

THE COMING EVENT IN HISTORY

Study 7

Trevor Faggotter

ONE FAR-OFF DIVINE EVENT

Jesus said: Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware; keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. (Mark 13:31-32).

The poet Lord Alfred Tennyson, concluded his poem, *In Memoriam* with these words:

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.

Just as there was a day when the Messiah, and Saviour of the world, Jesus, was born into this world in a town called Bethlehem, so too there will be a day when Christ's coming-appearing will be an actual event in our very real, daily human history. Tennyson described that occasion as "one far-off divine event, to which the whole creation moves". The *seeming* delay in Jesus Christ's coming-appearing - coupled with this expectation but non-arrival in *every age* since that of the early Christians - has driven some people to mistrust all such prophecy, and to doubt or deny the Christian story, and gospel.

This coming anew of the ascended, reigning Christ into human history, to put things right, and close off this age with finality, is an essential part of a biblical theodicy. It is one component, which is always lacking in a philosophical theodicy, where an understanding of the world is sought apart from the action of God in Christ. The difficult, or seemingly unanswerable questions of theodicy have often produced great doubt, and a kind of faithlessness in many people.

Only this week I noticed that a well-known University Professor in New Testament studies, by the name of Bart Ehrman has concluded that the questions of theodicy, and the unsatisfactory answers he has found, have forced him to take up the stance of an agnostic, rather than hold to his former Christian faith. He has now authored a book telling why.¹ One of the reasons given is his unbelief in much of the Christian creed – such as the resurrected, ascended, currently reigning Christ, and his coming appearing.

We should note that P.T. Forsyth draws our attention to the importance of faith, which looks forward to a teleology - God's planned goal –arriving in history.

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer our Most Important Question - Why we Suffer*, HarperOne, 2008.

The faith of a teleology in history protects us from the vagrancy of soul, which dogs the notion that things are but staggering on, or flitting upon chance winds over a trackless waste. It saves us from the timidity, which so easily besets us before the incalculable.²

Praying and not losing heart are important qualities for a human being to have, and to wrestle to maintain, and sustain. Jesus asked a good question about this persistent, enduring approach, especially when living amidst human injustice and suffering: 'When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?' (Luke 18:8).

LIVING IN THE MYSTERY

Jesus said... 'To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables'. (Mark 4:11).

He went on to say: 'Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away (Luke 8:18).

Geoffrey Bingham has helped us to see that a mystery is not a problem to be solved, but a revealed reality in which one lives:

The Scriptures do not seem to us to be mysterious, since we can read and noetically understand every idea put forward, but in what we think we understand, there is, nevertheless, mystery. Christ said that in certain cases it has to be given to understand certain mysteries. That is, such mysteries cannot be understood by intellectual endeavour. Somewhere—and somehow—the heart and the will are involved in true comprehension. This is a baffling thought; namely, that such mysteries are not puzzles to be solved. God is Himself the great mystery, and He retains the right to open up Himself and all concomitant mysteries, or to close them off. This is a fearful thought—that mysteries may be shut off from us, and we from them!³

Humility is especially necessary in the matter of theodicy, and in understanding the nature and origins and activity of evil. In our previous study we commenced by including these two passages from Scripture, concerning the matter of evil:

For the mystery of lawlessness (or mystery of iniquity) is already at work (2Thessalonians 2:7).

And he (Jesus) said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly (Mark 7:22).

² P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988, p. 120

³ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Glory of the Mystery and the Mystery of the Glory*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1998, p. xii

Paul's phrase in 2Thessalonians 2:7 teaches and cautions us that sin, lawlessness or iniquity is a mystery. Aware of this one can consider carefully such questions as:

1. The origin, cause or reason for evil, as well as, perhaps, a prior question about its essence or nature. What is evil? St. Augustine (354-430) denounced as absurd all efforts to reflect upon the origin of evil as long as one does not know what it is.
2. How long O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? (Habakkuk 1:2)
3. What is Victory? And, when does it arrive, this Victory over evil? *For a humanity that is overwhelmed by suffering (evil endured) and guilt (evil committed), that is the question that matters.*⁴

Whilst we are reading and listening to Forsyth seeking understanding – especially of his exposition of the significance of the cross of Christ – we need to bear in mind that we are not merely searching for intellectual insights, but rather, gospel insight – which comes by hearing with faith as Christ speaks!

