

GOD'S NON INTERVENTION
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I must tell you I have some apprehension as I come to you today because I couldn't get away from a theme that the Lord laid upon my heart for today. I'm not sure exactly why he laid it there. For one thing I don't have a text which is unusual for me, an expository preacher. I'm going to take a theme and the entire book of Acts is going to be my text.

The topic is "God's Non ~~Intervention~~ Intervention." The book of Acts begins with a marvelous release. A release of God's people, a release of the message of the gospel, a release which scatters the messengers of the gospel all across the Mediterranean-Roman world. The book that begins with release ends in confinement. With Paul under house arrest for two whole years. The miracles that attend the opening chapters of the book seem to be less frequent toward the end. In fact 9 chapters of the book of Acts, the last 9, are devoted to Paul's circuitous journey to Rome in which he went east before he went west. Three years of steady reversal in his life in terms of confinement and incarceration. In fact more time is devoted by Luke to this epoch in Paul's life than all three missionary journeys put together. Which kind of strikes me that the record of the scripture may be telling us that God pays as much attention if not more attention to us when we are in distress as when we are in success.

As you look at the book of Acts of course you face this great drama of how the Holy Spirit moves the church from Jerusalem to Rome across cultures and countries, ethnicity and peoples in a three decade period of time. You read the book of Acts and you realize the Lord took the church a long, long way in that generation. I've been asking myself as we begin this new year and this new century where is the Lord taking us corporately, where is he taking us individually. I'm sure he has great journey for us all.

If I review God's action in building his church as recorded in Acts you will stumble across not only his action of interventions but you will also discover his action of non-intervention. I say that deliberately because sometimes we refer to the non intervention of God as inaction on his part. I would submit to you that the record of scripture is when God does not intervene it is also an aspect of his action. And his action and his inactions are companions to the expansion of his church and the deepening of faith of his believers. Of course as Pentecostals, Spirit filled people we naturally focus first and foremost on God's direct interventions. There are many. Without God's direct intervention, the church of Jesus Christ is not built. The gospel is not expanded and we as individual believers simply then become victims of living out our life by the determination of the naturalistic forces of cause and effect. But we see God's divine dramatic inventions through scripture and through the life time of the modern era of the Pentecostal movement.

For example in the book of Acts his interventions. He sends the Spirit, in his great dramatic starting intervention. He is the one who establishes the Cornelius connection which begins to bringing the gospel across the Judeo culture into a Gentile culture. It is he who intervenes on the road to Damascus to reveal himself in a splendid way to Saul of Tarsus. It is he who sends the tantalizing miracles in the book of Acts which release the gospel in new spheres of dimension. The healing of the man at the gate Beautiful, the death of Ananias and Sapphira which was surely an intervention which taught the church, Don't lie about small things.

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This is such a miracle that relates to the credibility of God's people. Can you imagine what would happen if the apostles had been telling a lie about the resurrection? If he's going to strike people dead for telling a half lie he's going to really be upset with people who tell a bald lie.

There's Peter's miraculous prison release. There's the blinding of Elymas, magician, the sorcerer. There's the healing of the man lame from birth at Lystra on the first missionary journey. On the second missionary journey there's the exorcism of the girl at Philippi. In Ephesus extraordinary miracles that happen. On the journey to Rome, Publius' father ill with high fever on the island of Malta. All direct interventions. There's the direct intervention of the launching of the first missionary journey where the Spirit says "Separate for me Paul and Barnabus." There's the critical juncture in the second missionary journey where at the western edge of Turkey having gone as far as the apostles could go without a direct revelation from God and not knowing where to go next. Except they knew where not to go, the Spirit comes to Paul and says, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

All these are examples of direct interventions, which build the church, without which we as the church and individual Christians do not go forward. All of us in our life I suspect have had occasion where we've had an experience of direct intervention of the Lord in a marvelous way. We should have had more than one of those if we've followed the Lord any degree of time.

My attention has been drawn for the day to the non-interventions – the flogging of the apostles (Acts 5:40) non intervention to prevent that. The martyrdom of Stephen and the subsequent persecution that resulted from that non intervention. Time and time again you see non intervention.

In order to group them I'll just call it non-intervention regarding the vulnerability of the apostle Paul. He escapes Damascus in his early Christian experience in a basket over the city wall. No miracles opening the gate of the city. Thank God the basket weaver had been diligent in his labor and not shoddy in his craftsmanship or we would have lost an apostle. Teaches us the value of doing mundane things well. There's his illness on his first missionary journey which he recites in Galatians – "You know it was because of bodily illness I first came to you." He prayed for healing but evidently it did not occur. There is his expulsion from the town on the first missionary journey. No intervention. In fact at Lystra he was pelted with rocks. There's his beating at Philippi. There's his arrest in Jerusalem. The subsequent two year imprisonment at Caesarea by the Sea. His shipwreck. He's washed up on the island then bit by a venomous snake. Then two years under house arrest in Rome. You find him saying words in Corinthians like great troubles, hardships, distress, beatings, etc. In 2 Corinthians 11 he talks about the continual danger he had faced.

