

## CHAPTER 3: THE GOD WHO GOES “ZAP”

“And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.” (I Kings 19:11b–12)

Certainly we would all agree that we need a way of speaking about what God is and does that is both sensible and faithful. This is one of the primary goals of this book. But before we can arrive at this we first have to clear the way by understanding what God isn't and doesn't. And it is neither consistent with our common sense nor in keeping with our Christian faith to speak of God as a God who goes “zap”. That is, it is neither sensible nor faithful to conceive of God as “meddling”, as intervening on specific occasions for specific purposes in the finite physical events of our world.

Many sensible and faithful people believe that God does exactly this, either on occasion or by controlling every particular thing that happens. Therefore it is incumbent upon me to show how this is inconsistent with our reason and our faith. This is a relatively simple matter in connection with our common sense. But the question of consistency with our Christian faith will lead us to confront the darker areas of life as we deal with the problem of suffering.

### Common Sense and the Zap

Let us return to our old friend the thunderstorm. Assuming that you agree that our common sense is that this phenomenon is to be explained by meteorology and not by referring to the wrath of God—why? Why do we think this way? Why do we not consult oracles as well as weathermen?

Aside from the sociological answer that we think this way because we have been taught to by our society, there is also an important principle at

work here. It is known in philosophy as the “principle of economy” or “Ockham’s razor”.<sup>1</sup> The principle is this: that any event or state of affairs should be explained in the simplest way possible, and that once you have explained it one way, you don’t go explaining it yet again by postulating other “deeper” causes for it.

“Simplest” explanation does not mean simple in the sense that it is simpler to say, “God caused the thunderstorm,” than it is to try to understand ionization and humidity and the like. Instead, we mean that we should first try to explain finite physical events by looking for finite physical causes, by looking to the kind of cause that we know exists and operates in our world. These natural and human causes are “simpler” than any supernatural causes we might suggest. Thus, for instance, if we can come up with natural physical causes sufficient to explain an event, then we need not and ought not to postulate magic, miracle, or mystery.

Likely, you would say that this is just common sense. Quite so. But this was not always the case. Furthermore, besides being aware that part of our common sense is endowed with the fancy philosophical name of “principle of economy” (which doesn’t really matter), it is important that we are aware of the principles of reasoning with which we operate so we can ensure our own consistency (which does matter).

Now, Ockham’s razor in hand, let us return to the thunderstorm. We explain it as the result of physical atmospheric conditions. This is sufficient. There is no room for Thor, no need to guess at the anger of God.

But suppose during this storm someone is struck by lightning and killed. When this happens a large number of us drop our razors. We seek another kind of explanation. We may talk about fate or the will of God.

If a tree is standing alone in a field and is struck by lightning we are satisfied with a simple explanation of physical causes. But if a person happens to stand in the middle of a field or take shelter under this tree during this same thunderstorm and is struck by lightning, many of us suddenly require a very different kind of explanation. When personal suffering is involved, and especially when a person dies, we need to feel that there is a purpose for this, that there is “more” of a reason than just mere happenstance or bad luck. Often we reassure ourselves with the belief that God is in control, so this must be God’s will, and so (we conclude) there must be a good reason for it. The greater the impact on our own life, the greater our need to feel this.

But electrical charges do not distinguish between a tree and a person, so if you can explain the tree getting struck by lightning in a simple way, then the same explanation will hold for the person—except you might wonder why they *didn’t* have enough sense to come in out of the rain—

<sup>1</sup>William of Ockham was a 14th century philosopher/theologian who said, “*Essentia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*,” whatever that means, and who argued that theology should be reasonable and logical whereas faith is a matter of faith and ought to show in your way of life. To which I say, “Right on, brother William!”

even if this person is your spouse or your child. To look for another reason here, a "deeper" reason, is to try to find motives and goals in natural processes just as we would look for these in people.

Our common sense is that finite physical events have finite physical causes. If this is so, it does not make sense to suddenly postulate supernatural causes or metaphysical purposes when these events happen to have a strong impact on our lives. This is true whether we're speaking of storms or floods or fires or wars or automobile accidents. It does not make sense to ask "why" of a storm or a fire. It does not make sense to ask why your child died when hit by a ton of steel moving at sixty miles an hour. We cannot expect that the laws of nature would make an exception in our particular case, or that they have a particular goal in mind.

