

**§ 7. Doctrine of Christ**  
**Lecture 50**  
**Pushing the Defense For Christian Particularism Further**

Last time I argued that the religious pluralist has failed to show any inconsistency between the beliefs that God is all-powerful and all-loving and that some people nevertheless do not hear the Gospel and are lost. The religious pluralist has failed to show that there is a world which is feasible for God to create which involves universal salvation but without overriding disadvantages, and therefore the pluralist's argument fails.

Now, before we proceed, I want to respond to an objection that was raised on Facebook by one of our Internet members of the class. He said, *Wait a minute! I can prove that there is a feasible world available to God in which everyone always freely does the right thing and doesn't have overriding disadvantages; namely, heaven! That's what heaven is! God could simply create heaven without all of the run-up to it.* I think that this objection begs the question first of all by assuming that there is freedom to sin in heaven (which is not at all obvious). But that's not the most fundamental problem with the objection. The fundamental problem with the objection is that it just assumes that you can sort of take a segment out of a possible world like the actual world and create it on its own as a possible world in its own right, and that all of the same counterfactuals of freedom about how people would behave in the first world will also be true in the second world. That is simply a fallacious assumption. Once you create that segment all on its own in isolation that's a new possible world, and it may have a very different set of counterfactuals about how people would freely behave in various circumstances. You can't just assume they would do the same things that they do in the actual world. So this assumption is based upon a misunderstanding of possible worlds and thinking that you can sort of pluck certain people out of the possible world or the actual world and create a new isolated world in which everything would be the same in terms of how they would choose under various circumstances. So the objector, I think, has failed to show that there is a world feasible for God that involves universal salvation that doesn't have other overriding disadvantages to it.

But we can push the argument a notch further. I think that we can show positively that it is entirely possible for God to be all-loving and all-powerful and yet for some people never to hear the Gospel and to be lost. As a good and loving God, God wants as many people as possible to be saved and as few as possible to be lost. So his goal is to create an optimal balance between saved and lost where an optimal balance will be one that considers both the ratio between saved and unsaved and also the absolute numbers

involved of saved and unsaved. And it's possible that the actual world (which, remember, includes not only the past and the present but also the future) has such an optimal balance. It's possible that in order to create this many people who will be saved God also had to create this many people who will be lost. It's possible that had God created a world in which fewer people go to hell that even fewer people would have gone to heaven. It's possible that in order to achieve a multitude of saints God also had to bear with a multitude of sinners.

Somebody might object at this point that an all-loving God would not create people who he knew will be lost but who would have been saved if only they had heard the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> But how do we know that there are any such people? It's reasonable, I think, to assume that many people who never hear the Gospel wouldn't have believed in the Gospel even if they had heard it. Suppose then that God has so providentially ordered the world that all of the people who never hear the Gospel are precisely such people. In that case, anybody who never hears the Gospel and is lost would have rejected the Gospel and been lost even if he had heard it. No one could stand before God on the Judgment Day and complain, *All right, God, so I didn't respond to your general revelation in nature and conscience, but if only I'd heard the Gospel then I would have believed*. And God will say, *No, I knew that even if you had heard the Gospel you would not have believed it, and therefore my judgment of you on the basis of nature and conscience is neither unfair nor unloving*. Thus it's possible that:

C. God has created a world which has an optimal balance between saved and lost, and those who never hear the Gospel and are lost would not have believed it even if they had heard it.

Now, is C true? God knows! At least if he has middle knowledge. But as long as C is even possibly true it shows that there is no inconsistency between an all-loving, all-powerful God and some people's never hearing the Gospel and being lost. So on the basis of this proposition we're now prepared to offer possible answers – and I want to emphasize *possible* answers – to those three difficult questions that prompted our inquiry. Let me take them in reverse order, beginning with the third question.