EVIL TOUCHING OUR NERVE

Forsyth recognizes that there is a greater problem than merely staggering on to nowhere:

But our worst trouble is not due to a mere tracklessness in the course of history. That is too negative to try us keenly. We are exposed to positive assault. The iron enters our soul. The worst question rises, and the chief protest, when the disorder in the world touches our nerve in the shape of positive pain, evil, or guilt; when our personal life is deranged by that alien invasion, or is crushed, instead of stayed, by our connection with the course of things; when conscience rises in protest at the fate of the good, or the falsity of ourselves. Questions then come home about the connection of evil and suffering, sin and sorrow, grief and goodness. Then it is that the desire for a teleology deepens into a passion for a theodicy. Has the teleology a moral end?⁵

Other writers reflecting upon the more horrendous crimes of World War 2, seem to keep looking at the issue of guilt, and the need for it to be attributed, acknowledged and dealt with. But how is guilt to be dealt with, if you have done such things? Is there any hope for a person who has committed gross evil? What about our own less than righteous lives? It is valuable, even if very painful to recount what has happened and keeps happening in human history. In searching for a theology for Auschwitz, Simon writes:

We are dealing with the deaths of millions, mostly non-combatant Jews, who had been rounded up and sent to various concentration-camps designed entirely for their

⁴ Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, Apollos, IVP, England, 1994, p. 12-13

⁵ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988, p. 120

extermination. Auschwitz was the largest but by no means the only place of infamy. At Treblinka, Maideneck, Ravensbruck, Dachau, Buchenwald, Belsen, Chelmo, Sobibor, Mauthausen and many lesser known places the same dimensions of sin and suffering prevailed. Auschwitz stands here for the whole guilt which has stained the earth, not only in Europe but also in Asia.

This guilt must in the first place be ascribed to Hitler, the German Chancellor from 1933 until his death by suicide, probably on April 30th, 1945, in Berlin. He appointed the men who carried out the task of extermination with ruthless efficiency.⁶

Our problem is evil as it affects our own lives, so terribly. Over Nyholm produced a film documentary entitled 'The Anatomy of Evil', in which he interviewed mostly the perpetrators of mass murder in World War 2 and the Balkans War. In setting out on his task, he said. "I have decided to confront heartlessness, heartlessness itself, face to face."⁷ The interviewer's final conclusion is honest, as he asks about what he might have done in the same circumstances: "I cannot answer if I would do it; if I say I know myself it is not correct; I can't predict if I can handle it; I no longer have certainty...from certainty to maybe – that is a profound loss. That is my condition!"

WHEN GOD TRUSTED MAN WITH FREEDOM

When a film documentary maker, cautiously, fearfully, and sadly concludes that virtually all human beings are capable of terrible evil, and many have exercised it in such an atrocious manner, then it seems clear enough that we have been given such freedom as to include even a terrifying capacity for genocide. What then are we to say of our Creator?

There was never such a fatal experiment as when God trusted man with freedom. But our Christian faith is that He knew well what He was about. He did not do that as a mere adventure, not without knowing that he had the power to remedy any abuse of it that might occur, and to do this by a new creation more mighty, marvellous, and mysterious than the first. He had means to emancipate even freedom, to convert moral freedom, even in its ruin, into spiritual. If the first creation drew on His might, the second taxed His all-might. It revealed His power as moral majesty, as holy omnipotence, most chiefly shown in the mercy that redeems and reconciles.⁸

In the light of the Cross's power, Forsyth goes on the revel in God's grand plan:

⁶ Ulrich Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz*, SPCK, London, 1967, p. 11

⁷ The following are comments made by men who once killed their civilian victims, so mercilessly:

- Many people will ask, is there no light in this murderous dark? The light in the darkness is the shame.
- Generally speaking I am not a good man at all. I am not a good Christian. I succumbed to instincts to do evil to others.
- I envy people who have normal lives BBQ and go to the beach. I envy tramps. I am no longer like them. Now I don't belong anywhere, any particular place. I belong here (prison). I've lost what is most important – morality.