It does, of course, make sense to ask "why" when it comes to the actions of human beings. This is one of two major exceptions allowed by our common sense to the general rule that finite physical events are explainable by finite physical causes. In a way, this does not constitute an exception: it is still the *physical* action of a human that brings about a physical result. But it does make sense to look for purposes and motives in a way that is not true of natural phenomena, and the cause in which we are interested is likely to be found in the thinking or feeling of another person. We want to know why the assailant shot at us, not why a hammer detonates gunpowder or how this causes a lead projectile to travel at high speed.

The second major exception to the general rule that physical effects have physical causes is in the area of health and illness. We recognize that our mind and body are interconnected, and that a person's mental and emotional state can affect their physical health in a number of ways, and can even make a life-and-death difference under some conditions. One cannot get hepatitis without physical exposure to the virus, but we know that our recovery would depend in part on our own mental attitude. We also know that emotional stress or depression greatly increases our chances of developing a serious illness. The wise among us know that people really do die of broken hearts.

Our common sense is not tied to the purely mechanical. It definitely recognizes these two categories of possible non-physical causes for physical events. We shall address at a later point the question of how God may or may not act in connection with these two categories. However, with the possible exception of these two areas, we do explain finite physical events with finite physical causes. Therefore we must conclude that it is not consistent with our common sense to speak of God going "zap" in the physical world.

### Our Faith and the Zap

Neither is it in keeping with our Christian concept of a loving Deity to speak of God as acting this way.

It is possible to think of God intervening in worldly affairs and physical happenings according to two different models: as a constant cosmic string-puller who controls each and every event of any importance (either by causing it or by consciously allowing it to happen), or as an occasional meddler and zapper, limited (perhaps by self-restraint) to intervening in a certain number of instances.

The first of these two conceptions, that God exercises control over at least all those events that are important, is commonly the underlying assumption for those who believe there are "deeper" reasons or purposeful explanations for those events that cause us joy or sadness. Consequently we will address this idea first. The problem we confront here is really the problem of suffering, for it is our hurts for which we most need some sort of justification, some satisfying explanation. I call this the problem of:

### **Pain, Honesty, and Faith**

Pain, honesty, and faith. Separately, each one can be a problem for us. I know they have each been a problem for me. Together they have constituted a special problem. If you are neither blind nor self-deceived, together they constitute a special problem for you, too.

First, there is the problem of pain. At one time or another we are all hurt, and hurt badly, physically or emotionally or both. (I hope all your hurts are small ones. I doubt they will be.) And this presents a problem for us: how do we cope? Why did this happen to me? How do we make sense out of it?

Second, there is the problem of honesty. I mean honesty with yourself: you could also call it intellectual integrity. It means not denying what your eyes see or what your ears hear or what your heart feels or what your mind reasons. Even harder, it means not denying your eyes for the sake of your heart, or your ears for the sake of your mind, or either your mind or your heart for the sake of the other.

Third, there is faith. Perhaps if you do not bring in pain and honesty, if you do not insist that your faith face pain squarely and honestly, that it be consistent with what your mind reasons and your heart feels and your eyes see, then perhaps faith is no problem for you. But if we would have a faith that neither denies pain nor hides in dishonesty, then we must take a long, hard look at the fact of suffering. Let us begin by examining the desire we so often have for a justification or a "deeper" reason for our suffering.

### **"There Must Be A Reason"**

There must be a reason. When disaster strikes, when tragedy tears the normal fabric of our lives, we demand a reason. We demand to know

how this could happen, why it was allowed to take place. We want, and perhaps need, to know that there was a reason, that it was not merely senseless happenstance.

Why did the river overflow its banks? Why right here? Why weren't we warned? Why was our house washed away? Why did Uncle Harry die?

Sometimes it's enough to have the simple, causal, often mechanical answers that the razor allows as sufficient: the river overflowed because heavy storms dropped ten inches of rain in a forty-eight hour period just as the snow was melting. It flooded right here because of the contours of the valley. The weather service did issue warnings, but you refused to believe that the levee wouldn't hold, that this could really happen here. Your house washed away because that is the natural result of two fathoms of water flowing against a frame house. Uncle Harry died because he never learned how to swim and so couldn't make it through the water to safety.

Sometimes this kind of answer is adequate. When tragedy happens to someone else, when you're not caught up in the immediate effects, when neither you nor those close to you suffer any great personal loss, this kind of answer is probably all you need. When the same disaster strikes many others as well as you, when you do not feel singled out by it, this kind of answer may well eventually seem adequate.

