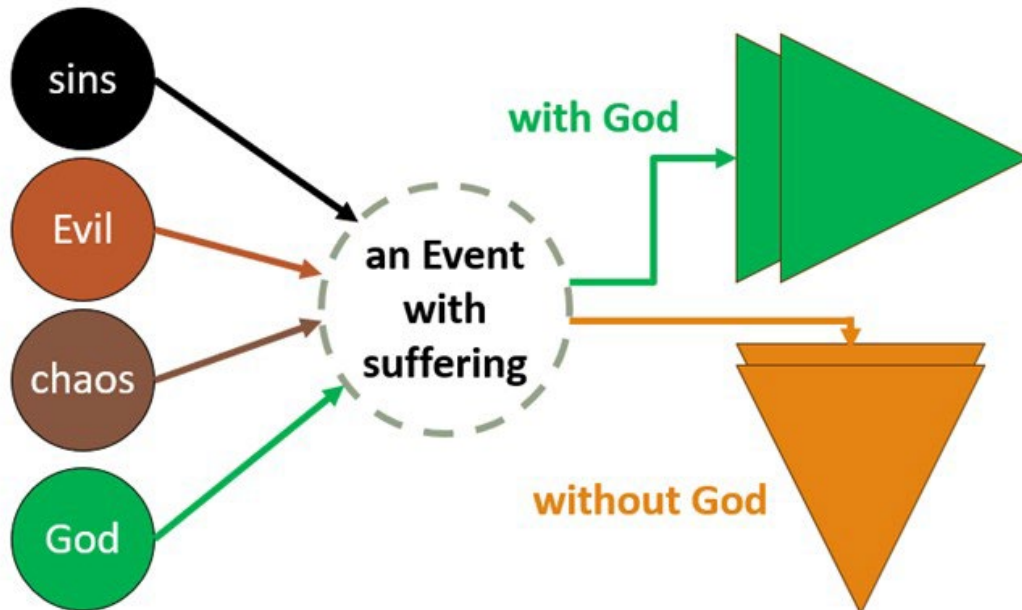


(3) Praying to the God who works in all things

Summary: the basics of a Spence view of God's Ongoing Work in our World

We cannot declare that evil will not come our way, nor can we say that evil is not evil for us. What we can, and do, affirm is that “in all things God works for the blessing of those who continue to hold his hand in the darkness rather than turn from him in fear and disappointment.”



1. God Creates and Governs his Creation in Love. (The open, embracing, being embraced, and making room for the other, kind of Trinitarian love that is never coercive.) Therefore, it is genuine love, not will, that determines how God acts.
2. God acts towards us relationally, and always chooses to act in a way consistent with his character, which is genuine love. In making humans in his own image, God has ensured that we have the genuine capacity to accept or reject love (for love is always open, never coercive).
3. God's will is not the cause of all events in the world. Sin, Evil and chaos in the world is neither the expression of a singular prevailing will nor of clashing wills, but the consequence of those who resist God's offer of love.
4. The end of the biblical narrative describes the time when the universe is set to right because God is “at home with” his creation and creatures (see, e.g., Revelation 21:3-4).
 “I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.’”
5. This diagram emphasises “outcome” rather than “origin” or, even, the “event” itself, because the impact of the event for good or ill is determined by our ongoing lived experience. Even when our suffering arises from evil or someone else's sin, the final impact of it need not be destructive. God can work in all things to achieve good things for us. This does not negate the evilness of evil nor the sinfulness of sin; it does mean that God has the final word in our lives. God is not just Creator of the past; he is continually re-creating good things for us. In the words of Bill Gaither,
*Something beautiful, something good
 All my confusion, He understood
 All I had to offer Him, was brokenness and strife
 But he made something beautiful of my life*

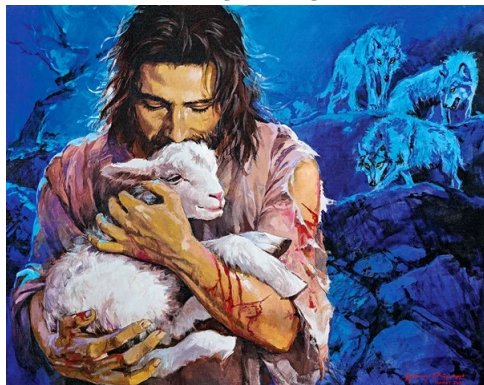
6. We cannot change the past, but we can shape the influence of the past on our present. It is how we respond and live in the “new now” that determines which life we lead. There is no meticulous providence (i.e., God’s will determining the causes and outcomes of our lives), but God continues to be present and to work in all things for the good of his people.
7. The Bible is filled with examples of God’s people who are upset with God because they take the experience of suffering and evil as evidence that God is failing to love them. However, it is God’s ongoing care of us, his promise that we will never walk alone, and his assurance that he knows where we are going that undergirds our faith in him. As the Apostle Paul says (Romans 8:35-39),
*Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ...No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.
 I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*
8. The future is open; what we choose to do matters. We live in the possibilities of the future; our lives are not determined by fixed decrees or chaos. Our lives are determined by our openness to God’s love.
9. God is Sovereign, even when his will is not done. There are risks, but the ultimate outcomes are not uncertain and the immediate outcomes of even the most terrible events contain blessings when we walk with God.

