

Don't You Get It?

In the name of him who came to declare God's great Good News, dear friends in Christ: As you know, last week was the 49th annual Superbowl; a game that ended on a play that many are saying was the worst call ever made by a coach. They're saying that especially in Seattle. Of course, if the play had gone well for their team, they'd be saying that the coach's call was a stroke of pure genius. Whatever. I didn't have a dog in that fight, so it didn't matter to me which team won. But one thing was for sure: when the game ended, one team was going to be the winner and the other was going to be the loser. And that means some fans were going to be happy and jubilant, and others were going to be sad and inconsolable. That's the way things go, not just with the Superbowl, but with any game of sports.

Now, you may not have been aware of it, but in the weeks before the Patriots and Seahawks took to the gridiron to duke it out, there was a theological battle going on about the game. No, really. What happened was that a polling outfit called Public Religion Research released the results of a broad survey they recently completed of the religious thoughts and attitudes of Americans. In this survey they specifically asked, "Does God determine who will win the Superbowl?" Turns out that 25% of Americans believe that he does. In addition to that, over 50% said that on an individual level, God rewards players who are faithful and committed Christians with good health, protection from injury, and success on the field. The implication being that the team with the greater number of faithful Christians would be more likely to win.

Well, the survey provoked a firestorm of activity in the blogosphere among pastors and theologians. In one corner you had those who said, "Don't be silly. It's just a ballgame. God doesn't care who wins it. And he certainly doesn't make it happen. He only gets involved in things that matter." Pressing the idea even farther in that direction, one pastor who's very well known in internet circles said that he's sickened even to have to answer the question and that there were people out there so foolish as to ask it. He said no way; God doesn't involve himself at all in what goes on in this world. He argued that if you say God determines who will win the Superbowl, you must also say that he determines who will lose. And the implications of that go far beyond the Superbowl. We'd have to say that God also determines who will be healthy, rich, and successful – presumably blessing those who please him in these ways; *and* he determines who will be sick, poor, and miserable – presumably inflicting such things on those with whom he is not pleased. The upshot is that we'd have to blame the Lord for all the world's suffering: the mass starvations, deaths by plagues—all the horrors of the third world, which in turn would make him the author of evil and an all around really mean guy. And we can't have that. No. God is a God of love.

On the other end of the spectrum, you've got many of the players themselves. The ones who are believers no doubt gave thanks to the Lord that they even made it to the Superbowl. In interviews, I heard some of them give God credit for their success. And before the game began surely they prayed to the Lord that he would cause them to play to the best of their ability. Some probably prayed that God would grant them victory in the game. Clearly *they* believe that God determines who will win the Superbowl. And they're not alone. A lot of their fans do too. Be it because they love their team, or they wanted bragging rights, or they had money riding on the game, they too were praying to the Lord for victory, which means *they* think he has at least some control over the outcome. And many pastors and theologians agree.

But let me put the question to you. Do you think that God determines who will win the Superbowl – or any other game for that matter? Raise your hand if you do. And while I'm at it, let me ask that second question: Do you agree that God rewards faithful Christian athletes with good

health, protection from injury, and success on the playing field – especially more than he does players who aren't Christians?

Okay. Let's think about this. The one pastor who said there's more at stake here than just the Superbowl was absolutely right about that. Behind the question of "Does God determine who will win a particular ball game" is the much larger question of to what extent is God involved in the world and what goes on in it. Is he pretty much "hands off", as that pastor asserted? God just sort of set everything up, wound the creation up like a clock, and now sits back and watches without interfering? Or is he involved intimately in what goes on in the creation? Are his fingerprints on everything that happens? Or, as some have suggested, does the truth lie someplace in between these extremes? Does he in some way influence what he considers to be the important issues to ensure the outcomes he desires while ignoring the trifling business of our day to day existence?

As the heated discussion that went on for weeks before the big game demonstrated, people can argue about this incessantly and never agree upon an answer. Everyone has their opinion. But, you know, those opinions don't matter. What matters – the only thing that should matter to us, anyway – is what God says about it. What he says in his holy Word trumps all human opinions. And we find all the answer we need in today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah.

And what the Lord says in that passage is that he's astonished even to have to answer the question – that there are people so dull and foolish as to ask it. "Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" It's like he's beside himself in frustration that he's dealing with people who are so utterly dense and unperceptive. "How could I have made this any clearer to you? It is so obvious. Don't you get it?"

