

## § 4. Excursus on Natural Theology

### Lecture 34

#### The Emotional Problem of Evil

We are going to wrap up our discussion today of the problem of evil and suffering. I initiated this problem by saying that there are really two versions. There is the intellectual version of the problem of suffering which comes in both a logical and a probabilistic form, and then there is what we could call the emotional problem of evil.

I've argued over the last couple of weeks that the intellectual problem of evil ultimately fails. The atheist is unable to show that the evil and suffering in the world is either inconsistent with or improbable with respect to God's existence. Therefore, the intellectual version of the problem of evil fails.

I indicated that I think for most people the problem of suffering and evil is not really an intellectual problem. It is really an emotional problem. They've never really thought very deeply about this problem, but they just emotionally react to God's permitting the terrible evil and suffering in the world. So we need to address this emotional problem. You might be thinking, *Then why go through all of this intellectual material if this is really just an emotional problem?* I think there are two reasons why it is important to have dealt with this intellectually.

First, people *think* that their problem is intellectual. So by working through the intellectual problem of evil we can show respect for their opinion and try to help them to see what the real problem is. We take their objections and arguments at face value and deal with them intellectually.

But secondly, I think also that what we've seen can be of tremendous help to us when we are called upon to go through suffering. The health-and-wealth gospel and the gospel of positive thinking that is preached in so many mega-churches and denominations in the United States are simply false gospels. They set people up for a fall. They cannot make sense of terrible, apparently pointless suffering entering in your life and therefore are setting people up for tremendous doubt and perhaps abandonment of their faith when they encounter that sort of suffering.

It is very obvious that these are false gospels because that sort of health-and-wealth prosperity gospel won't preach in Iraq or in Syria or North Korea or a thousand other places. If it won't preach there then it is not the true Gospel. We need to understand that God's plan for human history may involve terrible suffering for us whose point or reason we may not be able to see; indeed, we cannot expect to see it. Our hope is not in worldly happiness, but rather in that day when we go to be with God and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

What can be said to folks who are struggling with the emotional problem of suffering? In one sense, the most important thing may not be what we say at all. For many people, I think the important thing is that you just be there as a sympathetic listener, as a loving friend who cares about them. You don't need to have all of the answers. They may simply need someone who understands, who sympathizes with them, and gives them a shoulder to cry on. But still there will be people who need counsel. We ourselves may need to deal with the emotional problem of evil when we go through suffering. What does the Christian faith have to say to deal with this problem as well?

It tells us that God is not some sort of distant creator or impersonal ground of being.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it tells us that God is a loving heavenly Father who shares our hurts and who suffers along with us. On the cross Christ endured a suffering of which we can literally form no conception whatsoever because he endured the punishment or penalty for the sin of the whole world. Even though he was perfectly innocent, he voluntarily took upon himself the consequences for the sin of the entire world that we deserve. None of us can comprehend that suffering. Even though he was innocent, he voluntarily took upon himself incomprehensible suffering for our sake. Why did he do this? Simply because he loves us so much. To bring us back to a relationship with God, our heavenly Father. How can we reject him who was willing to give up everything for us?

So when God asks you to go through suffering that seems pointless, unnecessary, or unmerited, I think that meditation upon the wounds of Christ can help to give us the moral strength and the courage that we need to bear the cross that we are asked to carry through life. Don't torture yourself trying to figure out why God is permitting you to go through that suffering. As I said, given our cognitive limitations, we should not be able to expect to perceive the reasons for which God is allowing that suffering to enter your life.

The British theologian, J. I. Packer, calls this “the York signal box mistake.” Packer says that in the city of York in England there is a great train yard filled with tracks that have shuntings off to the side, sidings and so forth. The trains are controlled by a signal box that is in a tower over the entire train yard in York. To someone who is in the signal box, he can see on a lighted electronic map the little glowing worms of the various trains and why one is shunted on to a siding there, why another train is pulled over here. It can all make sense to someone in the signal box. But to someone down on the tracks, it is utterly incomprehensible why these trains are moving all about in the way that they are and why they are being shunted in the ways that they are. It would be incomprehensible to the person down on the tracks. What Packer says is that when it comes to the evil and suffering in our lives, for better or worse we are not in God's signal box. We can't see the big perspective. We are down on the tracks. Therefore, when we try to figure out why

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God allows us to suffer in a certain way, we are presuming to be in his position in the signal box, and we are not there. Rather than try to figure out why God is allowing you to suffer in this way, you should simply ask him to give you the strength and the courage to bear the suffering that Christ has called upon you to bear and to see what lessons you might learn out of this.

