Trusting God in Adversity

Introduction: Part 3, *The Problem of Evil*

In our last lecture on *The Problem of Evil*, we noted that John Frame confirmed that "this is probably the most difficult problem in all of theology" and "is perhaps the most serious and cogent objection to Christian theism." We also cited William Lane Craig, who admitted that "the problem of evil is certainly the greatest obstacle to belief in the existence to God." In all probability, the presence of evil in this world – indeed, in your own life – has caused you to think carefully about your own view of God. There is also the likelihood that you have entertained certain doubts which have arisen in your mind because of your keen observations about the world of suffering (e.g., the Holocaust, the Armenian and Rwandan Genocides, Mao's Cultural Revolution, the

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sinking of the Titanic, wars, 9/11, various diseases, devastating hurricanes, earthquakes, and tornadoes, terrorist attacks, or, closer to home, the Winecoff Hotel fire in Atlanta in 1946 which killed 119 hotel occupants. To this short list, each one of us could add our own hard stories and those of our family and friends.

While the world typically argues and concludes that since evil exists, God cannot exist, we were able (in Part 2) to demonstrate that the co-existence of God and evil *is logically possible*. Additionally, we maintained that the problem of evil is, ultimately, *unsolvable* – at least in this life. We will continue our study today by restating the problem of evil.

The Logical Problem of Evil Restated

1. If God is omnipotent, he is able to prevent evil.

2. If God is good, he wants to prevent evil.

3. But evil exists.

4. Conclusion: either God is not omnipotent, or he is not good.

Evil and God Logically Incompatible?

"Any logical argument which attempts to show that evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides to be completely bankrupt."
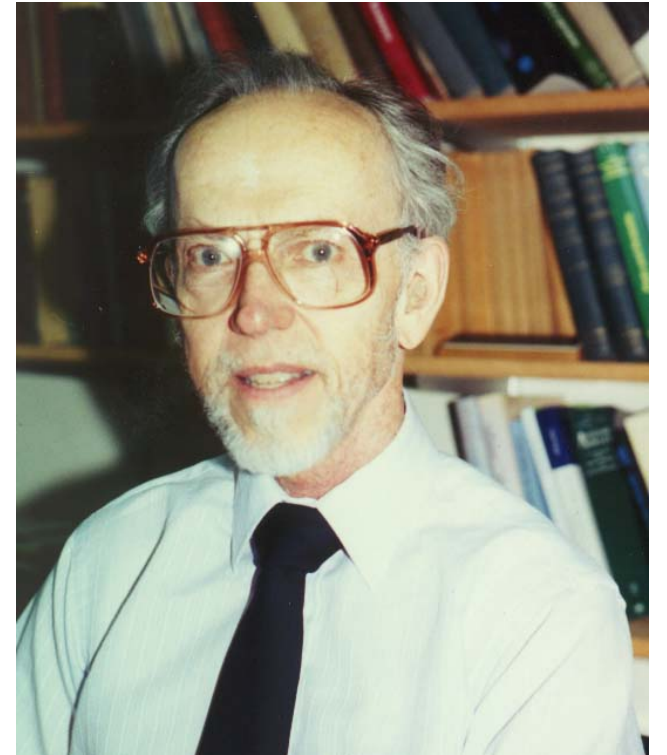
William Alston, PhD
1921 - 2009
Philosophy Professor at the Universities of Michigan, Rutgers, Illinois, and Syracuse

The Moral Character of God Questioned

"The most fundamental criticisms directed against Christianity have to do with the moral character of its God, and often focus specifically on the issue of eternal punishment."

Alister McGrath, D.Phil.
Andreas Idreos Professorship in Science and Religion at the University of Oxford

Can the Problem of Evil Be Solved?

- **N.T. Wright:** "The problem of evil is not something we will 'solve' in the present world" (Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St. Mary's College, University of St. Andrews, Scotland).

