

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND THEIR OUTCOME

Study 2

Trevor Faggotter

WHY THEODICY IS AN ISSUE

Analysis and commentary upon the major problems in the world, nation, city, family or environment, can be heard daily on radio talkback segments across the globe. The blame, for our current or impending woes almost always rests with someone else. Cynicism abounds. Theology within the Christian church can all too easily become more a reflection of the popular, or dominant culture of the day, than a proclamation of the mind, and action of God - as revealed in Scripture. Only a thoroughly biblical theodicy can meet the world with the Word of grace, amidst dire judgments, as *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness* (Romans 1:18).

From Genesis 3 we hear that ever since the entrance of sin into the world, human beings have sought to place the blame for their circumstances upon someone else – mostly God, but also other people and other creatures. Guilt is deeply at work in every human heart, provoking a skewed view of the truth, globally. This is especially so, as God draws near:

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 3:8-11)

The reflex response to God’s simple, but probing, existential question ‘Where are you?’ finds expression in the deflecting the blame onto another. The man quickly pointed to the woman as the leading cause of his present fear. He also blamed God - who gave the woman to be with him. The woman in turn, blamed the ancient serpent, the devil:

The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:12-13)¹

Human beings will view God very differently, depending upon whether they have a pure or an impure heart. Where a person has a pure heart, or cleansed heart, God reveals himself to be pure. Where genuine faith is not present, God’s wrath acts against the conscience of the guilty person, so that God appears to be unjust, unkind and wrong.

¹ Rev. 12:9 ... that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world...

...with the pure you show yourself pure; and with the crooked you show yourself perverse (Psalm 18:26).

Sinful human beings frequently view the world by placing *God in the Dock*² in order that he may give account of himself. In our humanly devised, God-blaming *kangaroo court*, we human beings exercise the self-appointed role of prosecutor, and judge. If God is creator, we reason, then he must answer for the state of the world he has created! However, the Lord sits in the heavens *and laughs* (Psalm 2:4).

In his *Foreword* to our text, *The Justification of God*, Dean Carter exposes the heart of sinful humanity in asking erroneous questions. Dean writes - in brackets:

(after all, theodicy is only an issue where there is a rejection of the light).³

This comment reflects the teaching of Jesus, in John's gospel, who said:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed (John 3:19-20).

Facing the plain truth concerning God, humanity and the world is terribly confronting, if ultimately gloriously liberating. In the day that you eat of it [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall *die*. Yet, everyone who lives and believes in Jesus will never die.

MAN-CENTRED CULTURE INSTEAD OF GOD-CENTRED FAITH

Man-centred cultures and religions, rather than God-centred faith in Christ, seeking his Coming Kingdom, are at the heart of all human evil and mayhem. A world that ignores the redemptive gift and gracious will of the Living Father soon becomes addicted to the narcotic agendas of progress, technology, escalating wealth, cultural mysticism, religious escapism, substance and environmental abuse and a yearning desire for more power.

Everything has come to turn on man's welfare instead of God's worship, on man with God to help him and not on God with man to wait upon Him. The fundamental heresy of the day, now deep in Christian belief itself, is humanist.⁴

Humanism had a bitter outcome for those who had embraced it, in the years prior to and during World War 1, as Forsyth points out:

I say it is inevitable that world calamities should encourage the denials of those who denied before. Their shock also makes sceptics of many, whose belief had

² C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, Eerdmans, 1970, is a book, which contains a series of short articles.

³ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988, p. 4

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 24

arisen and gone on only under conditions of fine weather, happy piety, humming progress...⁵

Elated by our modern mastery of nature and cult of genius, and ridden by the superstition of progress (now unseated), we came to start with that excellent creature, man, his wonderful resources, his broadening freedom, his widening heart, his conquest of creation, and his expanding career. And, as with man we begin, with man we really end. God is there but to promote and crown this development of man, if there be a God at all.... The Father is the banker of a spendthrift race. He is there to draw upon, to save man's career at the points where it is most threatened.

He is Father in a sense that leaves no room for love's severity, its searching judgment ... He is Father only so long as He meets the instincts and aspirations of man's heart.⁶

GOD ENTERS THE PULPIT AND CASTS US UPON A GOD OF CRISIS

It takes enormous discomfort, in order for humanity to come to grips with the necessity of the cross of Christ, and with the seriousness of the evil in our own human hearts, and the evil endemic among every nation. The sheer kindness and mercy of God, we so badly underestimate. Forsyth recounts something of the type of public conversation that took place prior to World War One. It sounds all too familiar. He says:

World calamity bears home to us the light way in which, through a long peace and insulation, we were coming to take the problem of the world, and especially its moral problem. 'We do not now bother about sin' was said with some satisfaction. The preachers protested in vain against that terrible statement – those of them that had not lost their Gospel in their culture. But they were damned with the charge of theology.⁷

He then goes on to include the war itself, as God's way of dealing with the human race; it is the disaster that ends dainty and dreamy religion:

And now God enters the pulpit, and preaches in His own way by deeds. And His sermons are long and taxing, and they spoil dinner. Clearly God's problem with the world is much more serious than we dreamed. We are having a revelation of the awful and desperate nature of evil.⁸

The task which the Cross has to meet is something much greater than a pacific, domestic, fraternal type of religion allows us to face. Disaster should end dainty and dreamy religion, and give some rest to the winsome Christ and the wooing

⁵ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 24

⁶ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 25

⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 28

⁸ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 28

note.... It is a much wickeder world than our good nature had come to imagine, or our prompt piety to fathom.⁹

We, who have known much of the grace of God in our personal lives, know that God has both spoken and enacted a great word of hope, for the nations of the world in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a great victory. It is a very great victory. It is The Victory. A godless world needs yet to hear this word, and respond. The church needs to rediscover not only the God of order, which Christendom has enjoyed, but also the God of crisis, *who is God most chiefly in the chief tragedy of things.*¹⁰ He alone is the One who *from the nettle of perdition plucks the flower of salvation.*¹¹

THE GLOBAL DIMENSIONS OF THE GOSPEL

It was world war one, which drew from Forsyth the rich insights he imparts. We too are faced with many a crisis, on a global scale. We are equipped with the same cross, and the same Christ, and the same gospel, to which we must make recourse. The gospel has always been of global proportions. We need a theodicy, which is adequate to the task. Let's take Forsyth words slowly, again and tease out each of these important points:

We begin and end with a faith, not in Jesus simply but in His world work...¹²

We begin with the faith in which our own soul calls Him its Saviour from what seems an infinite and hopeless evil. He delivers us from a sin whose guilt lies on our small soul with a pressure from the reservoir of all the high wickedness of the world.¹³

It is not from our moral lapses nor from our individual taint that we are delivered, but from world sin, sin in dominion, sin solidary if not hereditary, yea, from sin which integrates us into a Satanic Kingdom. ...An event like war at least aids God's purpose in this, that it shocks and rouses us into some due sense of what evil is, and what a Saviour's task with it is.

While the Church cannot begin to *measure* the problem of evil, we need the assurance of its defeat in the cross. For evil affects and invades every area of human life, and the theology of the cross always applies as God's Victory, and the only true victory:

Is the principle of the war very different from that of a general strike, which would bring society to its knees by sheer impatient force, and which so many avoid only as impolitic and not as immoral?¹⁴ ...It is impossible even to discuss the theodicy all pine for without the theology so many deride.¹⁵

⁹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 28-29

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 30

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. p. 30-31

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 34

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 37