

**Christianity on Trial**  
*Can We Trust the Bible and  
Can We Trust a God Who Allows Suffering?*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## [Has the Bible Been Discredited?](#)

The topic that I have been given to discuss is the question: has the Bible been discredited? And I suppose the first simple answer to that question is: yes, of course. Down through the centuries, the Bible has been discredited times without number, that is, in the eyes of some people. Whether they were justified in discrediting the Bible is another thing altogether. But it is astonishing to read how, right from the very start, the Bible and those who preached it have given rise to all sorts of ideas, some of them quite fantastic.

We are told in the book of Acts that the great and famous Christian apostle, Paul, was once in Jerusalem and went with some of his Jewish friends into the temple. Before this, many of the Jews had seen him in the city with Gentile people; and when they now saw him in the temple, the Jews objected most strongly, thinking that he had brought a Gentile in. That was forbidden, not only by the Jewish law, but by the law of the Romans who had the governing of that province. Without asking any questions, the mob set on Paul and attempted to lynch him. Whereupon, the captain of the Roman guard that occupied the citadel overlooking the temple grounds rushed down with a squad of troops and managed to get Paul free of the mob, and lead him up the stairs to the doorway to the citadel. When they got to the top, Paul asked the Roman captain permission to address the crowd. And, of course, he spoke to the Roman captain in Greek, much to the astonishment of the Roman captain who proceeded to say, 'Oh, you speak Greek?'

'Well, yes, of course. Why not?'

He said, 'I thought you were that Egyptian that some time ago led a revolt against the Roman government and went off with three hundred assassins into the wilderness' (see Acts 21).

What fantastic ideas people get. The notion that the Apostle Paul was kind of an agent to an early Al-Qaeda mob is interesting at least, isn't it? It was quite fantastic. And it astonishes me, I must confess, how so many people are prepared to take the imaginative fictions of a novel here and there in modern times, and feel the Bible has been discredited by what they read in these fictional novels.

Tonight I shall be trying to answer some of the accusations, or at least the complaints, that are brought to me against the Bible, and the arguments that it could not possibly be true. I shall try to answer them. Maybe due to shortage of time I shall not be able to deal with your particular complaint about the Bible—why the Bible, to you, stands discredited. But then there is to be a question time, and this is only the first of a number of lectures.

## **The claim that science discredits the Bible**

I want to come to what appear to me to be some of the more substantial reasons that people have for thinking the Bible is discredited. I address this one first because I find it to be the most common. It is the notion that somehow modern science makes it completely impossible for any modern, intelligent man or woman to take the Bible seriously. For the Bible is nothing if it isn't full of God, and it claims to be God's word.

### **Understanding how the universe works**

And people say, 'But, look, that was all right in centuries gone by when people didn't understand how the universe works.' So, they say, when it thundered, people imagined that it was God crying out and shouting and, of course, they felt fear. But now science has shown how thunder comes about. We know how it works, and it is not God shouting. When the moon went into an eclipse in the ancient world, people thought some demons had got hold of it and the women ran out and got the bin lids and banged them to frighten the demons away from getting hold of the moon. And people say, 'Well, of course, that was in the pre-scientific days of superstition. Now we know exactly how these things happen, for science has shown us, and there is no room left for God. There are some things in science that we still don't understand, but even so, it would be a false method to bring in God to explain those things. We have understood so much as a result of scientific exploration that, in the end, we shall understand these other things, too.'

So they find it difficult, they tell me, if not impossible, to take the Bible seriously when it proclaims that the world was created by God and, from time to time, God has intervened in its history to perform miracles.

My answer to that, as best I can think it through, is to tell a little parable that I've made up. I want you to imagine a tribe in the rainforest cut off from the outside world. I have visited some such tribes, and charming people they are. But I want you to imagine some imaginary tribes people. Walking through the forest one day, they come across a motorcar. They've never seen such a thing before in all their lives. They don't know what it is nor how it came there. But their interest is aroused and, presently, they begin to examine it, and they open the door and they look at this, and they look at that, and suddenly as they are fiddling with things, someone manages to turn the ignition key, and the engine starts into life! Well, of course, they're startled and frightened.

