

Two weeks ago we began to look at the reasons why God has given us the book of Revelation. In the face of incredible opposition and severe persecution, the early church needed to see the bigger picture. In fact, all of us need to understand the present in the light of the future. Last time we thought about how God is revealing in this book, that the church is advancing his Kingdom in the midst of a cosmic battle with evil..and some things must be, some battles must be fought, some things must take place even though they are not the will or desire of the Father's heart. Yet despite this, God is still sovereign. His ultimate purpose cannot be thwarted. Jesus is the true King of Kings and along with us His people, He will finally be victorious over every opposing power. This is the present seen in the light of the future. Let's go back to the opening verse of Revelation..

Revelation 1:1 NIV

[1] The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.

This is our key verse this morning. God is declaring what will happen in the future. That's plain enough. But how does God know this? For the last 2000 years Christians have puzzled over this and come to quite different conclusions. You might be thinking, 'Steve, what's the big deal, why does it matter?' ... but actually what you think about this will be subtly influencing how you see God and how you pray. And if you are believing wrong things it can paralyse your prayer life and even make you doubt that God loves you or that He's trustworthy. So please stay with me.. Here's a necessary 2 minute background...

Put very simply Christians have defended 3 very different ways of explaining how God can declare what will happen in the future. And they couldn't be more different! First option.. God knows what will happen because everything is working out according to his perfect design. In this view, God has a master plan, a blueprint and nothing can happen that's not in his plan. He either desires it or specifically permits it. In this view, the existence of the devil and all that he does is somehow encompassed within the will of God. This has been the predominant view in the western church since the time of Saint Augustine in the 4th century. Second option..There isn't a blueprint but God knows the future because He can simply see into the future- He can just look ahead to see what happens- a future that is fixed and unalterable. This has been a prominent view in the Eastern church when it became independent from the church in Rome. A strong case can be made that both of these options are influenced by pagan philosophy. Third option..there have been those who believe there is no blueprint and God doesn't see into the future either. The future in many ways is open and flexible. In this view, God relates to us in an ongoing dynamic way. He has decided to create a universe where He doesn't control everything. He is on the journey with us. So..When God declares what will happen, it's because of his ability to bring about what He says will happen or simply because He is certain that it will happen. This a more Hebrew, Old Testament way of seeing things. Probably , it's how Christians in the early church thought. It has been held by a minority of churches at times through history but I think it's fair to say that over the past few decades it has once again been gaining ground. In this view, we see the reality and significance of spiritual warfare: the devil pursues his own ambitions 100%, and he really does oppose the will of God.

Let's step back from all this for a moment...You don't need me to tell you that some people want nothing to do with God. For some, it's because they simply want to live their life their own way..they think they don't need God. But for others it's because they blame God for all the suffering in the world, for the suffering in their own life, or in the lives of those they love.

The well known actor Stephen Fry is quite outspoken and says that if he ever meets God he would say..

“How dare you, how dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right, it's utterly utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean- minded, stupid god who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain.”
And again..

“You can't just say there is a God because the world is beautiful. You have to account for bone cancer in children.”

To us who know God, and love God, and know that God loves us, this is quite distressing not to mention frustrating ! I loved the quote from the philosopher Nietzsche that Matt quoted a few weeks ago..”And those that were seen dancing were thought insane by those who could not hear the music.”

