His Eye Is On The Sparrow

How ‘personal’ is God?
(Does He have a plan for my life?)

Part 1
His Eye Is on the Sparrow

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father... Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. Mt. 10:29-31

1. Why should I feel dis-cour-aged, why should the shad-ows come, Why should my heart be lone-ly,
2. Let not your heart be trou-bled,” His ten-der word I hear, And rest-ing on His good-ness,
3. When-ev-er I am tempt-ed, when-ev-er clouds a-rise, When songs give place to sigh-ing,

and long for heav’n and home, When Je-sus is my por-tion? My con-stant Friend is He:
I lose my doubts and fears; Though by the path He lead-eth, My con-stant Friend is He:
when hope with-in me dies, I draw the clos-er to Him, but one step I may see,
from care He sets me free;

His eye is on the spar-row, and I know He watch-es me; His eye is on the spar-row,
His eye is on the spar-row, and I know He watch-es me;

Refrain:
and I know He watch-es me, I sing be-cause I’m hap-py, I sing be-cause I’m free.

I sing be-cause I’m free, For His eye is on the spar-row, and I know He watch-es me.

Civilla Durfee Martin (Jordan Falls, Nova Scotia, August 21, 1866--March 9, 1948, Atlanta, Georgia).

After several years of teaching music, Civilla married Walter Stillman Martin, a Baptist minister, and traveled with him in evangelistic work. Because of frail health she was compelled to remain home much of the time. She wrote several hundred hymns and religious songs. Her first one, "God Will Take Care of You," written in 1904 became world-famous. "His Eye is on the Sparrow" written in 1906 and set to music by Charles H. Gabriel, has also received wide acclaim.

Her husband and collaborator, W.S. Martin (1862-1935), preceded her in death. For the last 29 years of her life, she made her home in Atlanta, Georgia, where she was a member of the First Christian Church.
“Early in the spring of 1905, my husband and I were sojourning in Elmira, New York. We contracted a deep friendship for a couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle, true saints of God. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nigh twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself to and from his business in a wheelchair. Despite their afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing inspiration and comfort to all who knew them.

One day while we were visiting with the Doolittles, my husband commented on their bright hopefulness and asked them for the secret of it. Mrs. Doolittle's reply was simple: "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me."

The beauty of this simple expression of boundless faith gripped the hearts and fired the imagination of Dr. Martin and me. The hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" was the outcome of that experience.” The next day she mailed the poem to Charles Gabriel, who supplied the music.
Look at the birds in the sky: They do not sow, or reap, or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you more valuable than they are?

[Matthew 6:26 NET]

Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. Even all the hairs on your head are numbered. So do not be afraid; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

[Matthew 10:29-31 NET]
God has a wonderful plan for your life.

It's evangelical orthodoxy, on a par with belief in substitutionary atonement and the sanctity of Spurgeon. It's part of the salvation package, along with forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. Christianity isn't just true, it offers the sure and certain knowledge that whatever happens to you is God's will. If you don't like it, it's because you haven't understood it.

I don't believe a word of it.
I understand where people who think like this are coming from, I really do. They have a deep sense of the sovereignty of God. They want to affirm his power. They're dismayed by any idea that things just happen and that life, as far as we can tell, is random. We might not know why things happen, but God's working to his own agenda.

There's an anonymous poem that sums it up, comparing life as we know it now to the reverse of a tapestry, in which the pattern is obscured and barely discernible. So:

Not 'til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needed
In the Weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

In other words: the bad things that happen to you are God's doing and part of the master-work he's making of your life.
I see the attraction. But I think the idea that God deliberately weaves dark threads into our lives is theologically flawed and psychologically cruel. I think we should stop saying it and start offering people something more real, more exciting, more dangerous and more true.

Here's my problem. There are two accounts of God's sovereignty which are equally questionable. Let's call the first the 'hard' version. In this one, God's sovereignty is a deterministic philosophy in which human free will is an illusion. You have to put up with bad things happening to you because it's ultimately for your own good, just as a child has to put up with a measles vaccination. In some unspecified and incomprehensible way, we still have free will and moral agency. But ultimately, the awful power and majesty of God overrules and overwhelms: all we can do is resign ourselves to his will. Alexander Pope put it this way in his Essay on Man:

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All nature is but art unknown to thee,
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good;
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.
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But often, what is, is wrong. Some things that happen are just too terrible to justify by talk of dark threads or universal good. If we're to believe that God plans the tsunami, the cancer, Islamic State or Stephen Fry's eye-worm, what's required of us is not just a leap of faith, but a suspension of our moral judgment. "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter," says Isaiah (5:20). God does not plan evil.

It's not this 'hard' version of God's sovereignty that's the most pernicious, though. The 'soft' version runs like this: God wants us to be happy and fulfilled. To ensure that this happens, he's created a personalized route map for our lives. If we follow it, all will be well. If we don't, we can expect consequences. It's like a reward for solving a crossword puzzle. Just Google 'God's plan for my life' if you don't believe me.