- **John Frame:** "Is there an answer to the problem? That depends on what you mean by an answer. If you are seeking an explanation that will vindicate God's providence in every instance of evil, I certainly cannot supply that, and I doubt if anyone else can, either. Nor, I think, can we supply a totally satisfying theoretical reconciliation between divine sovereignty, goodness, and evil. The mystery of God's relation to evil is one that will, I am convinced, never be completely dissolved in this life, and I am not sure whether it will be in the next."

R.C. Sproul

R.C. Sproul, PhD
1939-
American Theologian
Ligonier Ministries

"I do not know the solution to the problem of evil. Nor do I know of anyone else who does. I have never been fully satisfied by any of the theodicies I've ever seen. This does not mean the problem is insoluble or that the question is unanswerable. Perhaps tomorrow the problem will be solved. But so far I haven't been able to find a solution. My ability to identify the problem is no solution to the problem. Diagnosis or analysis is not a cure."

Carl F.H. Henry's Assessment

In his six-volume work, *God, Revelation and Authority*, "his towering exposition of the Bible's place and relevancy in the modern milieu," Carl F.H. Henry wrote a 14-page chapter entitled *God and the Problem of Evil*. From beginning to end, he cites a long list of theologians and moral philosophers who have sought to solve the problem of evil, including John S. Feinberg, C.S. Lewis, Gottfried Leibniz, P.T. Geach, Günther Harder, Alvin Plantinga, James Ross, George I. Mavrodes, Michael Peterson, George Schlesinger, Winslow Shea, Keith Yandell, Stanley G. Kane, John Hick, John W. Wenham, Origen, Irenaeus, Augustine, Antony Flew, J.L. Mackie, Ninian Smart, John Calvin, M.B. Ahern, and Michael L. Peterson.

Carl F.H. Henry's Assessment

After considering their best thinking and theoretical reasoning, Dr. Henry concludes his chapter with the following critique:

The dispute over God and evil at the purely speculative level of theoretical possibilities leads to no conclusive outcome. As M.B. Ahern observes, even the atheist cannot prove the incompatibility of the existence of God and the presence of evil in the world....Not even theistic arguments can fully vindicate God's righteousness in the face of human evil if they appeal simply to empirical considerations or to philosophical reasoning devoid of revelational illumination.

Reviewing *Theodicy*

- **Theodicy**, *n.,* "*The*, or *a*, vindication of the divine attributes, especially justice and holiness, in respect to the existence of evil; a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to 'justify the ways of God to men'" (OED).

- Theodicy is the "answer to the question of why God permits evil" (Alvin Plantinga). The word *theodicy* derives from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (judgment). Theodicy literally means "justifying God."

- "When a theist answers the question, 'Why does God permit evil?' he is giving a theodicy" (Plantinga).

Natural Evil and Moral Evil: Groothuis

- **Natural Evil:** "Natural evil is the natural world turned savage: tornadoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, floods. Diseases and deformity fill out this category, since they are not usually instigated by humans. This includes both deadly diseases (birth defects, cancer, strokes) as well as disabling diseases (lupus, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome)." "Natural evil is God's curse" (Frame).

- **Moral Evil:** Moral or natural evil "comes from the gun, the knife, the bomb, the pen and the tongue. We tell lies, murder and steal; we are lied to, killed and stolen from. Human cruelty is all around us; we will find it within ourselves as well." There are intentional and unintentional evils. "Moral evil is sin" (Frame).

A Partial Answer to the Problem of Evil

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669)
The Apostle Paul, c. 1657
National Gallery of Art, *Widener Collection*

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth'" (Rom. 9:17; NAS).

"But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth" (Ex. 9:16; ESV).

Why God Raises Up Evil People

- This text teaches that God raises up evil people (e.g., Pharaoh) "so that by prevailing over them he can display his power and his name throughout the earth" (Frame).

- The term *raise up* "is one that is used in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) in the sense of raising up on the scene of history for a particular purpose" (John Murray).

- **Two Examples:** "He sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety" (Job 5:11). "For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own" (Hab. 1:6).

The Meaning of Pharaoh's Opposition

"The adamant opposition of Pharaoh became the occasion for the display of God's great power in the plagues visited upon Egypt and particularly in the destruction of Pharaoh's hosts in the Red Sea and the passage of Israel as on dry land. That God's name was thus published abroad in all the earth is abundantly verified and this signal manifestation of his power is the theme of Scripture elsewhere" (John Murray).

