when we try to pin him down to a "Job Description."**

I'm always amazed at how quick and methodical my accountant is with my tax return (in all honesty, I'm probably his easiest account, since I give him so little to work with!). Year after year, Stan just plugs the figures into formulas and wham-bang – I'm walking out with the bad news in hand. With the mathematical formulas that he works with day after day, he's got it down to a predictable procedure. I assume that IRS "recommendations" have something to do with there being very little variance in tax preparation. Is it possible that we expect God to act like an

accountant, and deal uniformly with all of “his accounts” in all situations? I’m finding that he isn’t nearly as “anticipatable” as that, and when he doesn’t conform to the image of him that I’ve concocted in my mind, I tend to become disappointed in him. This might be one reason so many believers eventually become *unbelievers*. God didn’t do what they expected, and they “lost faith” in him. Could it be that they lost faith, not in the God *who is*, but in the God they wanted him to be?

Herod had both James and Peter jailed for telling people about Jesus (Acts 12). He killed James and intended to do the same with Peter. But instead of having his head chopped off like his fellow Jesus-follower, Peter was visited by an angel who supernaturally opened the prison doors and set him free to rejoin his friends. James died and Peter lived! God watched the beheading of the one and then rescued the other from the same fate. What’s up with that? Did he love Peter more than James? Did Peter have more faith than James? Or maybe Peter prayed more or sinned less. Maybe his prayers were more poetic or fit the formula of the perfect prayer. (I’ve heard sermons on faith and prayer that gave me this impression.)

Does God locate blessings strategically at predictable increments along our path, or does he just fling them out like a little girl tossing her jacks? It seems to me that his gifts are quite randomly distributed. How can I trust a God like that – this “Sometimes God”?

In regard to *character*, God is not *sometimes* anything. He’s not sometimes holy, once in a while faithful, or periodically good. But it does seem that his actions (how he expresses his character in this world) can sometimes be one way, and at other times, another. Sometimes he rescues people from death, and sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he heals people, and sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he requires one thing from one person, and then with another person he expects something else. It all seems so haphazard and random.

I guess I just want to be able to predict what God’s going to do next. I wish I could say, “*He always heals everybody... He never lets bad stuff happen to us when we pray... He always does it this way, and never that way...*” That kind of faith is pretty impressive, especially when the person with this kind of “super-faith” have testimonies to prove it. It’s tempting to go along with that variety of faith, but I usually just end up feeling guilty or discouraged when I try to practice it and don’t get the results I was looking for. I thought I claimed the same promises, quoted the same verses, used the same spiritual incantations – and yet I didn’t get the same response from God that the guy on YouTube said I would. Why is that? He said the right things in the right way with the right tone, and got the right result – so why didn’t I get the same? Could my intonation have been a little off? Maybe I left out some of the ingredients in the *spell*.

Over time I pretty much got over expecting God to act the way I want him to. These days I’m just doing my best to get to know *him* better, so I can root my faith more in who he *is* than in my assumptions about how I think he should act. My faith is a little more personal than before. I don’t relate to him in the same way I relate to my computer. I realize that I can’t program him to do certain things in certain ways. Though I love my laptop, it’s more of a love for what it does for me. There’s no true intimacy between us. I install the programs, put the information I need into it, and it performs for me (usually) as I ask it to. Sometimes it malfunctions, and I become irritated by its failure to please me. But I get an expert to fix it or I save up and replace it with a new one. God, on the other hand, doesn’t operate that way. He does what he wants when he wants to. He asks for my cooperation, but doesn’t promise to always cooperate with me. I do have my part to play. I have to believe, align myself with him, obey his wishes, and then ask him for stuff (“*Lord,*

*please heal my friend... set my neighbor free from dope... help me pay my rent...”).* What he does with it is up to him, and I just have to trust and love him, notwithstanding.

Jesus didn't tell his disciples to have faith in a particular outcome of their prayers – he told them to “have faith in God.” I'm not sure that he likes it much when we line up Bible promises like targets to shoot down so we can get a prize. “Faith in God” sounds more like trusting him as a Person. He may or may not do what we'd trusted him to do, but we're still to have faith *in him*.

