

INTRODUCTION

We like to be in control. How many of you have ever gotten on an elevator and pushed the floor number and then you pushed the close door button? I confess I've done it hundreds of times. But just this week I learned that the button doesn't work. Since the ADA requirements for buildings in 1990, all elevator doors are programmed to stay open for a minimum of three seconds. So why are those buttons even there? When firefighters insert their key, those buttons are activated. But they are just placebo buttons for me and you.

I'm sorry to burst your bubble. There was an article about this in the New York Times. And Harvard Psychologist Ellen Langer said there is a reason we press that non-functioning button. She said: "Perceived control is very important. It diminishes stress and promotes well-being. When you find yourself pressing a nonfunctional close-door button, and later the doors close, you'll probably never notice the delay because a little spurt of happiness will cascade through your brain once you see what you believe is a response to your action."

We like to be in control. I've heard of small churches that would install several dummy thermostats inside the sanctuary so that people could think they were adjusting the temperature to their comfort level. We like to be in control. And don't even get me started about men and their television remote controls. We like to be in control.

We're going to study a passage of scripture today where we learn that when everything is said and done, God is ultimately in control – of just about everything. We're in John 11 and Jesus has called Lazarus out from the tomb where he had been dead for four days. We saw last week that many people believed in Jesus because of this amazing miracle. You would think that EVERYONE would believe after a miracle like that, but some of the Jews were still skeptical.

Let's pick up the text in John 11:45: Therefore, many of the Jews who came to Mary and saw what he did believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and were saying, "What are we going to do since this man is doing many signs? If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

One of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You're not considering that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people rather than the whole nation perish." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to unite the scattered children of God. So from that day on they plotted to kill him.

Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews but departed from there to the countryside near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and he stayed there with the disciples.

Now the Jewish Passover was near, and many went up to Jerusalem from the country to purify themselves before the Passover. They were looking for Jesus and asking one another as they stood in the temple: "What do you think? He won't come to the festival, will he?" The chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should report it so that they could arrest him.

To me, this is one of the most interesting passages in all the Bible, because it shows us that God has the power to speak through someone like the High Priest, Caiaphas, without Caiaphas even realizing what was happening. All throughout John's narrative we've seen how the enemies of Jesus have opposed Him. They have tried to trick Him up and try to make Him incriminate Himself. Finally, after this Lazarus miracle, they realize they have to do something, so they decide they're going to kill Him. For these Jewish leaders, this was a real crisis. It was both a political and a religious crisis. The Romans were the occupying force, but these Jewish leaders were in charge of religion—and they saw their followers leaving them to follow this rabble-rousing rabbi.

I think it's safe to say that we're in a political and spiritual crisis in our nation now. There's all the talk of impeachment, and add the possibility of a war with Iran. My novel, *The Masada Proposal*, is beginning to sound more like a prophetic book than a fictional story. And then we throw into the mix - this is an election year. I see some real similarities with this passage and where we are today. I want you to notice that there are three ways people can react to a crisis.

I. ANXIETY: "It's out of control!"

The Sanhedrin was made up of 70 Jewish leaders and they were divided between two parties who never got along. There were the Pharisees, the conservatives, and there were the Sadducees, the liberals. They were always arguing. Sound familiar? We know at least one member, Nicodemus, probably believed in Jesus. But the rest of the group were all part of the Never Jesus movement. The one thing these two parties agreed on was that Jesus has got to go.

So some of these leaders were filled with anxiety. They said that the situation was out of control. If they didn't do something about Jesus, the Romans were going to come and destroy their nation.

These worried individuals rushed to see the worst-case-scenario. And today, there are some people who are chronic worriers. When faced with a crisis they immediately default to the worst-case scenario.

Some people are saying that our nation is more divided than it's ever been. It may be more divided than ever before in our lifetime. But don't forget that there was this thing called the Civil War – that wasn't very civil, by the way. More Americans died in the Civil War than in World War I and II Korea, and Vietnam combined.

The Bible has a lot to say about anxiety. Paul was in a dungeon when he wrote, "Be anxious about nothing. But in everything by prayer and supplications, let your requests be made unto God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds." (Philippians 4:6-7)

II. ARROGANCE: "I'm in control!"

This was the reaction of Caiaphas, the High Priest. During this time, the High Priest was appointed by the Roman Authorities and it went to the Jew who offered them the most money. Caiaphas was brutal and rich because he served for 18 years as the High Priest. He was a member of the Sadducees. They didn't believe in the miracles of the Bible. They didn't believe in angels or heaven—that's why they were sad you see.. The conservative Pharisees hated the Roman invaders, but the Sadducees, like Caiaphas, were partners with them. They adopted Roman dress and customs. It really was like the Jewish Mafia. And Caiaphas was the godfather. Can't you hear the 70 leaders arguing about what should be done, and the godfather raises his hand and there is silence. Everyone fears Caiaphas. He starts with an insult. He says, "Youse guys don't know anything. We'll kill him. It's better that one man dies than the whole nation perishes. I'll find someone on the inside and I'll make him an offer he can't refuse."