Did God Display His Name & Power?

- "And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers" (Dt. 6:22-23).

- "He it was who struck down the first-born of Egypt, both of man and of beast; who in your midst, O Egypt, sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants" (Ps. 135:8-9).

- "If you say in your heart, 'These nations are greater than I. How can I dispossess them?' you shall not be afraid of them but you shall remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt" (Dt. 7:17-18).

Some Mystery Remains

John Frame's Response to Jay Adams' *The Grand Demonstration*:

- Why should the display of God's power and good name require the employment of that which is totally opposed to everything that God is?

- Cannot God display his power without contradicting his goodness?

- Cannot God display his name without making little babies suffer pain?

- How can a good God, through his wise foreordination, make someone to be evil, even when that God hates evil with all of his being?

- These questions return us to *mystery* - there are no complete answers.

Can We Trust God in Suffering?

"If what you want is encouragement to go on believing in the midst of suffering, Scripture provides that, and provides it abundantly. If you want help to go on trusting God despite unexplained evil, yes, we can help."

John M. Frame, M.Phil., D.D.
J.D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Answers in the Midst of Suffering

- The Scriptures bring us as close to an answer to the problem of evil as possible.
- The Bible is preoccupied with the problem of evil – from the fall until the end of the New Testament canon.
- "The whole Bible addresses the problem of evil, for the whole story turns on the entrance of sin and evil into the world and on God's plan for dealing with it" (Frame).
- If Scripture is wrong, how can we know what is right? (Frame)

Romans: A Great Concern for Theodicy

- "This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be **just** (justifier of God: theodicy) and the **justifier** (justifier of man) of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26).

- "What, then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! [a strong expression of abhorrence]. Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar…" (Rom. 3:3-4).

Romans: A Great Concern for Theodicy

- "But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms). May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world?" (Rom. 3:5-6).

- Paul argues for God's sovereign right as the supreme judge "without showing how God can avoid the charge of injustice in this connection" (Frame).

- No further explanation is necessary. "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" (Rom. 9:20).

What Romans Confirms: John Frame

1. We have no right to complain against God, and when we do, we expose ourselves as disobedient.

2. God is under no obligation to give us an intellectually satisfying answer to the problem of evil. He expects us to trust him in spite of that.

3. God's sovereignty is not to be questioned in connection with the problem of evil; it is rather to be underscored.

4. God's word, his truth, is altogether reliable.

5. As a matter of fact, God is not unjust. He is holy, just, and good.

The Heroes of Hebrews 11

- "They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:37-40).

- God did not answer all of their questions or "tell each one why his or her suffering was necessary. Yet their faith prevailed. The very nature of faith is to persevere despite unanswered questions" (Frame).

How God Solves the Problem of Evil

- Jesus Christ is the theodicy of Romans 3:26. It didn't look like God could vindicate His justice and goodness in the Old Testament. It seemed impossible. But He did it.

- The wait and tension builds over time so we can feel the amazing liberating power of salvation.

- God uses evil for His own good purposes. He seeks the greater good (fatherly discipline, get unbelievers' attention, resistance by Satan, etc.).

- God never foreordains an evil event without a good purpose (Rom. 8:28).

A Great Reassurance

"We find in Scripture not a philosophical solution to the problem, but a great reassurance, a powerful motivation to keep trusting and obeying, despite all the wickedness in the world….The believer simply looks at the world with values different from those of the unbeliever. And the change in those values is perhaps the closest we can get, at this point in history, to a theodicy."

A Mystery: God Has Decreed Sin

"We hold that God has decreed sin and embraced it in his plan for wise and holy ends, but not because it is necessary for himself nor for the existence of good."

- John Murray (1898-1975)

Buonarotti Michelangelo (1475-1564)
The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden
Sistine Chapel, Vatican (1509-1510)

The Awesome Silences of Eternity

"For the self-revealing God, silence remains always a sovereign option."

- Carl F.H. Henry

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