

EXPLORING INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY IN OUR CHRISTIAN LIVES

AT NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Second Session – The Big Question:

Why are there evils like Covid 19 in a world created and managed by an all-loving and all-powerful God?

First Session Review:

We examined the difference between saying “I **believe** that God exists” and “I **know** that God exists.” We agreed that claiming to **know** is stronger than claiming to **believe**. That difference appears in this definition of knowledge:

Knowledge is a **justified, true belief**.

- * For a belief to be justified, it needs supporting **evidence**.
- * For a belief to be true, it needs to **correspond** to the way the world is.

We considered the following **evidence for our belief that God exists**:

* **Miracles** that appear in the Bible and in individual lives were discussed and we noted that people differ about the usefulness of miracles for evidence re: the existence of God.

* **Philosophical Proofs** for the Existence of God were examined. Strengths and weakness were noted.

(1) The **Teleological Proof** claims that designed objects in nature point to the existence of divine designers. But these designers are like mini-gods and are **NOT evidence for the existence of the Supreme Creator** of the universe. The next proof addresses this weakness.

(2) The **Cosmological Proof** argues that the **origin** of features of the world such as motion, causation, and contingency is the **Supreme God** functioning as an Unmoved Mover, or an Uncaused First Cause, or a Non-Contingent Being. The weakness of this proof is that it **does not exclude** the possibility that **instead of** a Supreme Being serving as **an anchor-cause** of these features of the world, these features are present because they are **caused within an infinite series of finite causes** that had no starting point, no origin. The next

proof addresses this weakness by arguing that a Supreme God, a Perfect Being, does indeed exist.

- (3) The **Ontological Proof** tries to show that God, the Perfect Being, exists because such a being has **existence** as one of a perfect being's essential attributes. If the perfect supreme being did not have the attribute of existence it would not be a perfect being. Just like such attributes as omnipotence, omniscience, all-loving, and all-good are characteristics of a **perfect being**, so is existence a characteristic of a perfect being. The weakness of this proof is that existence is not a characteristic that can be derived from the concept of any being including a perfect being. We used the concept of a lobster to illustrate this point. If we listed the characteristics of a lobster from the concept of a lobster, we would get attributes such as claws, a tail, etc. But we could not determine if lobsters exist from analysis of the concept of a lobster. All of the lobsters in the world could have been destroyed by a fast-moving plague as we are thinking about a lobster's attributes. Existence is the issue of whether there is in fact a being corresponding to the concept of a lobster. The same situation applies to the concept of God. His existence is not made a reality by including existence as one of the attributes of a perfect being. God's existence is determined by an investigation of the universe. Logical analysis of the concept of a particular being cannot prove that such a being exists now.

Summary:

Miracles are unreliable in their usefulness for proving the existence of God. Philosophical proofs do not resolve the challenge. The teleological proof is weak and needs the cosmological proof. The cosmological proof is weak and needs the ontological proof. The ontological proof is fatally flawed. Miracles and Proofs do not provide, therefore, evidence that can convince all thinking people that God exists.

What can we do as Christians to recommend God's existence?

- (1) Embrace epistemic (intellectual) humility.
- (2) Consider as possible evidence **for us** the apparently God-bathed experiences in our lives:
 - (i)The people we respect who seem to exhibit the power and love of God.
 - (ii)The ebb and flow of the ocean we have seen at the edge of the sea.
 - (iii)The story of the Apostle Paul beside a prison hole in the side of a Mountain near Philippi, Greece.
 - (iv) The example of nature: Behold the serotinous pinecone.

Second Session Topic:

The Problem of Evil in the universe that we believe God created and continues to manage.

Key Question:

How can we reconcile our belief in the all-powerful and all-loving God of the Easter resurrection of Jesus with the presence of the devastating Covid 19 and its challenging variants that bring so much grief and suffering to humankind?

**This question is just a contemporary version of the Problem of Evil which has troubled people in the Abrahamic religious tradition (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) for thousands of years.*

Evil enters our lives in various ways.

Bernard Gert (1934-2011), identified five evils that rational people wish to avoid for themselves and others about whom they care:

Death, Pain, Disability, Loss of Freedom or Opportunity, Loss of Pleasure.

Experiences of those evils can be grouped into three categories.

- (1) Natural Evil – This evil is caused by the forces of nature without human agency being intentionally involved. Examples???
- (2) Moral Evil – This evil involves humans intentionally doing things that cause evil to happen to someone. Examples???
- (3) Accidental Evil – This evil is unintentionally caused by humans. Examples???

The **Problem** of Evil is based on three propositions.

- (1) God is all-powerful.
- (2) God is all-loving.
- (3) Evil exists.

To Christians like us who believe in the existence of God, these three propositions considered separately all seem to be true.

But: If we place the three propositions together in the following puzzle (frequently called the Stoic Dilemma), all of the propositions do not seem to be true.

The Stoic Dilemma

Either God cannot or he will not abolish evil.
If he cannot, then he is not all-powerful.
If he will not, then he is not all-loving.

How would you respond to the Dilemma? As you respond, which of the three propositions would you say is **false**?

Through the ages keen thinkers have fashioned responses that try to vindicate the power and love of God against evil. Such an attempt is called a **theodicy**. A theodicy involves speaking well of God.

Some theodicies try to define evil out of existence by

- * making evil an indispensable part of the balanced beauty of the landscape of life, or
- * making evil a pedagogical tool that God uses to make saints out of sinners.

Some theodicies make God into a limited being who needs humans to help fight evil.

Some theodicies say that God has afflicted humans with evil to punish them for their misdeeds.

There is not yet a theodicy that is convincing because they either deny that God is all powerful or all loving or they try to deny the existence of evil.

So, we might be helped if we turn to the Bible where a very special book is located:

The book Martin Luther (1483-1546) called “magnificent and sublime.”

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) called it “the greatest poem of ancient and modern times.”

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called it “the most wonderful poem of any age and language.”

That book is **The Book of Job**.

The book of Job has three parts: a brief opening prologue (1:1-2:13), followed by a long poem (3:1-42:6), followed by a brief concluding prose epilogue (42:7-42:17).

Let us begin with **the long poem**. Three friends come to Job to comfort him in his suffering caused by many calamities. Their theory is that if you sin you will suffer. Therefore, if you suffer then you must have sinned. So, they repeatedly tell Job to confess his sins. Job declares repeatedly his innocence and finally wishes he could present his situation to God himself. God does enter the debate and presents an unconventional message. Instead of offering words of comfort to Job, God belittles Job’s intellectual capacity. The cause of evil is not declared by God. Job repents. That is not a satisfying conclusion for the authors of the prologue and epilogue. They try to “fix” the poem.

The prologue introduces the suffering of Job as a test of Job's loyalty to God. God was prodded into allowing the suffering test as a response to Satan's claim that Job was a "fair weather" believer in God. God triumphed in the debate with Satan by Job's steadfast loyalty to God: he did not curse God for his sufferings that Satan heaped on him as a test allowed by God.

In **the Epilogue**, God chastises the three friends of Job for speaking incorrectly about God. And everybody "lived happily thereafter."

What do you think of those "fixes"?

Is Job telling us (1) evil in God's world is a mystery, (2) embrace epistemic humility, and (3) help those who suffer?

Next Week: January 23, 2022

Third Session and Wrap Up

What if anything can we expect to encounter when we die?

The need to embrace intellectual humility.