I once thought of faith as just a *means to an end*, but now I think it's sometimes *the end* itself. Faith isn't just the way I get stuff from God (“believe and you shall receive”) – while there's some truth to that. Faith is also something that I offer to God as my gift to him – a token of my love for him. It's not so much, “Believe and you'll get what you want,” but, “Believe and you'll please your Father.” This way, my faith isn't so utilitarian or me-oriented. It's not just a conduit through which God gives me things, but something that *I give to him*. It's what I hand over to him, whether or not I get from him what I want. I'm trying to simply trust him regardless of how he answers my requests.

Faith makes God happy (Hebrews 11:6) and since I live to make him happy, it makes me happy to give him my faith. Even if it is as small as a tiny seed my trust is what I bring to the table. Whatever *I* get from any sort of transaction with him is a bonus. When I trust him but don't get from him what I trusted him for, still my offering has been given, and I'm pleased because the “Sometimes God” is pleased.

## **LOVING THE “SOMETIMES” GOD**

The character that depicts Jesus in C.S. Lewis' series, The Chronicles of Narnia is a ferocious lion named, *Aslan*. One of the notable characteristics of the lion was his unpredictability. He even seemed fickle at times. Sometimes he would show up and, in the nick of time, save the day; and at others he would refuse to intervene – almost aloof. Or he would only show himself to one person and remain invisible to the rest. One of the characters asked another about Aslan, “*Is he safe?*” “*No. He's not safe, but he is good.*”

It's hard for us to live with mystery, enigma, and paradox. We moderns allow for very little *wonder* in our lives. Everything has to be nailed down, have clear explanations, and fit a pattern. But accepting the ambiguity of God's ways is huge part of a life of faith. He's just not that nail-downable. Faith doesn't mean that we have God all figured out, it means that we can live with him without having him figured out.

I think I love God more now than I did when I thought he was more predictable. When I was dependent on him acting predictably I see now that I loved the *idea of God* more than God himself. Now I'm beginning to love him more *for who he is* than for *what* he does for me. He's not my personal “tech support” – not just the voice on the other end of the line advising me on how to remedy my viruses. He's a “real” person who wants to be loved as such. Our love shouldn't vacillate as he performs for us in ways that make us happy (or not). He loves us, not for what *we* do, though he revels in it when we do what he wants us to do. He wants from us the kind of love he gives – the lover's kind of love.

**I once thought of faith as just a *means to an end*,**

## **but now I'm thinking it's sometimes *the end* itself.**

This is why some of my friends have been so quick to bail out when trouble and pain arrive. If God did nothing to prevent the pain or to stop it once it occurred, they have no more use for him. He was their *Errand Boy*, and if he's not going to run errands anymore, then they look for someone or something else to keep them happy by doing things for them.

It's easier to love someone if they make me feel safe, and if God is as unpredictable as I propose, how can I feel safe with him? How can I feel secure enough to love him if I can't predict what he's going to do or when he's going to do it? It helps me to remember that he *is predictably good*. I may not know what he's going to do, but I can be sure that whatever he does or chooses not to do finds its impetus in his character, which is unremittably good. He's good, and that's all I really need to know in order to love him. I'm secure, not because I know he's going to heal me of cancer or protect me today in traffic (I don't know either one of those things). But I do find safety in his arms of love.

Many of my friends have commended me for "holding onto God" during unchecked loss and unalleviated pain. I think most of them would've done much better than I, and many have done just that in their own tests of faith. But we've been grieved to watch so many of our comrades become disappointed with God's non-intervention and let go of their faith altogether. Others of us, on the other hand, have been content to love the God who loves us, whether or not he acts in a way that could be deemed as reasonable to our small minds.

## **He's good, and that's all I really need in order to know in order to love him.**

I help with a ministry in the worst of San Francisco's neighborhoods. Just last week I had a conversation with a man in the Tenderloin named Gary, who is racked with rheumatoid arthritis. Even with a cane he can barely walk, his limbs crippled with excruciating pain. He lives on the street or in cheap slum hotels. If my heart was pained for him I can only imagine how God's heart aches for Gary. He told me that he once had a close relationship with God, but now he admitted that he's "bitter at God" because he had let this happen to him. I told him I could relate to some of those same feelings.