I mentioned earlier in our study that the knowledge of God is an incommensurable good to which our suffering cannot even be compared. To know God, to come into relationship with him, is a good which is literally incomparable to the suffering that we undergo.

Few of us, I think, really understand this truth. But I had a colleague when I taught at Westmont College who got to know a woman who did understand this. He used to make it a practice of his to visit shut-ins in nursing homes in the community in an attempt to bring some bit of cheer and love into their lives. One Mother's Day he was visiting a nursing home in which he met a woman whom he would never forget. This is his account of that woman and that friendship.<sup>2</sup> He says:

On this particular day I was walking in a hallway that I had not visited before looking in vain for a few who were alive enough to receive a flower and a few words of encouragement. This hallway seemed to contain some of the worst cases. Strapped onto carts or into wheelchairs and looking completely helpless.

As I neared the end of this hallway I saw an old woman strapped in a wheelchair, her face was an absolute horror. The empty stare and white pupils of her eyes told me that she was blind. The large hearing aid over one ear told me that she was almost deaf. One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek and it had pushed her nose to the side, dropped one eye and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly. I also learned later that this woman was 89 years old and that she had been bedridden, blind, nearly deaf and alone for 25 years. This was Mabel.

I don't know why I spoke to her. She looked less likely to respond than most of the people I saw in that hallway. But I put a flower in her hand and said, "Here is a flower for you, Happy Mother's Day." She held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it and then she spoke and much to my surprise her words, though somewhat garbled because of her deformity, were obviously produced by a clear mind. She said, "Thank you, it's lovely, but can I give it to someone else? I can't see it you know, I'm blind."

I said, “of course,” and I pushed her in her chair back down the hallway to a place where I thought I could find some alert patients. I found one and stopped the chair. Mabel held out the flower and said, “Here, this is from Jesus.”

It was then that it began to dawn on me that this was not an ordinary human being. . . . Mabel and I became friends over the next few weeks and I went to see her once or twice a week for the next three years. . . . It was not many weeks before I turned from a sense that I was being helpful to a sense of wonder. And I would go to her with a pen and paper to write down the things she would say. . . .

During one hectic week of final exams, I was frustrated because my mind seemed to be pulled in ten directions at once with all of the things that I had to think about. The question occurred to me, what does Mabel have to think about? Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, not even able to know if it is day or night. So I went to her and asked, “Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?”

And she said, “I think about my Jesus.”

I sat there and thought for a moment about the difficulty for me of thinking about Jesus for even five minutes. And I asked, “What do you think about Jesus?” She replied slowly and deliberately as I wrote, and this is what she said,

I think how good he has been to me. He has been awfully good to me in my life, you know. . . . I’m one of those kind who’s mostly satisfied. . . . Lots of folks would think I’m kind of old-fashioned. But I don’t care. I’d rather have Jesus, he is all the world to me.

And then Mabel began to sing an old hymn:

Jesus is all the world to me,  
My life, my joy, my all.  
He is my strength from day to day,  
Without him, I would fall.  
When I am sad, to him I go.  
No other one can cheer me so.  
When I am sad, he makes me glad.  
He’s my friend.

This is not fiction. Incredible as it may seem, a human being really lived like this. I know, I knew her. How could she do it? Seconds ticked and minutes crawled, and so did days and weeks and months and years of pain without human company

and without an explanation of why it was all happening – and she laid there and sang hymns.<sup>3</sup> How could she do it?

The answer, I think, is that Mabel had something that you and I don't have much of. She had power. Lying there, in that bed, unable to move, unable to see, unable to hear, unable to talk to anyone . . . , she had incredible power.<sup>4</sup>

What an amazing testimony. Paradoxically, even though the problem of suffering is the greatest obstacle to belief in God's existence, at the end of the day God is the only solution to the problem of evil. If God does not exist then we are locked without hope in a world filled with pointless and gratuitous suffering. God is the final answer to the problem of suffering for he redeems us from evil and he takes us into the everlasting joy of an incommensurable good which is fellowship with himself.

That is what I wanted to share about the emotional problem of suffering and evil.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* It sounds like Mabel was highly spiritually mature. I've noticed even in my own personal life that when conflict comes the first thing you do is panic. You wonder what you are doing wrong, how can you fix it. Did I pray long enough? Have I given enough quiet time? Because the pain is hard, whatever it is – physical ailment, you lost a job, you lost a relative, whatever it is – you wonder why God is coming at you. You think did I do something wrong, especially if someone has lost a child they wonder if they were bad parents or they did something where they deserved that. There are Old Testament verses, at least, that seem like your happiness is right in line with whether or not you are good to God. Obviously the New Testament is different with all the . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Don't forget the book of Job is found in the Old Testament!