But those non-interventions in regard to Paul's vulnerability don't yet even exhaust the list of God's non-interventions as we unfold the tale of the early church in the book of Acts. For example there's his non-intervention in disputes. There are three disputes in the book of Acts. Over the widows (Acts 6), over doctrine (Acts 15), between Paul and Barnabus over methodology in terms of whether or not to take John Mark. Not a single time does the Holy Spirit speak by sovereign voice.

That's primarily why in business meetings in the Pentecostal circles we do not typically permit prophetic words because our experience in scripture is that there are some things which the Holy Spirit has asked us to measure in a reasoned kind of a fashion. So the Spirit does not by direct

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intervention interject himself into the Acts 15 counsel or into the Acts 6 widow controversy telling them to straighten out and do things right and fly right. But lets the leadership and the people of God work through these things.

Of course there's the non-intervention in the death of James, chapter 12. Why is James taken and Peter released? What's going on?

Maybe you can identify with this. Maybe there's been times in your life, I know there's been times in mind, when God's intervention would have helped us. When we think it would have helped his church but in spite of our prayers, our pleas, and even our faith, God did not intervene. What's going on? How do we relate to it? How do we understand it?

I don't pretend to be able to answer this question exhaustively or to everyone's satisfaction but as I look through the book of Acts I find some clues in helping us understand what God may be up to in his action of non-intervention.

One thing, first, is this. God is preserving freedom, choice. This is the least emotionally satisfying aspect of God's intervention. It's more of an intellectual exercise. But if we are free persons then we have freedom to do wrong. That applies not only to us but it applies to other people around us. Sometimes their freedom means that we as innocents live with the consequences of their wrong decisions. Certainly that was the case of the frequent persecution of believers in the early church in which the Lord was not intervening. He was giving those persecutors' freedom to exercise their human will and that exercise of will had negative consequences upon those who suffered the result of their choices. Maybe you have suffered as a result of someone else's wrong choices and God did not suspend their human freedom to make a choice which injured you.

Imagine a parent saying to a child, "Would you like to go play with your friends or do your homework?" *I'd like to play with my friends.* "I'm sorry. That's the wrong choice. Choose again."

God's saying to a person, "How are you going to plan to get the money to pay your bills? Get a job which means getting up early in the morning and going to work and doing hard work? Or are you going to go grab an old lady's pocketbook on the street and run off with it? *Grab an old lady's pocket?* No, that's wrong. I won't let you do that. Choose a gain."

A robbery has been prevented but the man has not been given the freedom to operate as a free moral agent. He has not been permitted to choose between good and evil and he has been reduced to the level of an animal in that his freedom to choose has been taken away from him.

The terrible suffering of the saints in Acts, and today, in this world in which there is plenty record of the suffering of the saints. We have many recent examples of this in the persecution of believers. The terrible suffering arises out of the evil deeds of others and their choices to do evil rather than good. God does not at times intervene to protect us from the evil choices of others or from the tendency toward fulfillment of the laws of sin and death.

Some of you have known the betrayal of a spouse. Some of you have known the hurt of children who have rebelled. You have prayed with everything within you for God to reverse that but one thing God deeply respects and values is the freedom of the person to make the decision against

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his will. The innocent bear the consequences of that. Because God has determined we'd live in world where there was freedom.

As I said that is not an emotionally satisfying incident but that certainly ought to be up front as one of the things that's going on in God's non-intervention.

There's a second thing I notice in the book of Acts in regard to God's action in non intervening. That is his non-intervention often gives us opportunity to develop wisdom and maturity. If he always intervened, we would not develop maturing in our life. I've already cited Acts 2 & 15 with the disputes. The Lord let the believers work this thing out, come to a decision which deepened their ability to make considered judgments. The Lord wants us to mature and grow in our faith.

Non-intervention gives us a change to develop maturity and wisdom.

The third aspect of God's action in non intervening is that it provides an opportunity to display in the most remarkable fashion the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The bedrock of our faith is that God did not intervene in the death of his own Son. The cross fulfilled the ultimate purpose of God. I cannot imagine being in the place of God the Father watching his only beloved Son die. Every thing within me would have wanted to intervene in that moment. God did not intervene.

When Stephen is dying and the faces of his accusers and persecutors are beaming with rage, Stephen's face is ablaze with glory. Instead of letting his face mirror the faces of his tormentors, he looked at Jesus and his face is mirroring the face of Jesus.

Unusual opportunity non-intervention provides us in reflecting the grace of Jesus. Not saying it's easy.