Then came the moment of truth. Would I lay some "preacher talk" on him and spout some spiritual platitudes about God making everything better? Don't misunderstand me, I believe with all my heart that God heals and restores. I've seen him do it, and very much prefer things to turn out that way. But the thing is, I have no idea if he's going to do that with Gary or anyone else for that matter. Sometimes he gives us the "gift of faith" for some particular supernatural intervention. (I define this gift as "*The sudden surge of supernatural certainty for a certain situation.*") But unless he drops that supernatural certainty in my heart, I can't know how he'll do what he'll do or when he'll choose to do it. So I decided to just pray for him. It came out something like: "*Lord, please touch Gary today. If you could take some (or all) of his pain away right now, I'd be very grateful. He's admittedly bitter with you about his agony, and I don't think you blame him for that. He's confused about how a good God like you could be so remote, and I share some of his confusion. You don't always act like we'd hoped, but even though I'm perplexed by your apparent non-involvement, I believe you are involved with Gary, and love him*

*with all your heart. Please move in his life right now, and begin showing yourself to him through whatever means you choose. In Jesus' name. Amen."*

I know that's not the kind of preacher prayer to which you might've been accustomed, but it's the prayer I had that day. The next time I saw Gary, he was still dreadfully crippled, but he seemed a little less pained in his soul.

## **HE'S IN CONTROL, BUT NOT CONTROLLING**

There has been many times through the years that I've prayed for something over and over, and haven't seen the result I was anticipating.

Sometimes my prayers feel like I'm repeatedly and frantically pressing the "Call Nurse" button next to my hospital bed. "I'm in pain here! Where are you?" If she really were on the ball, wouldn't she have been here by now? Is she busy with someone else, on a break, or just ignoring me? As least she could come and tell me that she'll be back as soon as possible. But I get nothing.

We were singing a worship song during a church gathering last Sunday, a line of which stated that "God is in control." I paused to ruminate about that for a few minutes. On one hand, I think the song was right; he is "in control," I don't think, however that he *controls everything* (at least in the "particular" sense of it). I'm not implying that God is anything but *omnipotent*. His power is unlimited, but he did choose a system in which the way he would wield his unlimited power would be limited (for a limited period of time call human history). He is able to do anything, but he organized his world in such a way that his beloved would have their own choice to love him (or not) in return. He wouldn't force himself on his sons and daughters, but would wait for us to return his love. His "omnipotence" is not the same as "omni-control." He's *in charge* of everything, but he doesn't necessarily *control* everything that he's in charge of.

God knows every sparrow's life span and has our hairs all counted; but he didn't go so far as to say that he extends the lives of all birds or gives all bald men more hair. I'm not saying that he couldn't do those things if he wanted to. If a circumstance presented itself that required such an intervention, I suppose he would do it and not work up a sweat in the process.

**He's *in charge* of everything,  
but that doesn't necessarily  
mean he *controls* everything  
that he's in charge of.**

He's in control, he has control, but he doesn't exert total control in every circumstance. There's no doubt that he can and will control the events of history's final chapter, the ultimate outcome of his free will experiment. In the meantime, however (and believe me, some of these "times" can be pretty "mean"), he doesn't always intervene to prevent a disaster or even fix one once it occurs. Sometimes he chooses, what seems like, a "hands-off" approach with human affairs and lets our choices sort of take their course. He can, and often does, sweep up our broken pieces in order to create something better than we were before (Romans 8:28). I love it when he does that.

Sometimes he does regulate earthly circumstances in such a way that the sick are healed, abuse is prevented, and injury or death is averted. It's certainly appropriate to ask him to do just that. *"You have not because you ask not... Ask and you shall receive... According to your faith be it unto you... I am the Lord who heals you..."* But if and when he doesn't intervene like we were hoping, then we should expect his "peace" that helps us cope with the circumstances such as they are. *"Let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which passes understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4).