They say, 'There must be a god in there!'

And then they look round the front and they see the letters F-O-R-D on the front of it. They say, 'That's the god "Ford" in there.'

So they let the engine run. And when it runs smoothly, they think Ford is very pleased with them. Then when it backfires, they think he's grown angry, so they offer it a sacrifice or two. But then one of them begins to study it more closely and goes on to study engineering. And, lo and behold, he finds as he takes the thing to pieces that he can see how it works. And now he finds there isn't a god Ford inside the car, making it work, nor is Ford necessary in order to understand how the thing works. And so they decide that, of course, all that notion of there being a god Ford in the car has all been superstition. And then they take another big

step, and they decide there never was a Mr Ford, on the grounds that they can understand how the car works without positing any such person.

We can see at once the falsity in that logic. It is the case that they don't need Mr Ford to be inside the car making it work; they can understand how it works. But to decide, because they can understand how it works, that there never was a designer of the car, nor a maker, is a false step of logic.

The advance of science that tells us how our universe works is wonderful, but to decide, because we can understand how it works, that there never was a designer who made it, seems to me a false step of logic.

### Science and faith

Then people will say to me, 'But, look, for you religious people, it all depends on your faith, doesn't it? You have to believe, where science doesn't depend on faith. Science bids you look at the hard facts and the rational explanation of those facts. It doesn't require any faith. It puts the evidence in front of your nose and shows you that any rational person must accept the evidence as to how this thing works. But as for God, there is no evidence. You just have to make up your mind to believe.'

To their mind, faith is believing something that you really, at your heart, know isn't true, but you determine to believe it because it comforts you, somehow or other.

But upon reflection, that seems to me to be doubly false. The notion that religion is founded on faith, but science is founded on sheer rationality and doesn't require any faith is not true. Scientific endeavour does depend on faith.

You needn't accept my argument. Listen to Albert Einstein, if you will, who confessed that the scientist's belief in the rational intelligibility of the universe goes beyond science and belongs to the domain of religion. Let me quote his exact words.

Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion. To this there also belongs the faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith.<sup>1</sup>

It is a popular notion, but mistaken, that science does not require faith. You have to consider that the study of the universe will yield to rationality. In so studying it, scientists have come up with remarkable (and many of them would say *beautiful*) laws that govern the physical universe. Professor Roger Penrose of Oxford, the famous mathematician, who, along with Stephen Hawking, did the mathematics leading to the theory of black holes, points out that mathematicians do not invent the laws of mathematics; they discover them. The laws are there to start with. And seeing they are evidence of intelligence and subject to rationality leads Professor Paul Davies, the mathematical physicist, to claim, contrary to some cosmologists, that the universe is rational all the way down to the level of metaphysics. He adds that this

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years*, 26.

remarkable phenomenon that we human beings have evolved (for he thinks we have evolved) to the state where we can turn round and study the universe and understand its laws suggests that we are 'truly meant to be here'.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, if you are going to say with Davies: 'We are meant to be here,' that leads inevitably to the question: 'Who meant us to be here?' Davies, being asked personally if he thinks it's God says, no, he doesn't like the idea of God. So then, what meant us to be here to be able to study these marvellous, beautiful laws that respond to our rational enquiry? He says he thinks there might be some mathematical laws somewhere that are so clever that they caused the whole universe to be.

I could wish he were right sometimes, because I wish I had some remarkable mathematical laws that would allow me to take £1,000 and multiply it by another £1,000 and come up with £1 million, and then go down to the bank and find out that these mathematical laws had caused £1 million to exist in my bank account. But abstract mathematical laws don't do that kind of thing. So it is fair to turn the question of Professor Davies back on him. If we are meant to be here, then who meant us to be here?

### **A question of evidence**

You will say, 'But you're going to say it's God who meant us to be here, and doesn't that require a lot of faith?'

Yes, I am going to say it's God, and I believe what the Bible has long since been saying for centuries, that God formed this world by his *word*: super, divine, intelligence, imposing form and rationality on the matter he created.

You say, 'You have no proof of it.'