Number three was: Why didn't God create a world in which everybody freely believes the Gospel and is saved? Answer: It may not be feasible for God to create such a world. If such a world were feasible then all else being equal God would have created such a world. But given his will to create free creatures, God had to accept that some would freely reject him and his every effort to save them and be lost.

Number two: Why did God even create the world when he knew that so many people would not believe the Gospel and be lost? Answer: God wanted to share his love and

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<sup>1</sup> 5:02

fellowship with created persons. He knew that that meant that many would freely reject him and be lost, but he also knew that many others would freely receive his love and grace and be saved. The happiness and blessedness of those who would freely embrace God's love should not be prevented by those who would freely spurn him. Persons who would freely reject God and his love should not be allowed to have a sort of veto power over which worlds God is free to create. In his mercy God has providentially ordered the world in order to achieve an optimal balance between saved and lost by maximizing the number of the saved and minimizing the number of the lost.

Finally, the first question, number one: Why didn't God bring the Gospel to people who he knew would accept it if they heard it even though they reject the light of general revelation that they do have?<sup>2</sup> Answer: There are no such people! God, in his providence, has so arranged the world that those who would respond to the Gospel if they heard it are born at a time and place in history where they do hear it. The sovereign God has so ordered human history that as the Gospel spreads out from first century Palestine he places in its path people who he knew would believe it if they heard it. Once the Gospel reaches a people group, God providentially places there persons who he knew would respond to the Gospel if they heard it. But in his love and mercy God ensures that no one who would believe the Gospel if he heard it is born at a time and place in history where he fails to hear it. Those who don't respond to God's general revelation in nature and conscience and never hear the Gospel wouldn't have responded to it even if they had heard it. Therefore, no one is lost because of historical and geographical accident. Anyone who wants or even would want to be saved will be saved.

Now, these are merely possible answers to the questions that we posed. But so long as these answers are even possible they show that there's no incompatibility between God's being all-loving and all-powerful and some people never hearing the Gospel and being lost. Moreover, I find these answers to be attractive because I think they also seem to be quite biblical as well as philosophically coherent. In his open-air address to the Athenian philosophers gathered on the Areopagus, the apostle Paul declares, according to Luke's record in Acts 17, and I quote:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and . . . gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

Now this sounds to me exactly like the conclusion that I arrived at simply on the basis of philosophical reflection on this question.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Your point about how people who don't accept the Gospel, as you said, shouldn't be allowed to have a veto power over which worlds should be created. Couldn't somebody respond to that it seems almost kind of selfish that you're kind of gaining heaven almost at the expense of people who are damned?

*Dr. Craig:* I think that would only be the case if God didn't love the lost and didn't extend sufficient grace to them to be saved. You've got to remember on this view God loves the lost. He wants them to be saved. He extends sufficient grace to them to draw them to himself. The only reason they are lost is because in their evil hearts they reject and repudiate God's grace and love and every effort to save them. I think people like that shouldn't be allowed to have a veto power over which worlds God is free to create. So, no, I don't see that there's any sort of selfishness or prejudice exhibited against the lost on this account. On the contrary, the lost are such due to their own free choices to separate themselves from God forever. And God grieves their loss.<sup>3</sup>

*Student:* Does this account that we're examining here . . . is this open to the same critique that a Calvinist position might also offer? For example, a Calvinist soteriology could be critiqued and say that, well, what's the point of evangelism? That's a very crude retort but is this open to the same critique?

