

FAITH AMIDST CATASTROPHE

Study 5

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Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. (*Jesus* in Matt. 7:24-25)

'...when historic progress seems to end around us in a social collapse and a moral anarchy... if the moral soul is anchored on the Gospel of the Cross and Kingdom of God in a historic crisis really greater than any war, it cannot be swept away by any currents or storms in history.'¹ (P. T. Forsyth)

INTRODUCTION

As we pursue our studies in *The Justification of God*, by P.T. Forsyth, it may be valuable to recall again what is at the core of our studies, namely theodicy. Theodicy has been called 'Thee-ODD-I-see'. We do see much that seems ODD, particularly in terms of suffering and catastrophe. In many of the occurrences in our daily lives, things occur which can, and often do cause us to question, or at the very least, re-evaluate what we understand by the mercies and goodness of God.

Job had to work things right through, from his worship life as a praying, righteous man, to the onslaught of inexplicable evil, permitted by God to take place, through to the week long silence of his friends as they sat with him, while he suffered greatly; on to the inadequate words of his comfortless theological counsellors; and his own genuine protest; and his trust still – *though he slay me, yet will I trust in him*; yet finally God, the wonderful counsellor revealed himself as creator, and then acted as redeemer, blessing once again the suffering Job. Job repented. He changed his mind and his disposition.²

It was Epicurus (341-270 BC) who formulated the classic theodicy dilemma, which David Hume (1711-76) has subsequently expressed in the following way:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?³

It is the incarnation of God in Christ, however, in the very midst of human history, which ultimately shatters this philosophical formulation, rendering it untenable. For God, the Father, and Jesus the Son of God, reveal themselves, together with the Spirit, to be the God who suffers to the full – to the uttermost in abandonment and forsakenness.

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988, p. 85

² Job 42:1-6

³ Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, Oxford, p. 2

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

At the same time, this is the God who is the only righteous enemy of all evil - human, demonic and satanic. This God comes in human flesh, to conquer evil, by holy love.

The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil (1John 3:8b).

We may give assent to such a biblical statement, and be glad of it, yet still find ourselves at a loss to respond to suffering and evil, when it arises in new, surprising and terrifying forms. Human suffering is so very unpleasant - in particular our own, or that of those near to us. Global suffering is so often tragic beyond comprehension (if we are not sedated and numbed by the sheer frequency of news updates, and the crass lack of reverence for life, often evident in TV programming). Global tragedy can confront us to *Be Still and Know That I am God*, and re-evaluate our own lives – when, in particular, faith is present.

C.S. LEWIS AND PAIN

In the film *Shadowlands* – the famous C.S. Lewis is giving a university lecture in which he addresses the great issues of life. In the movie (from my memory), he asks his students this question: ‘...and why does God allow us to suffer?’ There is a thoughtful pause, as the camera pans the lecture hall of students who are eagerly looking on. They brace themselves for the wisdom they have been seeking of late. Lewis proceeds confidently - providing the small beginnings of a profound answer to this age-old question. He has a note of certainty in his voice: ‘God lets us suffer because he wants us to grow up!’

Lewis is also well known for his comments regarding pain:

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.⁴

Pain is the flag of truth, planted in a rebel fortress.

Fast forward to a later segment in C.S. Lewis’s life. His young wife Helen has died, and Lewis is writing his thoughts, and expressing his emotions. He is engulfed in grief, deep grief. He acknowledges the hope of the gospel. But he is negating one significant aspect. To paraphrase (again from memory), he says something like: Speak to me of the sovereign God, and I will listen. But speak to me of the God of comfort, and I cannot agree. I feel no comfort. No consolation. Only numbness. But no comfort!⁵

Many will identify with Lewis at this point. It is not so easy just to *grow up* when it is our turn to suffer, intensely. Lewis reveals his emotions and thoughts. He illustrates the daily human struggle of coming to terms with life as it really is. On occasions, the pain - Christian or not - is very acute. We can ponder the reasons for suffering. We can even set

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fontana, 1957, p. 81.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Seabury Press, 1961

them forth in a lecture, given from a biblical perspective. We can talk about them. It is another thing however, to be on the receiving end of incidents, for which, discussion seems entirely inappropriate.⁶ Words fail us. Doctrines fail us. We need the breast of the Living Jesus on which to lay our head (John 13:23).

