

CREDO - I BELIEVE!

5. The consequences of God's Providence:

The question of suffering, evil and prayer

Introduction (2 MINUTES)

In this session we reflect further on the consequences of a belief in God as Creator and the doctrine of providence, particularly three questions it raises: the question of suffering, evil and the effectiveness of prayer. We will look at the book of Job.

Starter: (10 MINS)

A friend challenges you and says 'How can you believe in God when there is so much suffering in the world?'

How would you respond?

The Question of Evil and Suffering (40 MINS)

If God governs all things, what about the evil in the world? Does God ordain terrible sufferings and tragedies, especially for those who seem innocent victims? This is the issue of 'theodicy' – of justifying God's justice and goodness in the face of suffering and evil. No form of Christian theology affirms that God is the author of evil or created evil. Evil is that which opposes God and God's will. The origin of evil in the universe is a mystery.

In the book of Job, the righteous Job questions why calamities befell on him when he hadn't committed any sin.

Read Job 1.1-12. How is Satan described? What is his relationship to God?

In the Bible, Satan has many strategies. Read Ephesian 6.16; John 8.44; 2 Corinthians 4.4; 11.3, 13-15; 1 Corinthians 7.5; Acts 5.3; 1 Thessalonians 2.18 and highlight what they are.

The Bible does not say where Satan comes from. Genesis 3 has the serpent deceiving Adam and Eve and whilst the serpent is not identified as Satan, elsewhere in the Bible there are echoes of Genesis 3 e.g. Revelation 12.9. Paul describes him 'like' an angel of light (2 Cor 11.14). Some passages suggest he was created as an angel by God and rebelled (2 Peter 2.4; Jude 6). Elsewhere Satan has authority in the realm of demons as a leader of demonic forces (John 12.31, Ephesians 2.2). Isaiah 14.12-15 has been used to talk about 'Lucifer', falling from heaven as the morning star – although the context is about the overthrow of the king of Babylon. Although Satan is only mentioned a couple of times in the Old Testament in the New Testament he is a prominent adversary. He brings mental and emotional turmoil (e.g. Mark 5.2-5); false worship (Deuteronomy 32.17); encouraging God's people to sin (e.g. Luke 22.31); trying to prevent God's plan of salvation (Luke 4.5-7).

Read Job 2.1-10 and contrast that with Matthew 12.22-29

What does this passage suggest about Satan's power?

If the Lord has the power to stop Satan – why doesn't he? Job's wife believes his suffering has come from God and encourages him to curse God and die (Job 2.9)

Read Job 5.17 and 6.14.

Later in the book we expect God to blame Satan. But this is not what God says. In chapters 38-42 God defends his ways to Job. **Read Job 38.4-7 and 40.8-10. What is God's argument? What is Job's response: Job 42.1-6?**

Does God use Satan for the benefit of God's people?

The end of the Job story is that he has restored to him twice as much as he had possessed before and ten children and he lives another 140 years (Job 42.10,17)!

How does James use the story of Job to encourage Christians in the face of suffering: James 5.10-11? How does Paul use Satan's attack for good in 2 Corinthians 12.7-10? What promise do we have in Romans 8.28?

Can we therefore blame all evil and suffering on Satan? Is there a demon under every bed?

Read 1 John 2.15-17; Mark 7.14-23. Ephesians 4. 25-32

The Bible teaches that the world is in part an arena for the conflict of spiritual forces. Paul describes the spiritual battle in 2 Corinthians 10.3-4 and Ephesians 6.12. Believers are encouraged to avail themselves of spiritual armour and weapons and that Satan is ultimately a defeated foe (Revelation 12.12, 20.10; Colossian 2.13-15). Resist him! (1 Peter 5.9; James 4.7)

In conclusion the Bible suggests that Satan is a cause of evil and suffering but not the sole cause. Natural disasters, tragedies, diseases and illnesses often occur as a consequence of God's decision to create a physical universe where accidents, mutations, collisions and compressions are inevitable. As we go on to discuss humanity we will discuss human evil and sin and the limits of our responsibility for the way the world is.

Donald McKim sums up his section on Evil and Suffering by saying : *'in God's providential purposes, when evil and suffering come upon us, we can believe that God is still with us and that God's loving grace and power will see us through. This is the comfort of the apostle Paul's affirmation: 'We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Romans 8.28). Do you agree with McKim?*

Prayer

The Reformed understanding of God's providence may also lead to the question: Why pray? Does prayer 'change God's mind' about certain things?

John Calvin wrote that God's providence *'sometimes works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to an intermediary'* (Institutes I.17.1). In other words God can work directly, or by granting a miracle, or through people. The scriptures command us to pray and

therefore it is apparent that God desires us to be an intermediary. We may therefore be used by God to carry out the divine purposes. (e.g. Luke 11.1-10)

Contemporary Significance: (10 mins)

The doctrine of God's providence is extremely comforting but also challenging doctrine. It takes seriously the reality of evil and assures us that in the midst of evil and suffering, God does not abandon us, is in control and is with us.

John Calvin said: *'gratitude of mind for the favourable outcome of things, patience in adversity and also incredible freedom from worry about the future, all necessarily follow upon this knowledge'* (Institutes I.17.7)

Do you agree?

Yet the doctrine of Providence also challenges us to co-operate with God's purposes and not to thwart them. However, our lives are not left to blind chance and fate, they are guided by the God who created us and loves us in Jesus Christ and who calls us into his plan for salvation.

In what ways do you believe God governs or directs your life?

CONCLUSION (1 MIN)

Share together in St Patrick's breastplate (Celtic prayer of protection from evil).

**Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.**

Study based on Donald K. McKim's book, 'Introducing the Reformed Faith' (pub. WJK 2001)