Caiaphas is an example of a self-centered man who thinks he controls his own destiny. When there's a problem, he can fix it because he's a fixer. This is the kind of person who doesn't see any need for God. There's an element of our society that is enraged anytime someone says our thoughts and prayers go out to those who have suffered from a mass shooting, or a natural disaster. They make signs that say "Thoughts and prayers don't stop bullets."

The problem with violence isn't gun control, it's the problem of a sinful human heart. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. The Bible says in Jeremiah 17:9 that "the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" There is a widespread humanist movement in America that say that we can solve our own problems, and we don't need God.

Timothy McVey was the Oklahoma City bomber who killed 168 people. Just before he was executed his last words were the poem *Invictus*. The final stanza says: "It matters not how strait the gate; How charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." But moments after he died, he learned that he wasn't in control of his fate. Beware of the arrogant attitude that tempts you to think you can control everything that happens.

III. ASSURANCE: "God is in control."

This should be our reaction to any crisis we face. God is control. Assurance is better than insurance. With insurance you're betting that things will go wrong, so you'll be covered. With Assurance you know that whatever happens, God is in control! It doesn't matter than nature or the severity of the crisis we face. God is in control. It may be a personal crisis, a national crisis, or a global crisis. God is in control. And just one more proof that this is true is found in John's explanation of the statement that Caiaphas made about putting Jesus to death. We read in

John 11:51-52: "He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to unite the scattered children of God."

That's one of the most amazing things in all of the Bible. The godfather of the Jewish Mafia was planning to snuff out Jesus to serve his selfish plans. Mean old Caiaphas thought he was saying Jesus would die INSTEAD of the nation, but God turned it around to mean that Jesus would die FOR the nation. And not just for Israel, but Jesus would die on behalf of everyone who would be a part of God's family.

What a powerful proof that our God is an awesome God. There are many scriptures that tell us that God is in control. Here's how King David expressed it: "Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the splendor and the majesty, for everything in the heavens and on earth belongs to you. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom, and you are exalted as head over all. Riches and honor come from you, and you are the ruler of everything. Power and might are in your hand, and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all." (1 Chronicles 29:11-12)

So what does all this mean? Let me share with you two areas in which God is in control and a third area in which God surrenders control to us.

A. God controls Creation.

God created everything in the universe and He exercises control over His creation. Astrophysicists tell us that the universe is mostly space. If you remember the movie Despicable Me, Gru had a shrink gun and shrunk the moon to the size of an orange. And when he did surfers lost their waves. For comparison sake, let's imagine I could shrink the earth to the size of a tennis ball. The moon would then be the size of a marble six feet away. The Sun would be the size of a UPS truck down at Loop 323. In the other direction, the planet Neptune would be the size of a cantaloupe up on I-20. And all these planets are in perfect orbit around the sun so that every 365 1/4 days we make a loop—that's why this year is a leap year. So there's a reason we call it outer space. Or space, the final frontier. Comedian Stephen Wright says that according to the Hubble Telescope the Universe is expanding. He says that should help with our parking problems...

Put away your telescope and exchange for it a microscope. All matter is comprised of invisible molecules made up of atoms comprised on protons, neutrons, electrons and croutons (just seeing if you were listening). Electrons are in orbit around the protons and neutrons.

So as intelligent creatures we can study the universe and matter, but one question that scientists have never truly answered is: "what keeps it all together?" Why doesn't the earth go spinning off orbit? Why don't atoms just split apart naturally? The Bible answers that in Colossians 1:16-17: "For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and by him all things hold together."

Those words “hold together” is the word *sunestimi*, which means to “to stick together” to “cohere.” Jesus is the super glue of the universe. And it really is true that He’s got the whole world in His hands. And He’s got me and you brother and sister in His hands. And the One who holds the universe together can hold your life together.

