

SPRING 2011: DOUBTING GOD
WEEK 1: DOUBTING GOD'S GOODNESS—IF GOD IS GOOD, WHY AM I SUFFERING?¹

Have mercy on those who doubt. Jude 1.22

I. INTRODUCTION: DOUBT IN GENERAL

A. DOUBT AND FAITH—Doubt can be a catalyst rather than an obstacle to faith.

Mark 9.22-25: And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

B. DOUBT AND REASON—Faith is the basis of our reason, not the opposite of it.

John 20.24-29: Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." ²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

C. DOUBTING OUR DOUBTS

Luke 24.1-12 and real skepticism. If I tell you that our church is offering free bowling this afternoon, you may doubt that a church would do anything like that. Then you might believe that they won't and so, not wanting to look foolish, you simply don't go. But your doubt is based on faith, a belief in alternate reality. A true skeptic would simply show up and see—investigate. You cannot avoid faith, only a particular faith.

II. DOUBTING GOD'S GOODNESS: SUFFERING AND EVIL—There may be no greater time in life when we doubt the existence or goodness of God than when tragedy strikes. We quite naturally ask, where He is, what He's doing, and how could this be. In the moment and aftermath of tragedy, the claim of God's goodness seems like a trite response and an affront to the reality we are facing.

A. **There are no easy Answers.** Let's be straightforward in saying that there are no quick fixes and easy answers to this problem, nothing a person can say to make it all better or to tie up every loose end out there. To quote a Charlie Peacock song, "Lord, silence the lips of the people with all of the answers. Gently show them now is the time for tears." Remember Job's friends who showed up and simply sat with him in silence for 7 days/nights (Job 2.11-13) and the admonition of Paul to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12.15).

B. **The Bible takes our suffering seriously.** The Bible is extremely forthright about suffering, evil, and pain in our world. The Bible does not run away from this problem by portraying the world as an easy, glib place or by presenting a pie in the sky theology. Christianity takes the brokenness and the pain of our world seriously, in fact more seriously than any other worldview or religion. In religions like Islam and Judaism, one can morally escape the effects of sin on the world by obeying religious

¹ My convictions on this subject and this teaching have been greatly shaped by the preaching and writing of Tim Keller, especially his book *The Reason for God*.

instructions and following (to the letter) each rule and law. Thus, undoing brokenness is simply a matter of needing better teaching and more willpower. That does not take seriously the severity and scope of pain in the world. Eastern religions tend to see pain, suffering, and evil as illusory, and therefore advocate for a mystical experience that removes us from the physical world which the Bible describes as real and “groaning” under the weight of injustice and evil (Romans 8.18-17). The Bible confronts suffering head on. For instance, take the example of Joseph who was sold into slavery by his own brothers or Job who lost all his 10 children, his health, his wealth, and his wife’s support. The Bible is not pretend but rather a very earthy, raw, and real book about the human condition. Take the example of Lamentations 3 or Psalm 88.

- C. Can Atheism help?** We might think that the problem of suffering is too great for a good God and therefore it makes more sense to just become an atheist. In the face of pain, belief in God can just seem naïve, but I believe that atheism is actually more naïve. Why? If there is no god/God, then there are no standards of goodness, justice, or suffering, except the standards of nature. Unfortunately, nature gives us the prime example of how the strong eat the weak; nature would give us the ok to perpetuate violence on any who cannot withstand our power. In nature, the Lion is king because he can destroy any who oppose him. You don’t see the gazelles forming a movement of social justice against the despotic lions or them going to the animal U.N. to pass a resolution for gazelle rights nor is there even a movement of humans to stop gazelle cruelty by lions. They are simply part of the food chain, a link in the biological process; it is perfectly natural for them and their young to be eaten. The atheist, lacking a “god” and therefore any objective standard must play a game of choose your own adventure morality if he/she is unwilling to appeal to the example of nature itself. This hardly takes the brokenness and pain of the world seriously.

Look at the experience of the very famous Annie Dillard. She moved by a creek in Virginia to observe the serenity of nature and conform her life to it. Listen to her description:

Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me or any one! I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. I must part ways with the only world I know...Look: the robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased. The sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. But I cannot feel that way about your death nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin's! We value the individual supremely and nature values him not a whit. It looks as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized. Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak.