If you've discovered just how much God loves you, then you've heard the music. A song of love from the Ancient of Days. Like the character called Mack in the book *The Shack*, we are swept off our feet by this God of Love, by this Papa, this Abba Father, and we know we are totally loved, totally known, totally accepted and completely forgiven because of Jesus. There's another book that might intrigue you - *Mister God - This is Anna!* By Finn. With a foreword by the then Archbishop of Canterbury.. it is the remarkable true story of a 6 year old girl street urchin in the days when homeless children roamed the streets of London. Anna has an unshakable faith in Mister God as she calls him. And she knew that Mister God totally loved her. And her description of him i will never forget...she simply says “God is in my middle!” And that's it isn't it? This God of love sweeps us off our feet and comes to live in our middles. Forget the fancy language! He comes to live in our middle! This is what Rob was talking about on Pentecost Sunday. We come alive! We are swept up in the biggest hug in the universe, and joined with the life of God. We have heard the music and we dance. We dance. We experience the love of God. To us it seems obvious- God has powerfully demonstrated his love for us as Jesus dies in our place on the cross. What more could He do? And the world might think we're mad. But we dance. And we say to those like Stephen Fry. Can you not see? Why can't you hear the music? ...Why do you blame God, when He has created a world where we have freedom of choice? Why do you blame God, when our ancestors freely chose to rebel and assert their independence from God? Why do you blame God, when so much beauty remains in our fallen world that God could have removed? Why do you blame God, when so much of the suffering we experience is the result of sin?

Why do you blame God, when the devil has taken the authority that humans surrendered, and now uses it to cause sickness and pain?

Why do you say it's "not our fault"?

But sadly...when Christians defend the blueprint view, we only confirm the way that Stephen Fry sees the world.. When Christians say everything in the world is exactly as God wants it, when Christians say God has created the world the way it is, and despite appearances it is working out perfectly, everything is part of his blueprint, and yes, we know it's full of suffering and pain and children with bone cancer...but this is his perfect master plan, his ways are higher than our ways.. and we just have to accept and trust that he is wise and loving and that everything has a reason and all will end well. This remains the theology of large sections of the church, especially in Western Europe and America who believe in a blueprint view of God's sovereignty.

Is it just me, or is there something a bit off with this? Something that doesn't seem quite in line with what we know in our hearts to be God's character? Something that seems out of tune with the agape love of God as displayed in Jesus.

Remember, Jesus is the exact representation of the invisible God. If we want to know what God is like, then we need only look at Jesus!

Should Christians really be telling people that God is sovereignly controlling everything that happens!" .. Perhaps the god who has a blueprint is a smaller god than the God who is working out his purposes despite real opposition .

These 2 sermons are the hardest I've ever written. One way or another they've been at least 2 years in the making. At times it's seemed a subject too difficult to grapple with. But the fact is we need to be building on a right foundation, and if we have heard things that are not true, or not completely true, then we really should question them. I used to believe in a blueprint view. I know it's possible to argue quite convincingly for it. I know there are bible verses that seem to point toward it. I continue to love and respect those who believe it. But slowly I've moved away from it. I've realised there are other bible verses that seem to point away from it. That's the journey I've been on.

For years, some of us have heard it said, or read in books that God is in total control of everything ...that every tiny event that happens in the universe is something that is fulfilling part of God's eternal perfect blueprint plan. And at times I admit that can be a comforting thought-We take security in it: God is in control we say, and we think nothing can happen to us that isn't in his loving perfect master plan. But what about when something really bad does happen? If cancer strikes? If your daughter is abducted and raped. Isn't it then troubling to say God is in total control..because that means He is ultimately behind everything that happens..even the bad stuff..even Auschwitz..even the murder of children . It implies that either God actively planned or desired these things to happen, or at the least that he gave specific permission for them to happen. Those who believe this say we should just trust it's all working towards a glorious end. Preachers have preached it. Theologians have written books about it. Here's an example taken from a really popular book that's sold over 30 million copies..

“There is a Grand Designer..There is a master plan..God is pulling the strings...Regardless of the cause, none of your problems could happen without God’s permission. Everything that happens to a child of God is Father-filtered...Because God is sovereignly in control, accidents are just incidents in God’s good plan for you...God’s plan for your life involves all that happens to you- including your mistakes, your sins, and your hurts. It includes illness, debt, disasters, divorce, and death of loved ones.” Rick Warren - The Purpose Driven Life.