*Dr. Craig:* A very, very good question! I want to refer you to some articles on the Reasonable Faith website about this. If you look in the section of the website ReasonableFaith.org under "Scholarly Articles" there are a series of articles there on Christian particularism, and one of them is in response to this critique that was offered by William Hasker. I wrote a response to this called, "Should Peter Go to the Mission Field?"<sup>4</sup> I think what the objection forgets and what Hasker neglected is that even though the people who are in an unreached people group wouldn't have responded to the Gospel even if they had heard it, nevertheless through missionary activity we can bring the Gospel to that people group such that if we were to do so God would have created different people there – people who would respond to the Gospel if they heard it. So through missions work and sharing the Gospel we help to maximize the number of the saved. So I don't think that it leads to any sort of diminishment of the call to missions and evangelism. On the contrary, what I would argue is that this puts a very positive motivation on mission work and sharing our faith. It's not the negative sort of

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<sup>3</sup> 15:20

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<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/christian-particularism/should-peter-go-to-the-mission-field/> (accessed May 10, 2018).

guilt-ridden motivation where, *If I don't share the Gospel they're going to go to hell and they would have been saved and so it's all on me*. Rather it's a very positive motivation that if I go and share the Gospel God will have foreknown this and will have people there ready to respond to it when I share it. On this view there are literally divine appointments out there waiting for you to share the Gospel because God knew that you would do so and so has put people there who will be responsive to it. I find this to be a tremendously positive encouragement to missions activity and evangelism. Good question!

*Student:* To me, I always like to go back to the first chapter of Romans because when you talk about God's divine nature and his power and all of his attributes and he says this is within all man so you are definitively without excuse. To me that's almost the same as an audible hearing if he gives you an ability to know. A favorite example of mine is . . . in the late 1800s. He was the one that had elephantitis – the Elephant Man. He was found in the most horrible of rainforest type of situation. He was so deformed and they thought he was an idiot. He lived in this hovel, and he had a small six-inch Bible from his mother. That was all he had. When found, they discovered later that not only had he taught himself to read (which I think is God) but he was brilliant. He didn't live long. They thought he was Jack the Ripper, which he wasn't, so they hid him which was actually a very interesting story. But to me, when people talk about if you don't go or if they're in some horrific place God cannot possibly find them. So I agree with you that he can give you a divine appointment. If you don't go you will miss out on the blessing, but I don't think he could possibly (just based on Romans) lose anybody anywhere if they are in the Lamb's book of life.

*Dr. Craig:* I think you really did need to be here last week. It is so difficult when folks jump right into the middle of a discussion that's a continuation from before.<sup>5</sup> I agree and argued that through God's general revelation in nature and conscience that is described in Romans 1 and 2 salvation is universally accessible to all people and therefore no one can complain that he had no chance, that he had no opportunity to be saved. Even people living, as I said, on the Great Plains a Native American during the Middle Ages before missionaries came could be saved through his response to general revelation. But my concern was those people who do not respond to general revelation as did the gentleman you mentioned and so find themselves condemned before God but who would have responded to the Gospel if only the missionaries had arrived on time. If only Jim hadn't been disobedient to share the Gospel with him and had shared the Gospel with him he would have been saved but because Jim was disobedient this fellow, due to the accidents of history and geography, is forever damned. I find that very difficult so this is the solution that I'm proposing. God has so providentially ordered the world that anybody who has only general revelation and rejects it wouldn't have responded to special

revelation if he had heard it. So there are no people like Walking Bear that I used to illustrate this Native American in my lesson last week.

*Student:* Just a couple of quick points. One, your statement in your outline that God has created a world which has an optimal balance between saved and lost – it seems to me a better term is optimal feasible balance because optimal balance sounds like maybe 60% lost-40% saved is considered optimal. I think, based on the New Testament, we would say the optimal circumstance is everybody is saved.

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, fair enough. That is what I mean. I'm talking here about of those worlds that are feasible for God, he picks one that has an optimal balance.

*Student:* The second point is just to reinforce the importance of the issue. The idea that some are condemned without having heard of Christ or had the opportunity, is, I think, an important challenge that has to be addressed, and one reason is because there are many passages in Scripture where it says God is not a respecter of persons, he is not partial toward one person as opposed to another. You find it in Romans 2, Galatians 2, Ephesians 6, and elsewhere. I don't think we can just say, as the Calvinist would, the clay can't talk back to the potter because this idea that people who are similarly situated should be similarly treated is at the heart or the foundation of the human conscience. We're told that our conscience still has validity after the Fall, Romans 2:15. In fact, just a footnote from law, the idea of equal protection of the law has at its heart . . . in fact, many courts have said that those who are similarly situated should be similarly treated. I think we need to expect that somehow the solution to the fate of the lost has to take that into account.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, thank you for your comment.