Suffering and sadness at the death of a loved one under not uncommon circumstances, like cancer, can be very tiring, tearing and most difficult. However, when blatant human evil is *in our face* as the immediate cause of our pain, and when sinister powers seem to dominate and destroy human life, in murder, massacre and mayhem, then we are likely to ask, or to be faced with the most difficult and most probing of human questions.

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY ON THEODICY

The Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his famous book *The Brothers Karamazov*⁷ has a fictional character named Ivan Karamazov, who says of God and creation:

'I accept God plainly and simply ...I accept his divine wisdom and his purpose... I believe in the underlying order and meaning of life. I believe in the eternal harmony into which we are all supposed to merge one day'. However, almost immediately he tells his brother Alyosha: 'I refuse to accept this world of God's... Please understand, it is not God that I do not accept, but the world he has created. I do not accept God's world and I refuse to accept it. Ivan then proceeds to explain why he cannot bring himself to accept this world of God's. He mentions a number of cases of extreme and gratuitous cruelty, in particular the report of an army general who fed an eight year-old boy to his hounds because the child had slightly injured his favourite dog with a stone. Ivan says:

Listen: if all have to suffer so as to buy eternal harmony by their suffering, what have children to do with it – tell me please? It is entirely incomprehensible why they should have to buy harmony by their sufferings. Why should they, too, be used as dung for someone else's future harmony?

Ivan then concludes:

I don't want harmony ... too high a price has been placed on harmony. We cannot afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket of admission... It's not God that I do not accept, Alyosha. I merely most respectfully return him the ticket.

Ivan is not an atheist, but *he finds it morally repugnant that God should (seem to) expect such a terrible price to be paid for the final bliss and harmony that he will bestow on humankind at the end of time.*⁸ Some suggest that too much freedom was given to Adam.

How are we to respond to this type of reasoning? Perhaps, with silence, prayer and trust in God? Is it true love to speak of Christ, in the face of tragic and terrible deeds? Is it usually best left for another day? What then do we say or do on another day? Have we

⁶ Job 2:13 'They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great'.

⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, (1880) 2003, Penguin Books

⁸ Quoted by Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, Oxford, p. 96-97

merely theories of the cross to share, and mere words to offer, for the loss of a loved one? Or is there a time and a season for speaking even into the most difficult of objections, of God's goodness? Is this all profoundly a matter of 'soul making', fitting us for glory? Do we not have a Person, to offer, a Redeemer, Jesus, the friend, glorified flesh and blood, who has been there in the deepest of suffering, *made to be sin*, in order to redeem?

What indeed has God given us in Jesus Christ?

What He has not given us is a scheme of rational optimism, or a visible process of good, dawning and spreading to its perfect day. He has given us no programme of happy things.⁹

What then? It is said that we have nothing but the promises of God. But these are *all*:

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Corinthians 3:21b—23).

Forsyth always draws us back to God's one moral Act of holiness, destroying sin's guilt:

No reason of man can justify God for His treatment of His Son; but whatever does justify it justifies God's whole providence with the universe, and solves its problem. He so spared not His Son as with Him to give us all things. The true theology of the Cross and its atonement is the solution of the world. There is no other. It is that or none.¹⁰

Our faith rose from 'the sharpest crisis, the greatest war, the deadliest death, and the deepest grave the world ever knew – in Christ's Cross'¹¹.

“The chief cause of our being unhinged by catastrophe is twofold”.

First, that we have drawn our faith from the order of the world instead of its crisis, from the integrity of the moral order rather than from the tragedy of its recovery in the Cross.

And, even if we start there, the second error is that we have been more engrossed with the ill we are saved from than with Him who saves us, and the Kingdom for which we are saved. We are more taken up with the wrongs so many men have to bear than with the wrong God has to bear from us all – God who yet atones and redeems in giving us a Kingdom which is always His in reality and ours in reversion.

It is not as if God first redeemed, and, having thus prepared the ground, brought in the Kingdom; but He redeemed us by bringing in the Kingdom, and setting it up in eternal righteousness and Eternal Life. The Cross of Christ is not the preliminary of the Kingdom; it is the Kingdom breaking in. It is not the clearing site for the heavenly city; it is the city itself descending out of heaven from God.¹²

⁹ Forsyth, p. 79

¹⁰ Forsyth, p. 122

¹¹ Forsyth, p. 57

¹² P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 76-77