Gulp. What? God’s plan for my life includes all my sins and mistakes. It includes illness and disaster. So, if I’m ill it’s because God either desires that I’m ill or He has given specific permission for it! Gulp! It includes my divorce if it happens. It includes the death of people I love. Is this really how Jesus is at work in my life? Is this how Aslan shows his love and care to Lucy? John Piper is another influential author who agrees with this blueprint view...he says

“Everybody who dies, dies because God wills that they die. God decides when your last heart beat will be, and whether it ends in cancer or a bullet wound.” John Piper recording from podcast Q&A Feb 27, 2010

In other words God is sovereignly controlling everything. When Cain murdered Abel, the very first murder recorded in the bible, according to this view, it was really God pulling the strings. Apparently it was God deciding that it was Abel’s time to die.

Another writer takes things to a logical conclusion when she says that it's a sign of Christian maturity and faith when you can thank God when something evil happens because God must have a good reason for allowing it. So if your child develops bone cancer, according to this view, a mature Christian will whole heartedly thank God because the evil is just God’s good purposes being worked out. Gulp! What? Thanking God for evil? Really? I don't think so! Did Jesus model this? Did Jesus ever thank his Father for the evil he encountered? No He did not! So maybe there’s something missing from this blueprint view..something a bit skewed..perhaps it’s not the total picture..

As I said earlier, not all Christians think in this way. Neither seemingly did God’s people in OT times. There is much evidence in the OT that God isn't controlling everything and that the future isn't totally fixed or pre-decided. The people of Israel saw Yahweh as the One true God they genuinely interacted with and who was dynamically involved with them in the unfolding of events. In some extraordinary way they believed they were on a journey with him. And it might shock us to realise that even if God declared that something was going to happen, they thought it was quite possibly open to negotiation, and not part of a totally decided future. An example would be in the life of King Hezekiah.

2 Kings 20:1-6 NIV

[1] In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, “This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.” [2] Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, [3] “Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. [4] Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: [5] “Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now

you will go up to the temple of the Lord. [6] I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.' ”

God says in verse 1.. you are going to die..you will not recover. Why would God say that if he already saw into the future of his blueprint plan and knew that he would recover? Was God lying? No, God cannot lie. Ever. Hezekiah knew that God doesn't lie. If God said He was about to do something it was He really was about to do that thing. But Hezekiah was one of many OT characters who thought that despite what Yahweh said would happen or what he was about to do, it was just possibly negotiable. So Hezekiah cries out to God, and God apparently changes his mind and sends Isaiah back to him: in this case, prayer and intercession have had a profound effect..the future as described by God has been changed. There are many other examples in the OT where God declares that something is going to happen, usually in judgment, but then He changes his mind, He responds to intercession, for example there are times when Abraham and Moses pray..they cry out to God..and some impending disaster or judgement is averted.

When the people of Israel make a golden calf and worship it, God is angry and says He will destroy all of them and start over with a new people. But Moses intercedes. Then we read..

Exodus 32:14 NLT

[14] So the LORD changed his mind about the terrible disaster he had threatened to bring on his people.

We start to ask, if God has a perfect blueprint plan, then how can He really change his mind?

The prophet Jonah tells the people of Nineveh that the judgment of God will fall on them. He says “40 more days and the city of Nineveh will be overthrown” . But the people of Nineveh repent. And the judgment God says would fall does not fall. The future seems at times conditional on what we do, the decisions we make and how we pray.

You might be thinking... 'doesn't it say somewhere that God doesn't change his mind?' Good point. Let's look at that..Perhaps the best known passage is..

1 Samuel 15:27-29 NIV

[27] As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. [28] Samuel said to him, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors---to one better than you. [29] He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.”

Samuel is repeating God's words recorded in the book of Numbers. The context in both cases is that God is not like man that He should ever need to repent or change his mind because he has lied. God is not a liar unlike sinful man. God always speaks truthfully. 1 Samuel 15 both begins and ends with the statement that God regretted making Saul king...or literally repented or changed his mind about making Saul king. So the statement that God does not change his mind comes

sandwiched between 2 statements that say He has changed his mind. The conclusion then is that He never changes his mind like a man does or needs to because he has been false or lied. And here's an often overlooked passage in Hosea 11
Hosea 11:8-9 NIV

[8] "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. [9] I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man---the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities.