The crunch comes when you are singled out for pain and suffering: when *your* family is struck with cancer, when *your* child is hit by a drunk driver, when *your* spouse has an emotional breakdown, when *you* are paralyzed from the waist down for life. When anything like this happens the kind of simple causal answers we gave above are likely to seem totally and obviously inadequate. We may ask, "Why?", and in fact we may scream, "Why?", but we are not interested in hearing about the limits of modern medicine or the inevitable result of two thousand pounds of steel impacting on skin and bones. To a large extent our cry of "Why?" is not a question at all, but rather a cry of protest and anger and anguish. To the extent that it *is* a question, we are asking, "Why me? Why did this happen to *me*?"

A couple of factors contribute to our feeling that this question of "Why?" is a legitimate one that demands more of an answer than can be provided by matter-of-fact physical causes. For one, we seem to have the feeling that well-being is normal, that it is to be expected. No matter how often we may speak of counting our blessings, we usually do take them for granted. Though we would deny it, we feel that life "owes" us well-being and even happiness. Therefore suffering is felt as unfair and unjust, and our question of "Why?" takes on a moral tone that seeks an answer that would show us purpose and justice.

We also often feel suffering as a punishment. The reason we feel this way relates back to this same belief that we deserve good fortune, and perhaps also to our childhood experiences of reward and punishment,

and to ideas about God doling out good and bad fortune alike. For whatever reason, suffering feels like punishment. And so we demand to know "Why?", though again this is more protest than question, for we know we haven't done anything monstrous enough to deserve to be singled out for this kind of horrible punishment.

But if we cannot explain this suffering as a deserved punishment, most of us still find unacceptable and unbearable the alternative explanation: that there is no deeper reason for our suffering, that it is after all just a matter of happenstance and bad luck, that it is (in a moral sense) senseless. We want to avoid this conclusion. If we cannot avoid it by accepting that suffering is deserved punishment, then we often try to avoid it by saying that suffering is for our own good, or for the good of the world. After all, God works in mysterious ways. As long as we know that God is good and just and in control, then we know that what happens is for the best, even though we may never understand just how or why.

If suffering is either deserved punishment or else is for the ultimate good, then it makes sense to us. It is acceptable to us. And the assertion that all suffering, however great, is one or the other makes eminent sense if you believe that God is good and omnipotent, and that God exercises this omnipotence to control events here on earth. I, myself, cannot believe this. It would be dishonest: dishonest with what my eyes have seen, with what my heart has felt, and with what my mind is able to reason. Nevertheless, it is a time-honored conviction that has been expressed since ancient times.

"The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked."

"What the wicked dreads will come upon him, but the desire of the righteous will be granted."

"The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short."

"The hope of the righteous ends in gladness, but the expectation of the wicked comes to nought."

"The Lord is a stronghold to him whose way is upright, but destruction to evildoers."

"The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not dwell in the land."

"Be assured an evil man will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will be delivered."

"No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble."

"In the path of righteousness is life, but the way of error leads to death."

"Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous."

"A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous."

"The wicked is overthrown through his evil-doing, but the righteous finds refuge through his integrity."

(Proverbs 10:3, 24, 27-30; 11:21; 12:21, 28; 13:21-22; 14:32)

The good are prosperous and happy; the wicked suffer for their wickedness. The Lord who controls the fortunes of human beings doles out good fortune and bad in just portions to those who deserve them. God rewards goodness with a long and happy life and punishes evil with misfortune and suffering.

One has to admit that this is a thoroughly satisfactory system. Who could complain about a world where the good are rewarded and the wicked punished? It is desirable on our part and commendable on God's part. It is everything you could want.

Of course, there is one fairly important problem with all this: the world just doesn't work this way. No matter how desirable and commendable, things just don't always work out according to this plan. You know this as well as I do. And in spite of the impression given by Proverbs many ancient Jews realized this too.

For a while any apparent inconsistencies in divine justice could be explained by making reference to miscreant ancestors. After all, had not the Lord said, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation"? (Exodus 20:5) So if you suffered some undeserved misfortune you could always figure that one of your eight great-grandparents had secretly performed some pernicious iniquity that was only now receiving proper retribution. Not that this would be likely to provide much personal comfort, but you could at least believe that this suffering was in fact deserved by your family and that the system of divine justice still prevailed.

But this sort of explanation could not endure the rise of individualism, the increasing sense of the worth of each individual for his or her own sake. The idea of one person suffering for the sins of another became an affront to people's sense of justice and individual responsibility, and the prophets denounced it:

The word of the Lord came to me again: "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine, the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die." (Ezekiel 18:1-4)

The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:20. See also Jeremiah 31:29-30)