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The Change of the Most High (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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The Blessing of the Waters

As we celebrate Christ's Paschal victory – these thoughts are offered on the nature of our deliverance. One of the Psalms appointed for use in this season declares: "Now is the change of the Most High." Pascha is indeed God's change – which is why we ourselves are not the "agents of change."

As inhabitants of our modern culture, we find ourselves trapped in a world of “cause and effect.” It is a physical explanation of the universe that has, for all intents and purposes, become a universal metaphor, dominating religion and the most personal aspects of our lives.

We see ourselves as the agents of change – or responsible for the disasters that litter our lives. Those who “succeed” imagine that they are the masters of their fate, or, perhaps the ones who responsibly “chose” God.

For the weak, the addict, the genetically impaired, the myth of choice and the power of freedom are often experienced as a merciless taunt. We not only fail – it is judged that we fail because we have not willed to succeed. Our weakness becomes a curse, while the blessed enjoy their prosperity and their health. Choice is a myth believed best by the young. Old age almost invariably makes a mockery of its boasts. The “pro-choice” movement and the growing acquiescence to legalized euthanasia are but natural extensions of our “free will.” These last manifestations of our “freedom” are the freedom to kill and to commit suicide, which, of course are only illusions of freedom.

There is an important and occasionally subtle difference between these modern concepts of freedom and choice – man as the agent of change – and the traditional Orthodox understanding of the world and the place that free will plays within it. On the most fundamental level, the world of cause and effect (the realm of our willful choices) is an insufficient arena for the Truth as revealed in Christ. God cannot be described merely as an agent in a world of cause and effect. He cannot be described as First Cause – because He cannot be described by a term of which there is a Second. God is not the First of anything – God is the Only of which there is no other.

The God Who has made Himself known in Christ Jesus is rightly identified as the Creator of all that is. However, how God creates is not a proper subject for scientific study. Cause and effect are simply insufficient as a description of God as Creator. Instead, an interesting verse in the LXX translation of Exodus offers the suggestion of a better starting point for understanding the role that our choices do and do not play:

Now Moses built an altar and called its name The-Lord-My-Refuge; for with a secret hand the Lord wars with Amalek from generation to generation (Exodus 17:16).

God’s secret hand well describes His involvement in our world – a metaphor which is a recurring theme in the images of Scripture (particularly as understood by

Orthodox Christianity).

An excellent example of this theme can be found in the account of the Three Young Men, in the book of Daniel and its continuation in the Song of the Three Young Men (LXX). There, the faithful youths are confronted with the command to commit idolatry, to fall down and worship before an image of the wicked King Nebuchadnezzar. If you will, the threat is typical of those who view the world as simple “cause and effect.” Power is defined as the ability to cause your own will to be done. As such, the Three Young Men are powerless. They are able to do nothing against the power of the King. His threat, of course, is death in a furnace of fire. They refuse, adhering to the commandments of God and trusting in His goodness. Their reply to the king is classic:

So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? “Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?” Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. “If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. “But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (Dan. 3:13-17).

Thus power, as defined by the world, confronts the power of God, and His secret hand.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” “Look!” he answered, “I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the mouth of the burning fiery furnace and spoke, saying, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here.” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire (Dan. 3:24-26).



The Three Holy Youths in the Fiery Furnace

In the LXX Song of the Three Young Men we hear this added description:

And the flame streamed out above the furnace forty-nine cubits, and it broke through and burned those of the Chaldeans whom it caught about the furnace. But the angel of the Lord came down into the furnace to be with Azariah [Shadrach] and his companions, and drove the fiery flame out of the furnace, and made the midst of the furnace like a moist whistling wind, so that the fire did not touch them at all or hurt or trouble them (Song of the Three Young Men 24-27).

Thus, like the bush that Moses saw on the Holy Mount that burns but is not consumed, or the womb of the Virgin that gives birth to Christ and yet remains a virginal womb (and so the image may be multiplied), God acts in a manner that cannot be described. If we say that He causes these things - then the word "cause" has a meaning other than what we normally mean.

Azariah states it this way in his prayer:

Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in Thy forbearance and in Thine abundant mercy. Deliver us in accordance with Thy marvelous works, and give glory to Thy name, O Lord! Let all who do harm to Thy servants be put to shame; let them be disgraced and deprived of all power and dominion, and let their strength be broken. Let them know that Thou art the Lord, the only God, glorious over the whole world (Song of the Three Young Men 19-22).

I have added emphasis – “deliver us in accordance with Thy marvelous works.” This is a proper description of the work of God. The power of God is not a power to be compared to the king’s, only bigger. For however the king works, he does not do so in a “marvelous manner.” Such works belong to God alone.