Admah and Zeboyim are the cities of the plain that were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah. Here God is saying that He has changed his mind about letting judgment continue to fall on Ephraim. And the reason is startling...for He is God and not like man..He has changed his mind because He is not like man who will not repent...He has changed his mind because his love and compassion are so great that they overcome his anger and subdue his desire to see justice and judgment fall. This verse is actually saying that God changes his mind because he not like us..he is love and kindness and compassion and desires reconciliation above judgment.

What can we say then? Taken together the scriptures seem to say that God does indeed sometimes change his mind, but never because He is like us..never because He needs to repent of a lie. If He changes his mind it's because He is so much better than us, He is full of love and compassion. He is 100% good all the time.

So, if God can genuinely change his mind, we have reason to doubt that the future is all fixed and unalterable.

Another theme found in the OT is the way God often expresses surprise at what happens. How can God ever be surprised if He always can see ahead into a fixed unalterable future? Maybe we shouldn't just dismiss this in the way defenders of the blueprint say we should...

Zephaniah 3:7 NIV

[7] Of Jerusalem I thought, 'Surely you will fear me and accept correction!' Then her place of refuge would not be destroyed, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.

God is surprised that the inhabitants of Jerusalem did not repent. He expected them to. How could God be surprised if he sees the future in every detail?

Jeremiah 3:19-20 NIV

[19] "I myself said, " 'How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.' I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me. [20] But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me," declares the Lord.

Once again, God is saying I thought..I thought you would call me Father..but instead you turned away! ...How could God truthfully say that if he sees into the future and already knew how things would turn out...

Genesis 6:5-6 NIV

[5] The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. [6] The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.

Again, How could God regret making mankind and be genuinely sad if he really knew in advance what would happen or it was all part of his plan?

So, in this Hebrew OT way of understanding, it seems the future may not all be fixed and unalterable. Some things might possibly be negotiable. But the people of Israel also knew some things were not negotiable. If God makes a promise He will never break it. If God makes a covenant, He will always be faithful to his side of it. God declares these things about the future and will bring them to pass and they are not negotiable. He declares what will happen before it happens..Think of all the promises God has made..

So..When Abraham and Sarah are very old, God promises that Sarah will have her first baby! And she does! God promises that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as grains of sand on the seashore- and they are! Jeremiah declares that a day will come when God makes a new covenant with his people, and write his law on their hearts and place it in their minds, and in Jesus that day has come. The prophet Joel promised that a day will come when the Holy Spirit will be poured out on all flesh, and at Pentecost that day came! Jesus said that he would come back again, and one day he will! These things were not and are not negotiable. God declares what will happen, He promises what will happen, and his promises are not negotiable, He does not lie. He never breaks his promise. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And that day will come! One day Jesus will be seated as the Judge of all the earth. That day will come. And one day the new Jerusalem will descend from heaven to earth as God keeps his promise to come and live with his people. That day will come. So the future is not totally open to go this way or that. God will fulfil his promises.

So, in this partly open view of the future..many things may or may not happen. But some things most definitely will happen because God promises that they will and He does not lie.

Are your heads spinning? Let me try a silly illustration..

Suppose you pray and ask God to tell you the numbers of next weeks lottery draw. Now if God answered your prayer, and please call me if he does, then according to this partly open view of the future, the reason he knows the numbers is not because he sees the future before it happens, but because he is able to cause those numbers to be the ones that emerge as the balls whizz round in the machine! In other words.."I will make sure these are the 6 numbers that are drawn from the machine"

A New Testament example would be when Jesus tells Peter that before the cock crows that he would deny that he is a disciple of Jesus 3 times. How does Jesus know? Not because Jesus peeks into the future to see what happens next. But instead, Jesus knows Peter's heart. He knew that if challenged Peter would deny him. So, He simply made sure that 3

challenges came. Then he caused a cockerel to crow. If he can make a donkey speak in Hebrew he can make a cockerel crow! God declares what will happen, then without overruling our freedom, He brings it about. Only an Almighty God is big enough to work like this in our lives. Maybe the God of the blueprint is too small”.

