

It Happens

Many people, particularly those of a strong religious faith, often have a problem with the whole idea of luck, the idea that things might just happen for no particular reason. Sure, they may talk about good and bad luck in a casual sort of way when referring to every day kinds of events, such as how lucky they were to find a parking space in Center City, but deep down inside they really don't believe that anything in this world ever happens purely by chance apart from God's will. For such people, there is simply no such thing as a true accident. For some, understanding even the death of a loved one as in some way God's will is preferable to thinking of it as an accident.

But there's a problem with that, for one of the things that science taught us over the course of the 20th century is just how big a role that chance does play in the natural world. The fact is that there are many things that happen in this world that, while statistically predictable, are not in any real sense determined. Yet despite the fact that this has been recognized for over a hundred years in the natural sciences, the church has never really come to grips with this reality in its theology, which is still largely rooted in a Newtonian understanding of the world in which every action is the direct and determined result of another, a very causal world. Because of this, there's a fundamental disjunction between the way we in the church talk about how things happen in the world, and the way that science does, a disjunction that has been very much to the detriment of the church and its ability to speak to the world around us.

I firmly believe that it behooves the church to come to grips with that fact, and to accept the reality that chance itself may be a part of God's created order, that chance may in fact be God's chosen means by which to accomplish God's ultimate ends in the world, that chance may even be the best and most efficient way to accomplish those ends. If the church were ever to get its mind around that idea, the idea that some things just happen, it would change the way we look at events in the world around us in some very important ways.

For one thing, it would caution us against reading too much meaning into the things that happen around us, particularly when it's no more than a handful of events that occur over a relatively short period of time in the greater scheme of things. In other words, when things seem to be going really well for us, we need to be very careful about leaping to the conclusion that our "success" must be a sign of God's favor or an indication of how smart we obviously must be. It could just be good luck, in which case we'd be well advised not to push our luck by beginning to think we're so smart that we can do anything, that there's nothing in fact that we can't do, or even worse, that we can do no wrong.

I think that's exactly what happened to King David. David was a uniquely gifted person who even as a child demonstrated remarkable physical courage and prowess, so it was certainly no accident that he grew up to be a remarkably successful warrior. But David was also lucky, lucky for one thing, in the time when he lived and reigned over Israel as king, because at that particular time Israel had no powerful enemies. Of course, there were the Philistines, and the Ammonites, and various other Canaanite tribes, but there was no Egypt or Babylon to contend with during David's life, since both of the two great empires on either side of Israel were in periods of internal disarray. So David never had to contend with either of them, or any other foe of that magnitude, so yes, he was a great warrior, but he was also lucky.

But David lost sight of that fact, as many successful people do, and he let his very real successes as king go to his head, and eventually began to act as if he could do no wrong. As so often happens when people begin to think like that, when he did do something wrong, when he did cross the line, he did something terrible. Terrible for the people involved, not least the man he had killed; terrible for his own family, which would ultimately tear itself apart over what David did; and in the end, terrible for the nation, his actions unleashing forces that would over the course of several generations tear Israel apart in a series of bitter civil wars.

The account found in *2 Samuel* of what happened that day in Jerusalem is among the most dramatic and yet understated passages in all the Bible. It was the spring of the year, the time—the author makes a point of saying—when kings go off to war, but not David. No, that spring David sent Joab and the armies of Israel off to fight, but he stayed behind in Jerusalem, and somehow you know right away this isn't going to end well. Sure enough, it happened late one afternoon, when David got out of bed—late one afternoon!—and went for a walk on the roof of his palace, and spied from his vantage point a beautiful woman bathing down below. David, who'd always had an eye for the women, quickly sent an underling to find out who she was.

Turns out, he reported to David, her name was Bathsheba, and she was married to one of David's men, one named Uriah the Hittite, a man who has been at David's side for years. So David knew who she was, and yet still sent for her, and sure enough, Bathsheba ended up pregnant, an embarrassing fact since her husband was off fighting a war, off fighting David's war. What followed is simply breathtaking in extent of the utter callousness of David's action, and all this from a man widely celebrated as an exemplar of piety.

Scrambling to cover up his actions, David ordered Joab to send Uriah home, asked Uriah when he arrived how everything was going, and then sent him home to his wife, which of course was the real point of the whole charade in the first place, since David needed to cover his tracks. But his plan didn't work, and why not? Because Uriah wouldn't go home. Not because he didn't want to go home, but because he was a soldier, and as long as his fellow soldiers were still off fighting, he was not about to indulge himself by going home, so he just bedded down at the gate of the palace, a fact that is duly reported to David. The next day when David asked Uriah why on earth he hadn't gone home, Uriah, clearly appalled at the very idea, said there was no way

he'd go home, that he wouldn't even think of doing such a thing, not with his fellow soldiers in the field, his own integrity here standing in obvious contrast with David's utter lack of the same.

David tried one last time to get Uriah to go home by inviting him to dinner at the palace where he got Uriah drunk in the hope that alcohol would override his scruples against going home, but no such luck. Again, Uriah bedded down at the gates of the palace with the servants, and at this point, David, having given up on ever getting Uriah to go home to Bathsheba, resolved to solve the problem once and for all. He sat down and wrote a letter to Joab, the commander of David's army, instructing him to put Uriah in a position where he's sure to be killed, as indeed, he is. But the most chilling part of this whole story, a story that is told utterly without affect as if recording just another day in the life of David, the most chilling thing of all is that David sent the letter ordering Uriah's death by the hand of Uriah himself. Unbelievable! How did it all come to this? How could anyone so renowned for his piety stoop to such depths? Because David, intoxicated by his own success, came to think he could do anything, he could do no wrong.

Contrast this appalling story of the tragic fall of a great, though profoundly flawed man, with the example of the apostle Paul, a man who in many respects was very much like David. They were both loners who seemed most comfortable by themselves and never much liked taking orders from anyone else. Both were extremely accomplished and achieved a great deal of success over the course of their lives. Both died very famous men. Both had quite an ego, confident in their own views and not very tolerant of criticism or even other opinions, and not surprisingly, for that very reason, both generated a good deal of resentment on the part of others with whom they had dealings. But for all their similarities, there was one big difference. That was the fact that David lived largely in the moment, lived for the day, whereas for Paul, all that really mattered was the long run, and in the end, that one difference made all the difference in the world in the legacy they left behind.

You see, unlike David, Paul never put much stock in what was happening around him at any given time. He never got too elated by his successes, and never too discouraged by his many failures. No, for him, with his eyes firmly fixed on the long term, even the suffering that so often came his way—the frequent beatings, numerous imprisonments, even in the end death itself—all that was as nothing compared to the glory that was to be revealed in the fullness of time. So neither the suffering, nor the success, ever went to Paul's head. To him that was just stuff that happened in the course of things and it really didn't mean all that much. All that really mattered was the big picture, the work that God was doing through the Holy Spirit, the work that was taking place in the world all around him, the work to which he and many others contributed in their own small ways, the work that would be revealed in due time, that is to say, in God's time. Everything else—and in particular all those tokens of worldly success and the adulation that followed in its wake—all that was just so much sound and fury, signifying nothing.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*