B. God controls circumstances.

I love the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Joseph was hated by his brothers and he faced all kinds of adversity. He went from a pit to a prison and finally to a palace. But all the time, Joseph knew that God was orchestrating his circumstances. Toward the end of his life he said to his brothers, “You intended this for harm, but God intended it for good to bring about the salvation of many people.” (Genesis 50:20)

The Bible says: “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and no one is like me. I declare the end from the beginning, and from long ago what is not yet done, saying: my plan will take place, and I will do all my will.” (Isaiah 46:9-10)

The word coincidence is not part of God’s vocabulary. Our friend Tony Evans is grieving now. His precious wife, Lois, went to be with the Lord on December 30. Tony understands that we have a God who is good who is control of our circumstances. He wrote, “What you and I may look at as random events, chance encounters, or arbitrary connections are actually orchestrated events in both the purpose and plan of God. God is sitting behind the steering wheel of history. Sometimes He has us on the main highway. Other times it’s down a back alley. Sometimes it looks like we are going the wrong way on a one-way street. But whatever the case, God’s intentions are immaculate and His plans are providential.”

C. God doesn’t control our choices.

One of the greatest questions of Christianity or not is whether or not we have free will. In verse 45 we see two groups of people expressing free will. Some of the people who saw Lazarus alive believed on Jesus – it was their choice. But some of the people didn’t believe and instead went to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done. Some followed Jesus, some opposed Jesus. I personally don’t understand how someone can see a man alive who had been dead for four days and NOT believe in Jesus. But skepticism can run deep and sometimes it’s easier to just believe it was done with smoke and mirrors. I honestly believe it takes more faith to be an atheist than it does to be a Christian.

God gives us a choice to worship Him. Before Joshua died, he left this charge for the Israelites. “But if it doesn’t please you to worship the Lord, choose for yourselves today: Which will you worship—the gods your fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living? As for me and my family, we will worship the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)

God created Adam and Eve to live in a perfect garden. But He didn't make them robots with no ability to choose. He wanted them to choose to love and obey Him. When they made the wrong choice, they suffered the consequences.

Ray Stedman wrote, "This is where you have a harmony between free will and the sovereignty of God. We are free to choose—as these men and women did, we can go for or against Jesus—but we cannot choose the consequences. Consequences will invariably follow according to the program and sovereign choice of God."

CONCLUSION

God is in control. Here's the take-away: God could even use an evil leader like Caiaphas to speak His truth. And if God can use him, that means he can use any of us as well. God used a pagan King like Nebuchadnezzar as his instrument to punish the Jews. God even once used a donkey to deliver His message. It's the story found in Numbers 22. Balaam was invited by the King of Moab to curse Moses and the Israeli army. God told Balaam not to do that, but Balaam decided to accept the offer because he wanted the money. So God sent an angel with a sword to stop Balaam, and God used his donkey to warn him. There's a singer/songwriter by the name of Don Francisco who has written some great songs about Bible stories and this story of Balaam is one of my favorites. Let me tell it to you in the words of Don Francisco.

"Well Balaam was a prophet about the time when Moses was passing through. And every now and then God would speak to him and tell him what to say and do. He had a reputation in all those parts for being on the line of power. And when Moab's king heard Moses was comin', he called him in his needy hour. He said, 'Balaam come and curse these Israelites. If you do I believe I could beat 'em in a fight.' But when Balaam asked the Lord, the Lord said, 'Balaam, don't you go. Israel is blessed by me, so don't you go mess up my show.' But Balaam's head was turned by the money he could earn, so he saddled up his donkey away." So Balaam and his servants headed out to the King of Moab's castle. But they hadn't gotten very far down the road when the hole trip became a hassle. Because the donkey ran off across a field and she nearly broke Balaam's ankle. But when she lay right down and wouldn't get up, Balaam got a little more than rankled. For the third time Balaam beat her with his cane. But the donkey still refused to move again. It was the thing that happened next, though that made Balaam's knees get weak. The donkey would not get up; but she began to speak! She said, 'Balaam you're to blame; the way you beat me is a shame. When all I've tried to do is save your life.' Then the angel of the Lord appeared; with a fiery sword in his hand. Balaam fell down upon the ground, a very frightened man. The angel said, 'Balaam, you'd be dead if your donkey hadn't detected that I was waitin' right here to part your hair when you and my sword connected!' Balaam then repented of his sin. And he promised not to act like that again. And I hope he learned his lesson about God's reward for greed. But you know, it's that talking donkey that's really strange indeed. A donkey's just a donkey, but she's still the thing God used. And that's the point I want you all to see. The Lord's the one who makes the choice of the instrument's He's usin'. We don't know the reasons and the plans behind his choosin'. So if the Lord starts to using you, don't you pay it any mind. He could have used the dog next door if He'd been so inclined!"

My friend, God is control. And if He can use someone like Caiaphas and Balaam's donkey. He can use you and me.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
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