So, here's how I see it. I'm experiencing something contrary to the life of the Kingdom of God, so I ask him to intervene and exert some "control" over it – heal someone, prevent a disaster, provide for someone. But in this particular case, for whatever reason, he doesn't do the intervening (at least not the sort of intervention I was looking for). The healing doesn't come or the crisis becomes worse instead of better. So how am I to think about that? Where do I go from there?

My rule of thumb is to trust him to do one of a few things:

- 1) Sometimes I ask him for the faith to continue asking for the answer that I'm looking for. He often delays his interventions, and he has his reasons for it. The devil may be opposing the release of the resource, God may be waiting for some earthly circumstances to line up with his will, or he may just be building my faith and patience through the delay. So, I keep asking.
- 2) In the meantime, I wait for God's "peace" (Philippians 4) that helps me cope with his non-involvement (at least not the kind of involvement that I was hoping for). I may keep asking or I might not, but I bask in the kind of peace that's better than stressing out to figure it out.
- 3) If a solution is never provided for my problem, I trust him to *"work all these things together for some sort of good"* in my life or in the lives of others (Romans 8).

## **He can, and often does, sweep up our broken pieces in order to create something better than we were before...**

I'll say it again; I believe that God is *in control*, but in this world, he doesn't always *control every situation*. Do we ask him to exert control over a satanic purpose or an episode of human evil? Absolutely, yes! Unless he expressly asks you not to ask, always ask. (I often ask God to ask me to ask him for whatever he wants me to ask him for.) Sometimes the "Sometimes God" will do what we ask him to do, and sometimes he won't. Either way he's a mystery, don't you think?

If he does what we're asking him to do there's mystery. *"How did he do that? Why would he even notice me, let alone listen to my requests? What a mysterious God!"* If he doesn't grant our request, there's another mystery. *"Hmmm, I wonder what he's up to? I've seen him work a miracle in similar circumstances before, and yet this time he stands by and doesn't seem to do anything in particular. But I feel a peace that he's with me, and so I will trust him to work in these circumstances and in my heart, regardless of the outcome. What a mystery!"*

## **THE FRIGHTENING FREEDOM TO CHOOSE**

After watching a football game with a bunch of guys I was leaving my friend's house, when out of the blue I said to Dan, "*I hate free will!*" He wasn't aware that I was going through a horrific breakup with my wife, and so he was pretty shocked to hear his friend and pastor speak in such terms. But I meant it. I hated what human choice yielded, at least in *this* case.

One of God's choice mysteries is the *mystery of choice*. Whichever theological camp with which you identify, I think you'd have to admit that God did decide to take a radical risk in order to make relationship with us possible. It sure would've saved him (and us) a lot of trouble if he had made a bunch of robots programmed to love him, but it just wasn't his idea of *romance*. In the human mechanism he installed the "free-will software." He downloaded the power to choose or refuse a friendship with him. In order to create the possibility of a back-and-forth between us he made the dicey decision to gift us with choice. Otherwise, there could exist nothing that would even resemble genuine relationship. Unfortunately, we've sorely abused the gift and chosen our way over his.

At the same time that God gave us the ability to choose, he accepted a self-imposed limitation to his own control. Because he's a Lover, and wanted to share himself with potential reciprocal lovers, he was willing to risk the negative consequences of limiting his control over the wills of said lovers. The consequences to which I refer include allowing us to have our own way and reject him altogether – to love ourselves and other things more than we love him. He lets us take the wheel, and even allows us to end up in a place where his love can't reach us if we remain resolute in our choice to live independent of him. He gave us the frightening freedom to hurt one another (abuse our children, rape and oppress the weak, rob, enslave, and murder). Sometimes he steps in and prevents our atrocities, and sometimes he doesn't.

But if I understand his ways at all, even when God doesn't intervene to protect us or deliver us, he does identify with our pain and suffer with the sufferer. He doesn't always deliver us from our misery, but joins us in it. "*In all their distress he too was distressed*" (Isaiah 63:9). Could it be that while he waits to alleviate our pain, his pain is worse than ours? Imagine what he must feel as he stands next to every bed in every hospital. With a word, he could cure every patient, but he doesn't. Is it possible that it's more difficult for him to wait to bless us than it is for us to wait to be blessed? There's a mystery to his restrained passion. The mother suffers with her sick child. As she weeps while giving a painful injection to the baby in her arms, God holds us near while we hurt, and sheds a tear in the process.