*Student:* I didn't say the whole Old Testament. But Proverbs says if you give your life to God basically that he will direct your steps and you'll be successful and so on and so forth. But I agree that you can focus on God. I think there are adages that talk about instead of looking at how big your problem is look at how big your God is. It takes time to get to Mabel's level, but yes, if we could learn to dig our heels in and just say, "God, OK, whatever you are doing here, help me to get through it." Or "Whatever you are doing to my friend, help me to just be there for them." I think if we just focus on him, that that is what we need to do. But it is hard. You do panic. You try to run from the pain. You try to figure out any way to get rid of it and move on with your life. But sometimes God is just trying to change your life.

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<sup>3</sup> 15:15

<sup>4</sup> Thomas E. Schmidt, *Trying to Be Good: A Book of Doing for Thinking People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 180-183.

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah.

*Student:* Something that struck me about Mabel's story was when he said she had power. I started thinking about other people that I've known in very unfortunate conditions. They seem – and I can't prove it, this isn't any kind of logical proof of any kind but – they always seem like they've been given a grace that we can't have. They have been given a gift that we could only imagine. Even if we were in their situation, we wouldn't necessarily have it, but those people seem to be almost specifically chosen to be infused with a grace that gives them a joy that we can't understand. When you see the Downs child always happy, full of love. I've never seen a miserable Downs person. They are always happy. Why?

*Dr. Craig:* Paul suffered from a terrible physical infirmity that he asked God to remove. Three times, he says, he prayed to God to remove it. God's answer to him was, “My power is made perfect in weakness.” You see that illustrated in Mabel's life, I think, so beautifully. Paul says, *I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses because when I am weak then I am strong.*

*Student:* It just seems like God infuses the weak with his power. That is where we get that.<sup>5</sup>

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah.

*Student:* Thank you very much for sharing that story. The story very much reminded me of a great American saint, Fanny Crosby, who was born blind or at least was blind at a very young age and became, I think, one of the greatest hymn writers of all time. *Blessed Assurance, All the Way My Savior Leads Me.* She has written along these lines – similar things that Mabel shared. I think just in the way the disciples' lives are this powerful testimony and evidence for the Christian faith so to the testimony of the great saints, a powerful evidence for the Christian faith.

*Dr. Craig:* Amen.

*Student:* Could you comment on whether you think the book of Job is historical or an extended parable?

*Dr. Craig:* I don't know. I have never studied it, so as a layperson I never looked into it. I wouldn't have a problem if it were a fictitious story that was meant to illustrate a point. But in the absence of any reason to think that, I think one can take it as historical. I've just never explored that.

*Student:* The one issue that bothers me if you try to take this as history, it says that Job had ten children that were all killed. Job was tested, and he lost all of his property. At the

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end of the book, his fortunes are restored two-fold, and he has another set of children. But the original children are gone. They don't return. If you take it as history, it seems like that is not really a restoration of his fortunes in the sense of losing those children. That causes me pause to take it as history.

*Dr. Craig:* Well, I don't know . . . maybe what that might cause you to question is not so much the historicity of it but perhaps the Jewish value system that is expressed there. If a man loses some of his family and then God gives him twice as large a family, for an ancient Jew that might be thought to have your fortunes restored. That is exactly what in a Jewish culture that valued family one would mean by having your fortunes restored. We've got to recognize that we are dealing with ancient cultures here that may be very different than our modern cultures in terms of their values. I think that would need to be considered as well.

*Student:* Thank you, again. That was an incredible story. I was struck by the word at the end – she showed incredible “power.” The word I expected was “faith” or “strength.” Power to me means someone has control over other people or things, and here is this helpless person. I am still kind of struck by that word.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, it is a tremendous paradox, isn't it? I think he is right in choosing it. He could have said she had great faith, but he didn't. He chose to say that this seemingly helpless invalid had, in fact, tremendous power – much greater power than we who are well seem to exhibit. I like the choice of words that he gave.

*Student:* I think also in the case of Job that we have to have a perspective that is not of this world – that is of eternity. Yes, indeed, those children are gone. They are better than Job.

*Dr. Craig:* Right! They are better off!

*Student:* They are better off than Job. All of the people of the Old Testament are dead. All of the people born before 1850 are dead. They are all dead. Part of what we have to look at, I think, with suffering is not this world but eternity. It is hard to do because that is God's perspective. I think that is another thing that we have to think about in terms of suffering.

*Dr. Craig:* Absolutely.

*Student:* During this world there is a broader perspective that is very difficult for us to understand.