CASE STUDY 1:

The Trials of Herry Priyonggo

(240206 *Christianity Today*)

Herry Priyonggo, from an impoverished Indonesian family, was successfully supporting his family from the age of 16 through his painting of movie posters. At the age of 22, Herry developed a debilitating tremor in his right hand that made him unable to work. He pleaded for healing from God, but his prayers went unanswered. Disheartened, he chose to keep his faith in God. He continues to pray for healing, seeks medical help, and suffers from periods of depression. At the same time, he has become Herry found comfort in spiritual music, which has become a successful ministry or performance and song writing.



CASE STUDY 2:

The Trials of the Rev Julie Nicolson

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-33378848>)



Julie Nicolson said she could not forgive bomber Mohammad Sidique Khan

Rev Julie Nicolson is an English minister whose daughter, Jenny, was killed in the London terrorist bombings in 2005. She quit her ministry because she could not overcome her anger and her refusal to forgive those who had killed Jenny. She has written a book, which has been turned into a 2015 TV movie, about her experiences. She has not re-joined the church.

The Bishop of Bristol, the Rt Rev Mike Hill, said he understood her decision. "I think these situations in life shake the faith of everybody because they immediately bring into focus the why question. There's no simple Band-Aid answer to that," he said.

This moves us to the Monday Morning Questions:

When Herry prayed for healing and Julie prayed for her daughter's safety, what did they expect from God and what was God doing in answer to their prayers?

How should we pray for Herry and Julie?

How do we pray for ourselves and our families?

And, why despite biblical assurances does God rarely intervene supranaturally in our lives?

The Invitation to Prayer

1. Erickson outlines the dilemma from the Calvinist perspective, “On the one hand, if prayer has any affect upon what happens, then it seems that God’s plan was not fixed in the first place... On the other hand, if God’s plan is established and he will do what He is going to do, then does it matter whether we pray?”
 2. Erickson concludes, “We can pray, knowing that God hears and acts upon our prayers. It appears from Scripture that in many cases God works in a sort of partnership with humans. God does not act if humans do not play their part.” However, Erickson still believes that everything that happens happens only because it is part of God’s secret will.
 - 2.1. So, Erickson theorises, “When God wills the end, he also wills the means. Thus, prayer does not change what he has proposed to do. It is the means by which he accomplishes his end. It is vital, then, that prayer be uttered, for without it the desired result will not come to pass... While prayer does not change God, it brings the Christian in line with God’s purposes, thus enabling God to accomplish those purposes... Prayer is more than self-stimulation... But it is in large part a matter of creating in ourselves a right attitude with respect to God’s will.”
 - 2.2. “The believer can pray confidently, knowing that our wise and good God will give us, not necessarily what we ask for, but what is best.”
 3. This Calvinist framing of prayer seems out of step with the many invitations in Scripture to pray and the stories of God’s people wrestling with God in prayer that suggests prayer is genuine and relational. God is open to engaging his people in a real and significance way.
 - 3.1. God appears to welcome the intercessory prayers of Abraham and Moses.
 - 3.2. God wrestles with Jacob.
 - 3.3. The birth of Samuel (mother: Hannah).
 - 3.4. The Aaronic blessing.
 - 3.5. Prayers of Lament and of prophetic Challenge against God.
- IMPORTANT NOTE:** God answers the prayers of the non-Calvinist and of the Calvinist equally as an expression of God’s love for all his people. There is not theological test applied to our prayers to determine whether they are worthy of answering. God sees the heart.
4. Jesus is responsive to the “prayers” of those around him as well as encouraging his disciples to pray and to be persistent in prayer.
 - 4.1. “May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don’t let us yield to temptation but rescue us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:10-13).
 - 4.2. While the Lord’s Prayer can be seen as focused on God’s general providence, stories like The Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8) encourage persevering prayer for God’s miracles in our lives.
 5. Why do we pray?
 - 5.1. ...not to inform God of what he does not know.
 - 5.2. ...not to persuade God to actively care for us, our situation, or the situation of others, as if God was previously indifferent to our concerns.
 - 5.3. ...not to get God to do our will in our way.
 - 5.4. ...not to short-cut the process of living incarnationally in a world that suffers.