Consider that the world is a monster...There is not a people in the world that behaves as badly as praying mantises. But wait, you say, there is no right or wrong in nature: right and wrong in a human concept! Precisely! We are moral creatures...in a universe that is running on chance and death, careening blindly from nowhere to nowhere, which somehow produced wonderful us...This world runs on chance and death and power but I cherish life and the rights of the weak vs. the strong. So I crawled by chance out of a sea of amino acids, and now I must whirl around and shake my fist at that sea and cry SHAME! We little blobs of soft tissue crawling around on this one planet's skin are right, and the whole universe is wrong. Or the alternative that nature is fine and our feelings are freakishly amiss. The frog that the giant water bug sucked had a rush of feeling for about a second before its brain turned to broth. I however, have been sapped by various strong feeling about the incident almost daily for years....All right then—it is our emotions and values that are amiss. We are freaks—the world is fine! Let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first!

Don’t let the length of the quote make you miss what she is saying. We know that the essence of nature is the strong eating the weak (survival of the fittest) and yet we also believe that oppression (Hitler, Rwanda, child abuse, etc.) is wrong. But if nature is all there is (atheism), then why would it be wrong for strong humans to trample weak ones just like the bug Dillard observed destroying the frog? How could we believe that nature is in any way abnormal unless there is some standard outside of nature to which we appeal? If we only believe in nature as is, then we should not be repulsed at the Hitlers and child abusers of the world; rather we should think them normal and natural for they are only products of nature’s drive for survival of the fittest. If we have nothing to appeal to but nature, then we lose even the vocabulary to name people and events as evil or unjust. The Bible however,

makes sense of the world because it tells us that the world is created but fallen and that God provides a standard of justice by which we can call injustice exactly what it is and from which we derive our beliefs about suffering and social justice. It is only by the Christian standard that we say such things, certainly not by nature's standard. So, if you believe that nature is violent but believe that humans should not live that way, you are living as if the Biblical God is real. Therefore, atheism only puts your suffering in a deeper predicament—meaning, you have no right to even feel bereaved or lonely or sad or angry because what you are experiencing is simply natural, nature at work. It is not wrong, it simply is. Is it honest to live as if God exists and not acknowledge him?

- D. A God who is bigger than we imagine.** When suffering, I say to myself, “if I had the power, I would stop this from happening.” Then I make a leap of faith in both the size of my intellectual abilities and in the size of God Himself: If I would stop it, then surely that's the same way God would act, right? If I can't see any good reasons for this, then there must not be any, right? It takes a lot of faith to make such a leap. If you have a God who is big enough to be angry at for not stopping suffering, then you have a God who is big enough to have very good reasons beyond our comprehension for allowing it to continue. You can't have it both ways!
- E. A God Who Weeps.** If God was willing to endure the crucible of the cross for us, then He certainly will be willing to be with us in our more minor crucibles. In John 11, Jesus' good friend Lazarus dies and when Jesus goes there and stands before the tomb of His friend, the Bible says that He wept, not just a trickle but so that the people watching remarked, “See how he loved him! (John 11.35-37)” Jesus has been in a place worse than yours and He sheds tears alongside you.
- F. A God Who Heals.** As a pastor and as a human being, I have witnessed unmitigated suffering—death, disease, alienation, betrayal, abuse, abandonment, loneliness, tears. Sometimes, just upon approach, my stomach churns, my heart races, fear sets in. What will I say? What does God do or say? At a hospital bed or in a funeral home, a good God who allows suffering and evil transitions from philosophical conundrum to devastating reality. In such situations, we are rightly skeptical of pious platitudes or feel good inspiration from smiling pastors or back slapping well-wishers. Usually, at times of our greatest pain, we only admit an inner circle of people to witness—those who have been wounded like we have, those who have suffered too, those who are broken too. Those are the people who have the ability to enter our pain because they have been there first, and they are the people with the power to help us down the healing path because they know it well. It is an ironic truth that only the wounded can really heal. In Jesus, we have a wounded Savior, in the words of Henri Nouwen, a wounded Healer, one who has experienced every pain and travesty we have and has overcome. He has walked through the fire and been burned; He has been plunged beneath unimaginably deep waters and has drowned. He has faced pain, suffering, and evil head on and conquered. This means we can trust Him with our suffering. If he conquered the greatest injustice, then He can heal ours too. **Gen. 50.20: You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.**
- G. A God who Suffers.** We need to see that not stopping suffering is a question of which God Himself has faced the pain. Take a look at Luke 23.35-38. Notice what the crowd cries out to Jesus, “He saved others; let him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His chosen one. If you are the king of the Jews, then save yourself!” They are calling on him, not to stop the suffering of the world but to stop His own suffering. They are mocking the God who has ‘chosen’ Him for not stopping the blood-letting. Does God have the power to stop it? Of course, remember his statement in Matthew 26.53, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” In other words, more than 60,000 angels with flaming swords would be at His bleeding side in a moment if He called them. Now put yourself in the Father's place, watching your Son be tortured, hearing Him scream out, seeing the mocking, watching Him rise to gasp for air only to slide back down again breathless, hearing Him be rejected, and observing His death, all while you had the power to send more than 12 legions of angels to His side. You better believe if that were my son, I would move heaven and earth to be there; I would be an unstoppable force to armies, soldiers, bystanders, and weapons. And yet God watched on; Jesus died on. God Himself has faced

