

# *Sometimes Life just isn't fair!*

(Sermon by Craig E. Tenke November 27, 2005)

You do the right thing, the smart thing, the honest thing, the fair thing, and where do you get? You embrace the hand that God dealt you, only to find that the game you've carefully and faithfully prepared for isn't the one you really have to play, and the stakes are somehow higher than you ever expected. We speak of a God of infinite mercy, and still we find ourselves or our loved ones crushed under burdens so harsh that no reasonable person could ever be expected to survive or make it out intact. What does life do to us? What do we give thanks for, and what do we pray to be delivered from? What is chance? What is purpose?

I confess that back when I was a teenager, I knew so much more than I do today. I knew exactly what I wanted to do for a career, as well as just what was important and what wasn't. Life was a challenging at times, but not really all that confusing. You see, I knew that you can do anything you set your mind to. My understanding of scripture was sharp, but selective, focusing on the life, dedication, promise, hope, and salvation of Christ. It seemed fine to ignore the harsh and arbitrary aspects of the God of the Torah. Ours was the God of Love, the God of Justice, the God of Peace! The faithful *never* risked the wailing and gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness, and I just didn't *get* the story of Job. Yet, even then, I knew that for *some* people, all choices seem to be *bad* ones. Somehow, I guess they didn't *really want* to be successful, or healthy, or happy... except for some sick people... or people in far-away lands... and maybe some others out there somewhere. Well, luckily for me, these exceptions to my worldview were always out of the American mainstream: the ignorant, the poor, the faithless. Life has humbled me a bit since then. In some very small way, I've found myself walking in shoes that I never expected to. Sometimes I've had to prioritize choices that are all unacceptable. I've learned not to grimace when it's long past time to raise the bar, but I only hear the clatter and the thud of the bar falling in the sand.

I'm a scientist. I automatically question everything to get an objective look at things. The scientific method is like a machine driven by questions and observations. Over the last 500 years, science has proven itself to be a useful tool for understanding, interpreting and controlling the world we live in.

You don't have to be a scientist to recognize that it's all but impossible to be **completely** objective, particularly when you're trying to look at yourself, your family, your values, or your beliefs. Whenever you try to be objective - to look at yourself through the lenses of someone else's eyes, as it were - the tint of your own mood, the undercurrent of your own expectations and values, your politics, and even the very fabric of your personality distort what you see. Indeed, even the scientific method tends to fail when we use it to study ourselves. For example, many centuries after Newton and Galileo demonstrated that these methods can help us understand the physical universe, there are still some very simple questions about the common biology of all plants and animals on earth that find their way into the political arena, completely out of their scientific context. So it's not at all surprising that when you get even closer, into our very hearts and minds, that the fundamental questions have **haven't yet been phrased** scientifically. In fact, so far there's no evidence that the scientific method **can** be used in our search for personal meaning and purpose. It's just the wrong tool!

So **is** life unfair? **Is** life unjust? Exactly where **are** we in our search for meaning and purpose? There are a number of distinct ways of looking at the world, even though we generally use them in balance. I'll identify three of these perspectives. The first one is a very human, very American view: **All is freedom**. Freedom is not a privilege, but a God-given right to control our own lives and destiny. At the opposite extreme is the view that **everything occurs by chance**. We have no more control over **anything** than does the dust blowing in the wind. Then there's the equally extreme view of the faithful under fire: **Everything is a part of God's plan**.

**Each** of these perspectives can be helpful at times. The notion of freedom and personal control is great when things are going great, because feeling that we are personally responsible for our successes makes us feel better about ourselves, which makes us more enthusiastic about doing more, living more, and accomplishing more. However, if you **really** believe that **everything** is doable, you may be a little bit out of touch with your own limitations. Moreover, when things are bad, where does the buck stop? If you run out of steam dealing with the problems of life, how do you get started again. In contrast, feeling that everything happens by chance can protect you from feeling persecuted during the bad times or guilty during the good ones, but it's hard for most people to maintain any interest or enthusiasm in world-wide coin toss. It's hard **not** to feel disconnected, detached or depressed if everything is arbitrary.

For the most part, seeing all of the experiences of life as a part of God's eternal plan *is* the refuge of the faithful. However, even a trust in God can be bad if you continuously let God make all of your decisions for you. In fact, this isn't trust at all, but an excuse for *not* living your life faithfully. Remember, any image of God that leads to *faithlessness* is really worshiping an idolatrous false god - no matter whose name you invoke!

What's right and what's *wrong* with these perspectives *defines* the borders between the human and the profane, the healthy and the diseased. Being realistic or being happy or being faithful at the expense of everything else isn't really being well-adjusted. Even a pragmatist may need a dash of delusion to build up motivation to start an overwhelmingly difficult task. It's doable, it's worth it, but the risks and challenges may go so far beyond personal experience that it requires faith and hope.

According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the entire universe is like a windup clock, always running down. Energy is released from its stores. Things unravel and disorganize, going from the precise and predictable to the unpredictable and random. This observation is called a Law because it's seen over and over in different forms, but its implications depend on the details. On a local scale, complex things *are* assembled out of loose, disconnected materials. *We humans* are a great example of this! We live on the knife edge between purpose and chance, order and chaos. So what about the equations? Are they that far off? No, it's just that in the context of an enormous system, biology represents a local backcurrent, a riptide along an enormous beach, if you will. Life *is* creation. The world's clock rules over us, and the purpose of God over it all. In Ecclesiastes, the preacher says, "For everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven." This awareness and awe at the intricate and improbable way that our living world has been assembled is *fundamental* to *my own* faith - but *please don't* confuse it with the new American pseudoscience called "Intelligent Design" that you've probably heard of.