Well, now, that is a very interesting point, isn't it? Someone says, 'You need to prove there is a God.' And I would admit at once that you won't prove God by some philosophical analysis. But, of course, in real life that is not the only proof we ask for. God is not only power and rationality. God, says the Bible, is love (1 John 4:8). So let's take some examples of love, as we know it at our lesser level.

Here is a child of four. His daddy has been away abroad and comes home, and the child comes running to his dad who picks him up in his arms, and the child is delighted! And you say to the little child, 'Does your dad love you?'

'Yes,' he says.

You say, 'But prove it.'

How do you prove it? You can't prove that your spouse is faithful to you. You believe it, of course; you rightly do. You believe it on a ton of evidence. But if you tried to prove it philosophically, anybody could add endless doubts to it.

There are some things, and they are life's basic things, that we accept on evidence that is overwhelmingly strong, but which, in the technical sense, we cannot *prove*. So it is with the God whom we Christians claim inspired the Bible; and we say it is God speaking to us.

Let's come to the New Testament part of the Bible, for there we encounter the claim that the God who made the universe by the word of his power, has come into our world, and that

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Davies, *The Mind of God*, 232.

Jesus Christ is the word of God incarnate in human form. For that the New Testament offers, not logical proof in the philosophical sense, but evidence. John's Gospel is notorious for putting it in concise language. John says that the miracles that Jesus did, which are recorded in his Gospel, are signs. They are evidence so that, upon that evidence, you might come to believe, first the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and then, proceeding to the next step, believing him, you might receive eternal life (John 20:31). This is evidence, therefore.

But that raises a whole lot more questions, doesn't it?

## **The reliability of the Bible**

### **The reliability of the Bible's manuscripts**

I have a friend who had two children; both were disabled. One managed to live until she was about fourteen years old. Her father had taken a tremendous involvement in the nursing of the child. The second child is likewise disabled, and will die prematurely. He came to my door, asking if he could speak with me. He is an able and intelligent man, indeed, but you will imagine his emotional feelings in such a situation. As we sat down together, he said, 'How can I believe there is a God?'

I said something about the Bible and the New Testament.

He said, 'But my friends tell me that the New Testament wasn't written down until three hundred years after Christ. How can we believe it?'

You may think it odd, I don't know, but there are actually people who think that the New Testament was not written down until three hundred years after the time of Christ. When I first went to Russia, after the walls came down, I learned that many people there had been rigorously taught in school, and elsewhere, that Christianity was a fourth century legend. I wonder where people get the idea?

The last people on earth who ought to hold that view, if I may say it, are Irish people. For Dublin is world famous for all sorts of things, of course, but its Chester Beatty Library (so magnificently housed these days) contains some fabulous manuscripts, particularly those of the New Testament. Papyrus number 46 is an early collection of the epistles by Paul. They are not all the letters Paul wrote, but there are a good many of them that were collected in one volume, originally. The experts date that particular manuscript around about the year AD 200. Some might put it a few years later, to AD 240, maybe. But just ponder the implications of its existence. It is not an original, of course not; it's a copy. This copy has now lasted eighteen hundred years. How old do you suppose was the manuscript from which it was copied? We don't know, do we? It could have been just a year old. It could have been the result of a chain of copying with ten or twenty manuscripts before, or it could merely have had one manuscript before.

On the walls in that part of the library, you will see a tiny fragment coming from the Gospel of John. It is a fragment of another manuscript. We can know at once where it comes from. It is part of the text where Christ is speaking to his mother, Mary, at the foot of his cross, when he said to her, 'See your son' (namely the Apostle John). To John he said, 'Behold, your mother' (see John 19:25-27). That manuscript is dated by the experts at AD 180.

If you go to the Rylands Library in Manchester, you will find fragments of the Gospel of John that are dated to AD 115. They weren't originally written as fragments, of course. They were written as whole copies. Most of the manuscript has gone, but these fragments survive.

When we see those hard facts, it becomes a nonsense when people say that the New Testament wasn't written down until three hundred years after Christ's time. The facts are open to anyone's inspection.