I used to think that all suffering had a divine purpose, and that if God allowed a child's fatal accident or cancer to ravage a young father, that he had some reason for his non-involvement. Though this may sometimes be true, I can't say that this always explains God's "hands-off" policy. There's no doubt that God cares, as he is always "*close to the broken-hearted*." I'm sure that it disgusts him when a man beats his wife or a tsunami kills 100,000 of his beloved, but he doesn't always prevent such things from happening. When he doesn't prevent a disaster or address an atrocity, I'm not inclined to believe that there is always some sovereign plan that he previously concocted. Maybe there is, maybe not. Evil in the world can best be explained by the presence of evil people and their demons. In general, bad things happen because we live in a fallen world that hasn't gotten up yet.

**It sure would've saved him (and us) a lot of trouble**

## **if he had made a bunch of robots programmed to love him, but it just wasn't his idea of *romance*.**

Because he chooses to *persuade* more than *coerce* people, in the short-run, God doesn't always get his way. When he does get his way it's usually because he has *persuaded* someone to make a good choice. His interaction with us is person-to-person, not puppeteer-to-puppet. Because he seldom (if ever) forces his will on us, it's up to us whether or not to *be persuaded*.

Though God's will is going to be done *eventually* (on a universal level), it is often not done *immediately* (on a person-to-person level). Everything that he desires will be accomplished --- in the next world. But while we're still in *this world*, all that God wants in the present world is not always done.

- *Almost half of this world's inhabitants (3 billion people) live on less than \$2 a day...*
- *30,000 children die every day due to poverty... 210,000 a week... Close to 11 million each year...*
- *2.2 million of these children die simply because they aren't immunized...*
- *Of the 2.2 billion children in the world, 1 billion of them live in poverty...*
- *There are an estimated 27 million sex and labor slaves in the world today...*
- *One in three females in the U.S. will be sexually assaulted sometime in their lives...*

I'll go out on a limb here and assert that none of this is God's will! These things are not what God intended for the people he loves. He's obviously not getting his way in every corner of the earth in the short-term. He will ultimately have his way when this world's evil and suffering all will cease, when wars and tears and injustice are all alleviated. In the short-run though, within the parameters of this free-will experiment, his will isn't always done. If it were, he wouldn't have taught us to pray, "*Your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" He isn't "*willing that any should perish,*" and yet, because he gives us the option to, so many of us *do* perish. But help is on the way! Jesus is going to return to earth and return it to something better than it's ever been. He will take back the wheel of this careening vehicle someday and get it completely under his control.

Don't misunderstand me – I'm not saying that God is not "sovereign." Some people fear for God's honor if we claim that he doesn't sovereignly exert control over everything. But it was his sovereign prerogative to create a world in which his control would be limited in such a way that his creatures could choose for themselves. Willing to risk being rejected by the majority, his is an *adventurous sovereignty*, the kind that chooses to restrict the exercise of his own omnipotence. That he made beings with the power to say "No" to him might have been the most sovereign thing that God ever did. Someone suggested that if God wanted a world where a Mother Theresa were possible, at the same time he had to be willing to accept the possibility of an Adolf Hitler! He made us "for better or for worse," knowing that there would be a lot of *temporary worse* on the way to the *eventual better*.

In the meantime, he comforts those caught in the free-will whirlwind. When he doesn't interrupt evil, and people are shattered, he stays around to pick up the pieces. And with those broken pieces, he often creates a whole new magnificent mosaic. I once lived intact, with no fractures. In general, things went well for me, the fissures were hardly visible. I was flawed to be sure, but my defects were hidden by my skin. Eventually the cracks reached the surface and my

brokenness became obvious. When I fell apart my fragments were strewn about. That's when God, who though he had previously stood aside instead of intervening, his own heart throbbing for my pain, got involved, and began retrieving the shards – cunningly inserting them in new places. The reconfigured wreckage was being reshaped as an art form. An Artist's hand is putting me back together – but better!