So what is chance? As a neuroscientist, I work with the concepts of chance and probability on a day-to-day basis. The so-called laws of probability are descriptive and comparative, a model for what you expect to find if everything else is controlled for. Without these models, it would be hard to provide convincing evidence for findings in many different fields, including medicine, economics, much of biology, and even physics. These models are good science because they makes specific predictions that can be tested. The results are interpretable as long as

you correctly understand what it is that you're controlling for. Unfortunately, the approach fails for individuals cases: whether it be the motion of a subatomic particle, a gas molecule, or a single moment in a person's life, the best a statistical model can do is to point to an average based on everyone else. This stuff seems very abstract - the kind of thing that's easy for a scientist to do. It all affects *everything*, yet *no particular* thing. It summarizes great *laws*, but *no lives*, yet alone our own.

If life were fair, would people suffer? Actually, suffering is so prevalent in human life that it's a kind of cornerstone for eastern religions. For them, the only way out the same suffering, over and over for all eternity, is a kind of dedication and stoical resignation to do good. In our western, secular culture, we *sometimes* understand that suffering and injustice for *a person* can be critical in the path to justice for a *people*. In the ethics of the Star Trek movie series, the spiritual, yet logical Vulcan culture uses a kind of math, seeking out the greatest good for the greatest number. At the Society for Neuroscience meeting two weeks ago, the Dalai Lama said something surprisingly similar when someone asked how a Buddhist could justify animal research. All of these notions imply that suffering may, at times, play a redemptive role. Of course, when *we* think of redemption, we think of *Christ!*

Probably the harshest and most cynical aspect of evolutionary theory is what's been called "the survival of the fittest," which is a catch-phrase for the process of natural selection. Curiously, in one sense, this harsh view of the world is scriptural. On many occasions, Jesus gives us very clear examples of how we *must* use our talents and skills for the glory of God. Those who *have* will get *more*. Those who aren't *productive* will *lose* what little they have. Yet the moral laws that we generally consider to be the highest and best *aren't* based on *personal* survival. Mankind is also altruistic, compassionate, and giving, all of which help our species survive. The Bible extends this as a personal mandate to *each individual* and *expands it to eternity* from the lifespan of an individual. In Matthew 25, Jesus says of the final judgement:

Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when

did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'

He then goes on to say that those at the *left* hand were condemned, but they were *clueless to the end*.

So what is God's purpose for us in life? Could it be that what seems harsh at first makes some kind of sense if we stand back from ourselves a bit? The Lectionary Old Testament selection for today concludes with:

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Jeremiah uses this same metaphor:

So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? says the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Where are *we* as individuals, families and nations in this metaphor? How are we to *see* our trials and tribulations on earth??? In his letter to the Romans, Paul says:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

There can also be comfort and security in our *faith itself*, something that can feed us during the trials of our lives.

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Deut. 6: 4-9

I go back to this rigid-sounding doctrine for a reason that is much more practical than you might think. There is a direct progression from the harsh, punitive laws of the Torah, through the development of talents for the greater common good, and into true faith in and dedication to God. Faith provides a living alternative to despair or stoicism when we are faced with difficulties. Christ himself quoted scriptures in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed. He also spoke them in his last words on the cross.

In Matthew 12, Jesus makes this somewhat peculiar statement:

"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. So shall it be also with this evil generation."

You see, it *doesn't matter* how clean, ready, and even pure you manage to make your heart, mind and soul. If you leave a your house vacant and *unused*, you're pretty likely to come back to find something very, very bad. On the other hand, when your heart is *filled* with love of God and compassion for man, there's no room for hatred and cruelty to take hold. When you confidently pray the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, how can evil overtake you? If you're filled with the Holy Spirit, what is there to fear?

So prayer, meditation, and dedication can help protect against evil and disorder. In the book of Mark, an epileptic who the disciples couldn't cure was brought to Jesus. In those days, they called him "possessed." Jesus answered them,

"O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him; and when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by

the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." *Mark9:17-29*

As a neuroscientist, I'm certainly not going to say that we should replace modern medicine with prayer, but this passage *does* say something important about what *we* may be *missing* as we try to do Christ's work in the world. We often hear about the power of prayer, yet, occasional news story to the contrary, prayer is something that's as unstudyable by science as faith itself. In part, this is because we use the word prayer for different things in different contexts. To Christians in general and Protestants in particular, prayer tends to imply a verbal conversation that includes requests and statements of respect or dedication. For a number of religions, prayer can also include chants. Meditation is often a form of prayer, although not always. Hymns, dance, and even "prayer-walking" can serve as prayer. The one thing that all of these things have in common is that they are used to align ourselves with God, to adapt and conform ourselves to God's will, and not the other way around.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

There is a world of difference between the wish-like prayer of a child who says, “God, please let me have a pony for my birthday!” and a faithful prayer of thanksgiving from a terminal patient who closes by saying, “Thy will be done.” From the latter, we *all* gain dignity and strength.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

*Rev 21*

May the Lord show us mercy, grant us wisdom, and bring us peace.