The same kind of thing could be said about the availability of reading and writing in the time of Jesus. This book I have here, by Professor Alan Millard from Liverpool, an Akkadian specialist who is now retired, points to the common existence of reading and writing, and recording in the time of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> So it is quite understandable that some of his apostles, particularly Matthew who was an income tax inspector before he got converted, would have written down actual notes of what Jesus said at the time when he heard them.

### **The reliability of the Bible's record, archaeologically**

The same thing has been true archaeologically. In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that when Paul the apostle reached Corinth, the Jews caused a hubbub and dragged him before the Roman governor whose name, according to Acts, was Gallio (Acts 18). I'm old enough to know the time when expert scholars said that was evidence that Luke was making it all up, for there never was a Roman governor of Corinth called 'Gallio'. In one sense, that and such like things discredited the historical reliability of the New Testament. But then a new inscription turned up with Gallio's name on it. Those things that overturn the evidence that supposedly discredited the record tend not to get the headlines so much.

## **The truth of the Bible**

Now I come to the heart of the matter. Let's suppose that our manuscripts give us an authentic text of what was originally written in the New Testament. And let us suppose that the compilers of the Gospels and the Epistles were very careful to do their background study and got all the geographical and historical things in the right place. Yet any writer of a novel will do that when he's pitching you a big yarn: he'll get all the factual details correct, as best he can, to give verisimilitude to his story. Let's suppose that's what some of the Gospel writers did. The fact that the manuscripts give us an authentic account of Christ's life doesn't necessarily prove, by itself, that the main message of the New Testament is true. How can we begin to know that the Jesus who appears to us in the New Testament and claimed to be God incarnate is true? How can we know that message concerning him is true and not something made up by the Christian apostles?

### **The evidence of Christ's death**

I want to take one thing that suggests to me, very strongly, that this claim of Christ was not manufactured by the apostles. The part I'm talking about now is the significance of the death

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (2000).



of Jesus Christ, crucified on a cross, in the time of Pontius Pilate. How do we know that the Gospel writers didn't make it up?

Well, for the first thing, the apostles tell us themselves in all honesty that when Jesus first announced he was going to Jerusalem to die, they thought it was the most absurd thing they had ever heard, and no less than Peter rebuked our Lord straight to his face, and said it was nonsense (Matt 16). When in the Garden of Gethsemane the soldiers came to arrest Christ and Christ refused to give his apostles permission to use the sword to defend him, but meekly surrendered to the arresting party, the apostles tell us they all fled.

We might also listen to Paul the apostle. He preached the cross of Christ as central to his gospel message. But even as he preached it, he tells us in one of the letters he wrote to a new Christian church, that he realized that the preaching of the cross was to the Jew a scandalous offence and to the philosophically-minded Gentile it was sheer folly. To come before philosophically-minded Greeks and preach that the cure of the world's problems is to be found in a man who was crucified on a cross, seemed to many a Greek to be self-evident nonsense (1 Cor 1). Why then did Paul preach it if he knew right well before he did so that this would be the reaction of many people?

He did it for two reasons. One: because this gospel is traceable straight to Christ. He not only announced it, even when his apostles objected, but they record how he said the Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

The fact that Christ himself held this to be the central part of his divine mission is seen in another thing that can be traced to the very earliest times of Christianity. Before he left, Jesus Christ instituted a ceremony by which his disciples thereafter should remember him. What he chose as a means of memorial is exceedingly significant. He could have chosen that, when he was gone, his people should read the Sermon on the Mount every time they came together, and then we would have remembered Jesus Christ as primarily a moral teacher. That would have been marvellous. He was a great moral teacher. Or he might have chosen that they should read a collection of his miracles. They were genuine works of power—evidence of his deity. But then we would have remembered him as chiefly a miracle worker. He did not choose those two things. He took symbols of his body and of his blood. 'This is my body given for you,' he said. 'Eat it in remembrance of me. This the blood of the new covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins' (see Matt 26:26–29; 1 Cor 11:23–26). And from that very first time, according to the Christians, they celebrated this and have done throughout the world ever since: pointing to the heart of the Christian gospel as Christ enunciated it.