⁸ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988, p. 123-124

To redeem creation is a more creative act than it was to create it. ...The supreme power in the world is not simply the power of God but of a holy God, upon whose rule all things wait, and may wait long. It is no slack knot that the Saviour has to undo. All the energy of a perverse world in its created freedom pulled on the tangle to tighten it. And its undoing has give the supreme form to all God's dealing with the world. But at the same time the snarl is not beyond being untied. Man is born to be redeemed. The final key to the first creation is the second; and the first was done with the second in view... The first creation was the prophecy of the second; the second was the first tragically 'arrived'. There was moral resource in the Creator equal to anything that might happen to the creature or by him⁹

The Cross is at once creation's fatal jar and final recovery. And there is no theodicy for the world except for a theology of the Cross ... No reason of man can justify God in a world like this. He must justify Himself, and He did so in the Cross of His Son.¹⁰

As Forsyth reflects upon the 1914-1917 (1918) war to end all wars, he urges us to see the greatness of the gospel of redemption, and the role the church has to know her Lord, and proclaim his Act of Redemption, accomplished, (and recounted), in the power of the weakness of the cross:

We are now in a crisis that no individual can measure, nor his piety deal with and it is beyond any philosophy or idealism of a time. In needs that faith of an agelong holy Church to grasp it. Would that the Church's faith could always handle it in the true power of that crisis greater still which made the Church – in the power of the Church's Cross and Gospel. An awful crisis of wickedness like war can only be met on the Church's height and range of faith; and it forces us up to levels and aspects of our belief which our common hours or moral slackness too easily feel extreme. Nothing but the great theologies of redemption are adequate to the great tragedies of the world. ...Christ finished the world-work given Him to do. He brought the world home.¹¹

Isaiah once said of the suffering servant to come – Jesus – that 'He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied'. (Isaiah 53:11 RSV). Forsyth takes up the same words and applies them to the whole creation, and its travail:

In Him the whole creation sees the travail of its soul and is satisfied. He who can take away the sin of the world has in His reversion the reason, completion, peace, joy, and glory of all things. The Destroyer of guilt pacifies all grief, the Reconciler of our enmity ends all question. To see the devastator a truly penitent thief would compensate any Christian victim. The Justifier of men is the one and only theodicy of God.¹²

⁹ Forsyth, p. 123-124

¹⁰ Forsyth, p. 122

¹¹ Forsyth p. 126

¹² Forsyth p. 127

Further reflection upon the sadness and horror of the war, brings Forsyth to describe the situation as elements of hell breaking through into the daily life of humanity, as judgment on the world, but also upon the Church's failure to serve the world well:

After all, the present cataclysm is an acute condensation of what has been going on in nature, human and other, for millenniums. If faith could survive that, need it succumb to this? If the existence of hell is compatible with faith in God, and is even of His ordinance, must we lose faith when it comes through the earth's crust in a volcano?

The dirty chimney needed to be fired.

The present situation is a monument to the failure of the Church!¹³

We are driven to a very personal involvement in the cross, where we can not consider it from afar, nor just talk about it – rather, by the Spirit, we are taken into its action, in the embrace of our Saviour, as he bears our sin, we say – *I have been crucified with Christ*:

The Cross is not a theological theme, not a forensic device, but the crisis of the moral universe on a scale far greater than earthly war. It is the theodicy of the whole God dealing with the whole soul of the whole world in holy love, righteous judgment, and redeeming grace.¹⁴

HOW WEIGHTY IS THE GLORY THAT IS TO COME?

Concerning the coming glory, Alister McGrath chimes in with a helpful word:

Some say that nothing could ever be adequate recompense for suffering in this world. But how do they know? Have they spoken to anyone who has suffered and subsequently been raised to glory? Have they been through this experience themselves? One of the greatest tragedies of much writing about human suffering this century has been its crude use of rhetoric. 'Nothing can ever compensate for suffering!' rolls off the tongue with the greatest of ease. It has a certain oratorical force. It discourages argument. It suggests that what has been said represents the distillation of human wisdom in the subject, and is so evidently correct that it does not require justification. It implies that anyone who disagrees is a fool. But how do they know nothing can compensate for suffering? Paul believed passionately that the sufferings of the present life would be outweighed by the glory that is to come (Romans 8:18). How do they know that he is wrong, and that they are right? Have they tasted the glory of the life to come, so that they can make the comparison? Have they talked to others who have been through the bitter experience of suffering and death, and have been caught up in the risen and glorious life of Christ, and asked them how they now feel about their past suffering? No. Of course they haven't. The simple truth is that this confident assertion of the critics of Christianity is just so much whistling in the wind. Their comments are made from our side of the veil which separates history from eternity.¹⁵

¹³ Forsyth p. 129

¹⁴ Forsyth p. 133

¹⁵ Alister McGrath, *Suffering*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1992, p. 96-97