*Dr. Craig:* I think you are making a good point. When we dealt with the probabilistic version of the problem of evil you will recall I mentioned that one of the Christian doctrines is that this life isn't all there is. This life spills over into eternal life. When you view our suffering in the perspective of eternity it is infinitesimal by comparison with the

time we will spend with God in eternity.<sup>6</sup> But I think what you are pointing out is that this also goes some distance for dealing with the emotional problem of evil. If you can live in light of eternity and keep your eyes fixed on that, that will help to give you the strength to endure the suffering that we go through now. So this point is not only intellectually relevant, but it is – I think you are right – emotionally important as well.

*Student:* I want to go back to the word “power.” One of the things that I run into as a doctoral student at Georgia State is this whole idea that only white men have power in this country. It is an urban university. It is a research university. It is very much a worldly mindset. They would not look at Mabel and say, “Yeah, that's power.” I think part of what we need to do as believers is to retake the word “power” and attribute it back to what the word actually means. Power is not “I get to boss you around” although people in their sin natures have taken it to do that. But power means enabled by God to persevere. I think we've lost sight of that as well.

*Dr. Craig:* Well said. Thank you.

*Student:* You said that this was the response to the emotional problem of evil. Are we going to be continuing on with other discussions?

*Dr. Craig:* No, I think that this is sufficient for dealing with the emotional problem of evil.

*Student:* OK, then I better ask the question now. A book that was written I think relatively recently by Bart Ehrman on the problem of evil. I was wondering if you could respond to something like that where he is saying that these issues dealt in the Bible are actually saying you are supposed to respond to the problem of evil this way, and then another part of the Bible it says that you should respond to the problem of evil that way.

*Dr. Craig:* I haven't read Bart Ehrman's book on the problem of evil because I don't think it is likely that a New Testament scholar who has no training in this area would have much insight into the philosophical questions related to the intellectual problem of evil. I think it is very interesting, though, that Ehrman's abandonment of the Christian faith, he said, really had nothing to do with biblical inerrancy or his finding errors in the Gospels or his work as a New Testament scholar where he is trained and where he is expert. He is a textual critic on the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. There wasn't anything in that that apparently led to an insuperable obstacle to Christian faith. It was these philosophical questions related to the problem of evil that caused him to lose his faith. I, for one, find that tremendously paradoxical because it wasn't something in his area of expertise that challenged him and made him lose his faith. It was in something on which he hasn't studied, he isn't expert. I would simply say that the responses to the intellectual

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<sup>6</sup> 25:05

problem of suffering that I've given, I think, are thoroughly biblical and are good responses to the probabilistic version. Did you have something specific in mind?

*Student:* I think his argument was that each one of these examples – let's say your sin has caused this evil to happen to you – is one response, but then another place it will say it is not that. He'll say that these are two separate accounts that are contradictory – the Bible contradicts itself rather than different scenarios can have different explanations.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that, again, would be a question for the consistency of biblical theology, not the adequacy of the answer to the problem of suffering and evil. It seems to me that what I've said about those four Christian doctrines that greatly increase the probability of evil and suffering if the Christian God exists are all biblical and that they show that it really isn't surprising that the world would be filled with moral and natural suffering if Christianity is true. I take that to be an adequate response to the problem of suffering and evil from a biblical point of view.<sup>7</sup>

*Student:* What I am seeing – help me through this – given we are in a secular world and also academia is so liberal, the most of those saying, *I can't believe in God because of the evil and the suffering in the world, and no loving God would allow that*, I think they stop there because they are not really searching. It is more that they want to prove to themselves that God does not exist, and they are not responsible to a god. It seems to them that you can't have an all-loving God and have suffering. As we studied this – which we had to delve into to create some logic behind that statement – most do not want to go that far, if I'm correct. It does take a little bit . . . I can understand a human being being evil and causing suffering on another human being. I think the real hangup is – let's take your example of the little girl caught in the rubble where there is no apparent good news or greater-good. I think those kinds of sufferings just stop short. It is kind of difficult to walk someone through to get them to a point where they can comprehend that a loving God allows evil and suffering.

*Dr. Craig:* The question is – is this an intellectual problem that is being raised? If it is then I would just go back through the points that I made about how we are not in a position to say when some natural evil occurs; that God probably doesn't have a morally sufficient reason for allowing that. Give some illustrations like from chaos theory and popular culture to make the point. Then make the other points that I made as well. It is all just going through the same material over again. If this is an emotional problem that they are having, then, again, I think one would point to Christ, to God, and how he was willing to bear suffering for them, of which they can form no comprehension. So why would they reject him when he was willing to go through hell in order to save them? One would just

need to go through these issues again with a person and hopefully that person will be open and not just argumentative.

**END DISCUSSION<sup>8</sup>**