6. God is love, so of course God wants us to communicate freely, fully, and honestly all of our feelings and desires. (And, when we don't even know what those are – the Spirit of God groans for us.)
 - 6.1. Persistence in prayer is generally (or, always?) not a discipline, but rather an outpouring of our unresolved concerns. Our persistence stops when our concerns settle.
 - 6.2. Does there come a time when it is unhelpful to our relationship with God to continue to ask for what has not been given (consider Paul's desire for his "thorn in the flesh to be removed," 2 Cor 12:7)?
 - 6.3. All prayers that grow our relationship with God are truly answered.
7. Do our prayers for miracles often ask for God to do the impossible (or, that which is not consistent with God's love for all)?
 - 7.1. The God who loves us does not exercise coercive love over others, whom he loves, at our request. (Disney's, *The Eternals* (2023), includes a character, Druig, who can control and manipulate minds and is conflicted about allowing humans to war with one another; why allow them freedom when they clearly choose what will harm them?) The prayers of all politicians for electoral success go unanswered, not because God does not care about the outcome but because God won't manipulate the voters.
 - 7.2. What James calls "asking wrongly" (NRSV) is evidence of a love that seeks to constrain God to the narrow channel of our love, rather than allow ourselves to enter the broad channels of God's love for the whole world. (James 4:1-3)

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.
 - 7.3. God's people cannot choose to stand apart from the brokenness of this world and live in an Edenic paradise. For God enters incarnationally into our suffering world (that is, he exposes himself to the same kind of suffering and evil that all humans encounter) in order to bring healing and wholeness (i.e., redemption) to all.
8. Our prayers are not magical (that is, transactional) access to the power of God, but a loving path to a relationship with God. Prayer is a way to find God's presence in our now and to find his way to our what's next.
 - 8.1. Walking in the shadow of the Valley of Death with the Good Shepherd. Grief is reshaped by gratitude, and, thus, death is overcome, we become better people (more conformed to the image of Jesus), and the world becomes more good.
 - 8.2. Living righteously involves living in right relationships with God and with others.
9. Miracles are not God's common way of working in the world. By definition, miracles are unexpected and astonishing. Biblical miracles, generally, demonstrate the displacement of kingdoms of darkness by the kingdom of God or are signs pointing to the revelation of God.
10. Prayers on a global scale such as world peace, an end to hunger, good health and longevity, justice, an end to poverty, clean water, have all been answered already – the only thing that blocks the experiencing of it is human sinfulness (in particular, greed). Our prayers for these things are a challenge to us to hear God's heart and to follow the Jesus way.
11. In his preface to *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis writes, "I must add, too, the only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified, nor have I anything to offer my readers except my conviction that when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all." Amen.
 - 11.1. This is a fitting epilogue for any discussion of *The Problem of "Unanswered" Prayers*.

A Prayer from those who Pray

Good Shepherd, guardian of my life and soul, we find ourselves lost in the Valley of the Shadow of Death (Psalm 23:4). And we are afraid of the Evil and the suffering that has overcome us and those we love. We do not feel your presence with us in our time of trial.

We are in the pit of despair. We are entrapped by mud and mire unable to find the light. (Psalm 40:2)

We are in the Garden of Gethsemane and our spirit is in such agony that it is as if our life blood is ebbing from us. (Luke 22:44)

We are being crucified by all the enemies of heaven, and we feel forsaken by our God. (Mark 15:34)

In our distress and our fear, we cry out to you to destroy our enemies and wipe them out completely. (Psalm 59:13) Do not love our enemies or give mercy to those who persecute us. (Cf. Matthew 5:44)

In our pain and our suffering, We ask. We seek. We knock. Without ceasing! (Matthew 7:7) Give us our miracle now, end our suffering and the suffering of those we love, bring judgement upon our enemies and all those who defy you, so that all may know that we are your beloved children, the children of blessing.

...Yet

...Yet

You find us in the darkest valley. You lift us from the pit of despair. You minister to us in Gethsemane. You turn our Good Fridays into Easter Sundays.

You give us your presence. We are not alone!

You envelop us in your love. We are healed and restored!

You create again and again a world of hope and joy and thanksgiving! We find new life even as our old life ends.

Give us the courage to pray expectantly in our broken lives for your miraculous *shalom**. Give us the patience to wait expectantly for your miraculous *shalom* in all of its richness and glory. Give us the eyes to see the miracles in your *shalom* that we have faithfully prayed for. While we wait, give us a godly contentment through the strength of Jesus in our lives. (Philippians 4:11-14)

Give us thankful hearts and a song of praise for your loving presence that bring fresh mercies to us every morning. Great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:23)

We are but fragile clay jars; but we contain a great treasure for we have God's light shining in our hearts. (2 Corinthians 4:6-18) Great is our God – the Creator who was, and is, and is to come. (Revelation 4:8) Amen.

* God's *shalom* encompasses physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational wholeness; it draws its life-giving power from the now and future kingdom of God, and is the light that ends all the cold shadows that reach into our lives.