This is the product of a fundamentally materialistic and consumerist worldview in which it's normal for good things to happen to us. Religion is a spiritual investment that pays temporal dividends.

When things are going well, it seems to work: that's God's plan, after all. When they aren't, it's not so clear. Either "God is testing us", in a coolly experimental process designed to make us stronger and better people, or we've sinned in some way and departed from his perfect will and it's our own fault.
If that's the case, the plan has failed. But either way, the idea that God plans our lives is, from a scriptural point of view, deeply suspect.

Where does the idea that God has our lives mapped out for us come from? Biblically, it's often related to Jeremiah 29: 11, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" There are other verses that speak of him working behind the scenes to bring about a particular result.

The trouble is that in too much evangelical rhetoric, these verses have had a weight put on them that they can't possibly bear. So we're forced into all sorts of mental gymnastics to try to justify the idea that God has a plan for each individual, even when this idea so clearly fails the test of experience. I'm sorry, but I don't believe God's plans for anyone include bereavement, divorce, redundancy or large-scale tragedy.

There is a heartbreaking film of a clergyman interviewed after the 1966 Aberfan disaster which killed 144 people, most of them children, when a slag heap collapsed on top of a school. "There has to be a plan," he chokes out. "I have to believe that."
And that's the problem: take away the idea that God's in control of everything that happens, and the alternative is too terrifying to contemplate.

There's another way of looking at it, though.

Suppose that, instead of trying to map a philosophical determinism or a spiritual consumerism on to the Bible, we actually read it?

When we do that, we don't find the God of the philosophers and scholars or the God of the shopping mall. We find the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We don't find that God plans our future. We find that he accompanies us into it. It's his presence with us that takes us safely through the valley of the shadow of death, not his hand on the steering wheel.

I believe we'd be spiritually healthier if we dropped talk of God having a plan for our lives, and started talking about God having a hope for our future – a hope that's ultimately based in resurrection.

God's hope for our future is about second chances, about choices and new beginnings.
At every stage of our lives we're faced with decisions, usually at a practical level but sometimes at a moral level. Practically, I might make all sorts of mistakes, from a choice of career to a choice of car or house. But God's hope for my future means that within that wrong choice there are right choices to make – and his desire is for me to flourish, within the context in which I find myself and according to my capacity, and above all for me to become more Christlike. I don't need to be rich, or healthy, or admired, for that to happen.

Morally, I might commit all sorts of sins – and I have. They don't fit into the 'plan' idea, either: but I know God has never given up on me. So every time I take the wrong path at a fork in the road, I know I'll come to another fork before long. Again, there'll be a choice: and the more wrong turns you take, the harder it becomes to do the right thing and get to the right place, but it's never impossible with God as your guide.

The resurrection of Jesus was God's statement that hope never ends.

I don't believe God has a plan for my life. But I believe that he has a desire for me, to be filled with his Spirit and made Christ-like. So, "Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom ... Keep thou my feet, I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me."
His Eye Is On the Sparrow

Inspiration

Provocation

Music

Theology

Scripture

Discussion
Look at the birds in the sky: They do not sow, or reap, or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you more valuable than they are?

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[Matthew 10:29-31 NET]
The Lord of hosts has sworn: “As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand,

[Isaiah 14:24 ESV]

And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

[Isaiah 58:11 ESV]

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

[Jeremiah 1:5 ESV]
For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

[Jeremiah 29:11]

{Arguably, an extremely misunderstood and misapplied verse: prosperity theology}
Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.  

[Proverbs 3:5-6 ESV]

Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.  

[Proverbs 16:3-4 ESV]

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.  

[Proverbs 16:9 ESV]
Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

[Proverbs 19:21 ESV]

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

[Psalm 23:2 ESV]

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

[Psalm 32:8 ESV]
The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way;

[Psalm 37:23 ESV]

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands

[Psalm 138:8 ESV]

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

[Psalm 139:16 ESV]
“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[John 3:16 ESV]

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

[Romans 8:28  ESV]

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

[Romans 12:2 ESV]
But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—

[1 Corinthians 2:9 ESV]

Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,

[Ephesians 1:4-5 ESV]

Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

[Ephesians 1:9-10 ESV]

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them

[Ephesians 2:10 ESV]
And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

[Philippians 1:6 ESV]

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

[1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV]

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

[James 1:12 ESV]

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

[2 Peter 3:9 ESV]
CHRISTIAN TODAY

God does not have a plan for our lives, and we should stop pretending that he has

Mark Woods
CHRISTIAN TODAY CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Rev Mark Woods is a Baptist minister and Contributing Editor for Christian Today.

God has a wonderful plan for your life.

...

I don't believe a word of it.
“If it’s the reedy, gurgling ‘cut-cut-turrerr’ of the long-billed marsh wren, I’m not here.”