This phrase, “Thy marvelous works,” is echoed in the service of the Great Blessing of the Waters (used at Theophany, Baptism, and all blessings of Holy Water).

“Great art Thou, O Lord, and marvelous are Thy works. There is no word sufficient to hymn Thy praises.”

Calling such words over the waters of the Jordan [as I experienced on pilgrimage in September] only emphasizes the secret hand of the Most High. For in the course of the Blessing of Waters, we specifically call down upon the waters “the blessing of Jordan.” It seems strange, at first, to ask God to make the Jordan to be the Jordan. It is an illustration of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann’s statement that in the sacraments, we do not ask God not to make things to be something they are not, but to be what they truly are. Thus a blessing is not added to the Jordan, but in the prayer, the Jordan is revealed to be what it is: an icon. It is the place where the people of Israel cross to enter the Promised Land. It is the place that reveals the Pascha of Christ – who descends into death to lead the dead to the Promised land of life. An icon does not symbolize, in the modern sense of the word, but makes present that to which it points. Thus, “as many as are Baptized into Christ are Baptized into His death.” The Jordan and all water so blessed are an entrance into Pascha.

Icons do not cause, but reveal. To cause would be a magical understanding (magic itself being something from the early modern world – see alchemy).

When we bring this understanding of God's work to bear on the human predicament - the will is revealed to be other than what we imagine it to be. Rather than the agent of change, it is simply one part of the human creature which is itself in need of redemption and healing.

I can no more will my salvation than I can will my resurrection.

Like everything else in the human life - the will is in need of redemption, even though it plays its own small role in its cooperation with grace. We cannot be saved except by grace - even though grace requires our cooperation. That cooperation, however, can sometimes be as minimal as a cry for help. It is the voice of the thief on the cross crying, "Remember me!"

We are not the agents of change - but subjects in need of change. The world of cause and effect in which we can imagine ourselves (like Nebuchadnezzar) to be people of great power, is not, after all, the realm of true power. That realm, ruled by God's secret hand, became flesh and dwelt among us - doing for us what we could not ourselves do. We could not ascend into heaven and become Divine. He descended among us and became Man - that we might ascend with Him and become partakers of the divine nature.

God cannot be chosen or consumed as though He were a product among products. Neither is He an idea or slogan to which we may give allegiance. He is the God to Whom we may cry for help and Who has manifested His love and assured us of the ready answer to our feeble call.

Among the truest insights within our culture (although itself the product of Christian theology rather than modern culture) is the understanding found within the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The first step recognizes that we are powerless over the addictions which bind us. Strangely, the alcoholic who wants to be sober, must begin by recognizing that he is powerless to become so alone. The second step recognizes that "only a power greater than ourselves could help us." I would say that only a power that is utterly unlike anything we know as power can help us. The third step is to turn oneself over to that power. Strangely, millions of men and women have found sobriety, not because of the power of their will, but through the recognition of the weakness of our will. It is the most non-consumer community within the whole of our culture - aside from Christianity rightly lived.

We are not the agents of change, though without change our very existence will become moot. The change for which we, and the world, hunger is finally dependent upon the secret hand of the Most High, Who created us, sustains us, and redeems

us through His marvelous works. In Him the weak become strong, the meek inherit the earth, and those who weep laugh, while the mighty fall from their thrones.

From the midst of the flames we hear the Song of the Three Young Men, who see the true freedom of creation – not as inert objects or brute beasts to be coerced by worldly power, but as a joyful chorus of grateful creatures, whose voices unite in the great song offered to the God Whose secret hand sustains us in His presence:

O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever,

O ye heavens, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye waters that be above the heaven, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye powers of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye sun and moon, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye stars of heaven, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O every shower and dew, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye winds, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever,

O ye fire and heat, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye winter and summer, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye dews and storms of snow, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye nights and days, bless ye the Lord: bless and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye light and darkness, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye ice and cold, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye frost and snow, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye lightnings and clouds, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O let the earth bless the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye mountains and little hills, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye things that grow in the earth, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye mountains, bless ye the Lord: Praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye seas and rivers, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye whales, and all that move in the waters, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye fowls of the air, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye beasts and cattle, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye children of men, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O Israel, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye priests of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye servants of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye spirits and souls of the righteous, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye holy and humble men of heart, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O Ananias, Azarias, and Misael, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever: for he hath

delivered us from hell, and saved us from the hand of death, and delivered us out of the midst of the

furnace and burning flame: even out of the midst of the fire hath he delivered us.

O give thanks unto the Lord, because he is gracious: for his mercy endureth for ever.

O all ye that worship the Lord, bless the God of gods, praise him, and give him thanks: for his mercy

endureth for ever.

By Fr. Stephen Freeman

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