Who is the Lord talking to in this way? In a broad sense, he's speaking to anyone who would ask the question; but the original intended hearers are the Judeans who were taken captive into exile to Babylon in the sixth century BC; which, at the time Isaiah wrote these words, hadn't happened yet. The Lord knew that they'd be pondering the question of the level of his involvement in their lives and he gave them the answer in advance. He knew they'd be suffering greatly. They were going to be uprooted from their families and comfortable homes, marched off at spear point wearing chains, forcibly resettled in penal colonies, and made to scratch out a meager existence as little more than slave laborers. And when that time came, they'd be complaining that God didn't care about them, that he wasn't concerned for them and their welfare, and that he wasn't in any way involved in their lives. And he rebukes them for this: "Why do you say, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right (that is, the justice I should have) is disregarded by my God'?"

He responds, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Don't you get it?" He explains that it should be obvious from the creation itself that he's got all things under his control. You should know from the care and intimate detail that I put into making all things the way they are so wondrously made that there is nothing, absolutely nothing that escapes my notice and that I am not concerned with. Elsewhere we are told that not even a sparrow falls to the earth without his consent, and that the very hairs of our heads are numbered. Here we are told that he sits above the circle of the earth taking all things in. He's ruling over all, raising up great kings among men and toppling them when they've fulfilled their purpose for him and it pleases him to do so. Even the stars of the heavens appear and march at his command. He's got his hand on everything. One wonders whether that pastor who said God doesn't involve himself in the creation has actually ever read the Bible. If nothing else, it's the account of how deeply God is involved in all things, and in particular how he is involved in the lives of his people.

The mistake we make is to attempt to analyze precisely *what* he's doing at any moment based on our limited perspective and the things we see and experience. God's view of the whole thing is much wider. His understanding is limitless, his wisdom infinite. His timeline is eternity. We can see only a tiny fraction of it. And we understand almost nothing of what we do see.

Take the exiles in captivity: they thought the worst thing in the world had happened to them. They thought they'd been abandoned by God. The truth is, as I've explained before, God used their captivity to rescue them. It was those who were left behind in Judea, the ones the captives thought were so lucky and blessed as to get to remain in the land – they were the ones who were destroyed in the end because of their sin, idolatry, and refusal to repent. God used the Babylonian exile and all the terrible suffering that went with it save the captives from that destruction and to bring them to repentance and to trust in him. He used their adverse circumstances to rescue them both in time and more importantly in eternity.

And this goes to the other question the survey asked: Does God reward his faithful with good health, protection from injury, and success in this life? The answer is that it's not that simple. He's always got a greater goal in mind than our immediate wellbeing: and that is to bring people to repentance and faith in Jesus the Savior. Good health, a sound body, and success in this life aren't worth a thing if you end up spending eternity in hellfire. If you gain the whole world and lose your own soul, you've won worse than nothing. And so, in his wisdom, the Lord often uses adversity, sorrow, suffering, pain, poverty, and loss to bring people to repentance and saving faith – and to keep them in it. He knows what's best for each of us, and he's doing it. So, no, you cannot determine from someone's circumstances – or your own – how faithful they are or how pleased God is with them. Nor should we attempt to understand what the Lord is doing in our lives or someone else's based on what we see going on. God's secret ways are hidden to us. His thoughts are too lofty for us to comprehend.

And for proof of this, we have only to look at the cross. There we have Jesus. He is the only truly faithful one, and yet he's not enjoying good health, protection from injury, or success. What we see is him experiencing the greatest miscarriage of justice ever. We see him writhing in agony. We hear him crying out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" And at that point he *is* forsaken by his heavenly Father. Who could have imagined that anything good could have come from this great evil? The answer is no one. Only God understood. Only God saw what was necessary to save us from our sin. And he did it. He jumped in with both feet. He involved himself completely in his fallen creation in order to save and restore it. If you ever doubt that God has invested himself wholly in the good of his creation, or question whether he is involved personally and intimately with you and your needs, you have only to look to the cross of Jesus and see all that God wants you to see. He holds the cross of Christ before us and says, "Don't you get it? Look here at the cross and know that Christ was forsaken so that you never will be. See that here my Son bore your sin. See that he suffered the penalty you deserved. See that by his death he won for you victory over death and hell. That's how much I care. That's how much I'm involved. Don't you get it? That's how much I love you. And that's why you can trust me always to do what's best for you." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!