the reality of not stopping His own suffering infinitely more powerfully than we ever will b/c He not only allows suffering to continue in our world but He allowed it for His own Son. We face the pain of *powerless* suffering, where we have little control over the situation, but God faced the pain of *powerful* suffering, that is, suffering with the full power to end it and yet letting it continue in horror. There would have to be an amazing reason to do something like that, and there is. He did that for the infinitely valuable result of the salvation of you, me, and all of creation. Christianity is the only religion that gives us a God who is not removed from suffering but comes and Himself takes on the suffering that should have been mine and should have been yours. He does not require your blood but provides His own. John Stott says that he personally could not believe in God if not for the cross where the One who is all powerful humbles Himself and suffers a type of punishment that you and I will never experience. So, we don't know for sure what the reason for suffering is but we know what it isn't, what it can't be. It can't be b/c He doesn't love us; it can't be b/c He doesn't care; it can't be b/c He's aloof. God loves us and hates suffering so much that He was willing to come down and get involved in it personally.

"For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worth while." (Dorothy Sayers)

H. A God who Restores. What God promises is ultimate and total redemption of suffering. This is why the Bible can say in Romans 8.18 that the present sufferings are not worth comparing to the future glory, which in v. 23 he describes as the redemption of our bodies, a physical future (not destruction of the world but restoration) where everything crooked will be made straight, where we will dance like the greatest of dancers, where we will travel like the wealthiest millionaires, where we will sing and play and worship in ways that are unimaginable to us now. Tim Keller writes, "The Biblical view of things is resurrection – not a future that is just a *consolation* for the life we never had but a *restoration* of the life you always wanted. This means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater."

The Bible promises that God's work in the present leads to a world in the future where, in the words of Sam from *Lord of the Rings*, every sad thing comes untrue. This is what is so unique and powerful about Christianity: Jesus did not abolish suffering, he absorbed it; He did not sidestep it, he swallowed it. He did not stop the crucifixion; He rose from the dead. He took the crown of thorns and in the Resurrection twisted it into a crown of glory; He took the cross of death and in the Resurrection made it into a place of life. That's what the Resurrection means for your pain and the pain of the whole world. Practically speaking, every cross the Christian must bear, every thorn in your flesh, every tear from your eyes will be twisted and remade for your glory, it will be worked for your good—not just consolation but restoration. Tim Keller again, "If we think of our lives as only 70 years long, suffering will loom large; if we think of our lives as endless, suffering is a fleeting thing. A billionaire will hardly feel a theft of the \$1000 from his pocket. A middle class man will feel it sorely. Christians are billionaires in glory...One second of glory will outweigh 1000 years of pain."

Revelation 21.1-5: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."