*Student:* God partners with us in physical reproduction, thank goodness, as well as spiritual reproduction so he partners with us in this. In Revelation 14:6 when there's great tribulation and not as many people to go he has an angel go and proclaim in every tongue and to every nation the Gospel. So even God finds that necessary even in those times to send the angel even though he knows who would believe.

*Dr. Craig:* I want to underline a point that you, I think, are making. I'm not suggesting that the world just has by chance this optimal balance. That would be fantastically improbable, wouldn't it? That everybody who doesn't hear the Gospel would have rejected it if they had heard it. That's absurdly improbable if people are just randomly distributed in time and space.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the suggestion is that this is a providential arrangement by a sovereign God who has so arranged the world that it's like this.

*Student:* In talking about creating a world where people have the opportunity to reject or accept God and then go to heaven, what do you do with our biblical understanding that the devil was able to turn away from God even though he wasn't of this world? Does that make sense?

*Dr. Craig:* I think I understand the question, and it's very difficult to answer questions about Satan and the angels because there's so little biblical data to go on. The presumption would seem to be that if demons and Satan originated through an angelic fall that when they did so this was an irrevocable choice on their part and that's why there is no provision for their salvation. Christ didn't die for the demons or for Satan. There's no possibility because their fall is irrevocable. In the case of human beings it's still possible for them to respond to God's grace and be saved.

*Student:* I guess my question is then could you say that it's possible that in whatever world God made that there still could have been a Fall?

*Dr. Craig:* You could say that in any feasible world that there would be a Fall. In fact, that's what Alvin Plantinga, the great Christian philosopher, calls transworld depravity. He compares this to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. He says maybe every world that is feasible for God is a world in which creatures fall into sin and therefore there is this thing called transworld depravity. Now certainly there are possible worlds where creatures don't fall into sin, but those worlds wouldn't be feasible for God.

*Student:* Way before in Genesis there are already two kinds of people: the line of Seth (they build an altar and call upon the name of the Lord) and the line of Cain (they went about building their cities). The Fall is a nature of people's conscience where one that seeks God as the reference of goodness and wisdom and all that as a basis of life, and the other line seeks to maximize self-benefit. So like the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that separates people's conscience which line that they go for. The Gospel was not revealed way back then but yet people already exhibit their inclination to either see God as the reference of life or to seek their personal benefit. So Jesus came as the ultimate sacrifice that is not looking for myself and benefit but look for God's best. People that had that inclination to call upon the name of the Lord will never reject this kind of goodness. But the other kind will always reject this.

*Dr. Craig:* I think you're making a good point; let me interrupt you in the interest of time. Somebody might say, *But what about people who do respond to general revelation and conscience in a positive way but if they were to hear the Gospel they would reject it and be lost?* Then bringing the Gospel would be bad news to these people. It would bring about their damnation. Here I want to agree with you – anyone who senses the voice of God in nature and conscience and is responding to it will sense the voice of God in special revelation when he hears it and will respond to it in a salvific way. So we need

not fear that by sharing the Gospel with unreached people groups we will do anything to their detriment. On the contrary, as I said earlier, it could only help to maximize the number of those who are saved.

## **END DISCUSSION**

What we will do next time is extend the analysis. I've argued that this shows that it's entirely possible that God is all-loving and all-powerful and yet some people never hear the Gospel and are lost. Someone might respond, *All right, Dr. Craig, your solution is possible, but nevertheless it's highly improbable. It is improbable that that's the way things are.* We'll take up that objection next week.<sup>7</sup>