From time to time when I see ministers who allege some form of unfairness in their treatment, while I recognize that such things can and do take place on an occasional basis, I cannot understand the bitterness, the resentment, the festering spirit that so detracts from the grace of God. I see an early church that faced hardship and displayed toward that hardship an atmosphere of grace.

Fourth, God's non-intervention may significantly advance the gospel. That's always a surprise. Look at the death of Stephen. I like cause and effect relationships. It was Stephen's preaching that I think was the goad in Saul's conscious that the Lord talks about that day when he strikes him on the road to Damascus: "Why are you kicking against the goads?" Paul couldn't get over the face of Stephen, couldn't get over the words of Stephen. Because we had Stephen we had Paul. Because we had Paul we had Luke his companion in ministry. Because we have Luke we have Luke-Acts. The most writing of the New Testament actually flow out of that. All of that comes out of an initial non-intervention on God's part in delivering Stephen from martyrdom.

Christians are meant to be Spirit filled people, are meant to be people of grace. Every set back in the book of Acts, if you look at this carefully, every set back produces a subsequent advance. New light, God's church, the Assemblies of God is like a ships on the ocean. His unseen tides are pulling us into the harbor where he wants us.

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Fifth, God's action in not intervening often powerfully deepens our character and our faith. Hebrews 11 "others were tortured." That's an incredible phrase! Then "both the people who were delivered and the people who were tortured, these all had faith." Powerfully deepen our character and faith.

There's a marvelous scene in Acts 4, the first persecution of the Apostolic company. The first time they've suffered for Jesus physically. They'd been flogged. When they are released they go back to the home meeting where people had been praying for them. They pray and the first words "Sovereign Lord."

The word in Greek is the word we derive "despot." We almost always in the English language use the word "despot" in a negative way to refer to someone who is tyrannical. But in the purest sense a despot is someone who has absolute control. The apostles never assumed that because they were suffering that God had lost control. He is still the God who is in control and in the midst of things their faith was deepened so Paul would later reflect "We rejoice in our sufferings [and the period is not put after sufferings but a comma] because sufferings produce endurance or staying power and staying power produces character and character produces hope and hope doesn't disappoint us." In other words we understand that non-intervention initiates a process in our life that is a straining process, a filtering process a training process that in the end produces individuals of golden faith and character, the trial of your faith more precious than gold. Such may deepen our faith.

The last thing I want to say about God's action in non-intervention is a caveat. On this side of eternity we may never know in what was involved in the scene we went through. We may never know. We may never, for example, in Acts given an explanation for James death. Acts 12. We're never explained that. I'm fascinated by that because James was one of the inner three. He never writes a letter (the book of James in the New Testament is not written by the James, the apostle of the inner three). We never read a recorded sermon of James. It's the wrong time from my vantage point strategically to lose a key asset. You've only got 12 apostles to begin with. One has already flaked out. So you've got 11 left and right at the get-go you lose one tenth of your trained force. It doesn't add up. It doesn't make sense.

And we're never told what happened or what the outflow of it was. There are many things this side of heaven we do not know. "Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly, will God unroll the canvas and explain the reasons why. The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand, as the threads of gold and silver in the patter he has planned."

In no way do I intend today that this look at God's non-intervention take away our prayers, our faith and expectancy for God's intervention. We recognize in the book of Acts that it took God's intervention to move the church from Jerusalem to Rome. It will take his intervention to move us forward in the 21st century as he repeats his mighty acts and deeds for us as a church and for us as individuals in order to get us from where we are to where we need to be. God must act. But I plead also for a fuller understanding of faith. That our faith is not in faith. Our faith is in God. Our trust is not in trust. Our trust is in the ever living God. We have faith for God to change our circumstances. But when our circumstances are not changing we have faith that God is changing us in the circumstances because the Lord does all things well!

Lord Jesus, we come now into your presence in these moments and we want to reflect on the times of non-intervention in our life. Some of my colleagues and friends here today may

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have moments in their life in which they're still grappling with the aftermath of why you didn't intervene and did you really care after all. Lord, there may not be an answer this side of heaven. But I pray that the hurt and damage that that event caused that you'll lift the heavy stone, lift the oppression. Grant a healing in the heart that says "I'm your child. I pray to be released from any harm internally in my heart that I may have let settle there as a result of this disappointment that has happened to me. And that you would give me a remarkable grace and peace so that there's calm and joy, serenity in my heart."

Take this moment to acknowledge if the Lord is speaking to your heart today. Speaking to your heart about some non-intervention in your life. Lord, you love each person. If you were present physically here today you would come alongside each of us. You would embrace us and say, "It is well. I love you. I care for you." You'll give us the strength, Lord, to journey on. We thank you for your wonderful comfort. We want to say again, in our hearts, we trust you.

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