You might be thinking..doesn't the bible say God foreknows some things? You're right. The verb to foreknow is the Greek prognostiko from where we get the word prognosis. Five times in the NT it says God foreknows something. And there are 2 things God foreknows. The first is the incarnation of Jesus. The second is the collective people of God who will spend eternity together with God. Both of these are compatible with God declaring in advance what He knows He will accomplish in the future. The eternal Son of God will become a human being. And God will make sure that a human community will share his eternal life. He doesn't need to see into the future to be able to declare this!

So let's go back to the start...

Revelation 1:1 NIV

[1] The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.

God is giving us the bigger picture. God is declaring some things about the future before they happen. Through the book of Revelation we can better understand the present in the light of the future. According to the warfare partly open view of the future, God declares what is to come not because He sees into a fixed unalterable future, or because everything is working out according to his blueprint. but because He is dynamically at work and big enough to ensure that what He says happens. His promises are not negotiable. At the same time God does not control everything. In fact..Some things must be despite them being the opposite of God's will or desire. Yet nothing can ultimately defeat God's loving purpose in creating a people who will be joined with him forever.

If you want to think more deeply about these things, I recommend Greg Boyd's book "Is God to blame?" Where he tackles the problem of evil and suffering from the perspective of a partly open warfare view.

Also this book by Jessica Kelley..Lord willing?.. where she wrestles with the idea of a blueprint in the midst of the trauma of having a 4 year old son with a brain tumour. It's an extraordinary book that will make you laugh and cry, but will fill you with hope too.

And if you really want to dig down deep into this subject and think through the warfare open view, then I recommend The God Who Risks by Prof. John Sanders

I want to leave you with 2 massive implications of this open warfare view.

First. God loves you. No ifs or buts. If something really bad happens in your life..something evil.. you can be sure this is not in God's plan for your life! Stuff happens..people get hurt. Sometimes good people get hurt, God's people. It doesn't come at us from God's hand. We live in a fallen world and we are subject to the kinds of trouble that everybody else faces. Plus, we have an enemy. God does not plan evil against us. Our God is not a God who breaks hearts, He is a God who heals broken

hearts. Amen? As we were thinking last week..if anything bad were to happen to Lucy, this would not be the will of Aslan. In fact He would be very very angry. If you've been hurt, you can be sure that God has been hurt too, And made angry.

The second implication is this: prayer really matters. If the future is in many ways open it means what we say, what we do and how and what we pray are vital in God's purposes as His Kingdom advances. God has given us a task and it's in many ways down to us! We've seen today how God invited the opinions of Abraham and Moses..He really wanted to know what they thought..and their intercession changed the future that God had said He would bring about. God values you in just the same way. He listens attentively to all that you ask. No matter if you feel insignificant , your prayers can literally change the world. The future of the people of Truro is not all pre-decided. Their destiny is a battleground. The weapons of our warfare can demolish strongholds. If we really understood how vital our prayers are to the wellbeing of everyone in our city, we would be on our knees much much more than we are right now. On the other hand, If we believe that God has a blueprint plan that will be fulfilled whatever, then we might think... what's the point? The blueprint idea can easily paralyse us. When illness strikes we will just passively accept it as part of God's perfect plan. We might even think we should thank God for this evil thing because He has a good reason for allowing it! But if the future is open, if we are in a real battle, then when illness strikes we should fight. Really fight. Stand against it. Don't accept it. Wage war. Tell the enemy to get lost. Speak health and wholeness in Jesus Name over our bodies. Prayer changes things. God doesn't always answer our prayers how we think He should. But if Jesus said we should pray "your kingdom come, your will be done" then we can be sure that no prayer like this is ever wasted! Amen?