This is what we face eventually, when we come to the records of the New Testament to consider their validity. It is a colossal claim. For a mere man to claim that he had come, in some sense, to offer his life as a sacrifice to God for the sins of the whole world, would suggest the man was bordering on lunacy. Christ claimed it.

### **The forgiveness Christ offers**

How does Christ's claim speak to us? It is not just a matter of philosophical proof, is it? I remember some years ago there came to Queen's University a postdoctoral student in Chemistry, and a very bright scholar she was. She came from Thailand, I think, and joined the Chemistry Department, and there were a number of people in that department who were

professing Christians. They got talking to her and she to them and, eventually, she said she'd like to meet somebody to explain Christianity to her. For some reason or other, her colleagues suggested that she should come to me.

So she came to my office one bright Saturday morning. I can see her yet. And her first words were, 'I've come to ask you to explain Christianity. I don't want to get converted. Please understand that. I'm not going to get converted.'

I said, 'Okay.'

'I'm a Buddhist,' she said.

So I explained to her, as I have just done, what lies at the heart of the message of the New Testament. And to emphasize it, I said that I find this a remarkable thing, that in and through Christ's atoning death for us, God offers us forgiveness, and not only a shadowy hope of forgiveness when we've reached the other side, but forgiveness of which we can be utterly sure now. Consider the words that Paul preached, for instance:

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:38-39)

And waxing strong in my enthusiasm, I said to the dear lady, 'Have you a little child?'

'Yes,' she replied.

I said, 'If she did something wrong and she said she was sorry, you'd forgive her, wouldn't you? And you'd not only forgive her, but you'd want to make sure the child understood that she had forgiveness.'

I shall never forget her reply.

'I should do no such thing!' she said. 'How can I forgive the child? There is no such thing as forgiveness. Everybody must suffer the consequences of the wrongs they do. That is their *kamma*.'

It is also called *karma*. According to those who hold this teaching, there is no such thing as forgiveness. We are born into this world, they say, defective and burdened by suffering, because of the wrongs we have done in previous incarnations. What wrongs? They cannot tell you. How many reincarnations ago was it? They can't tell you. But their theory is you must suffer the consequences in this life, and if you have not suffered enough when you come to the end of this life, then you must be reincarnated. Of course, in this life you do some more sins. What would you have said to a mother like that who believed there was no such thing as forgiveness? Here, Jesus Christ appeals to me.

Can I tell you another story? (Old men do tell stories, you know. You have to forgive them.) Just after the walls came down in Eastern Europe, I was in Ukraine, in Kiev, and was invited by a headmistress of a school to go to the school and talk on Christianity to the children there assembled. For all that, she explained to the classes, 'The government used to forbid all religion, but now they've had deeper insights, and we are allowed to teach it. And I'm going to have religion taught in the school, not just Christianity, but all kinds of religions.'

So I held forth. Afterwards, the Deputy Head came to me. She was a gracious, senior lady. She said, 'May I ask you a question?'

I said, 'Yes, by all means, madam.'

She said, 'What do you think of UFOs?'

I said, 'Madam, I think they're remarkable. I haven't seen any myself. I don't know anything about them, and the ones that some people have said appeared over the UK, well, the government says they weren't the real thing anyway. So I don't really know. But I believe you've had a lot.'

She said, 'Yes, we've had a lot round here. You know, the last ones that came, when they got out of the UFO, they told the locals that Buddhism was the true religion, and not Christianity. What do you say to that?'

I said, 'Well, madam, I have a little difficulty there. You see, if I may speak for myself personally, I have respect for all who teach us healthy ethics, that we ought to be good. I have a personal problem, however. It is that I know I ought to be good, but I haven't been. How can I find forgiveness that will not undercut my own values, and not undercut God's values either?'

And I quoted her this story about the chemist from Thailand, and what she told me. I said, 'You see, Buddhism tells you to be good, but strict Buddhism has no forgiveness. What I desperately need is not someone to come along and tell me my sin doesn't matter, but someone who tells me my sin mattered infinitely because it was sin against God. But the God who loves us with the Creator's love sent his Son on purpose into this world. His primary purpose was that he might offer to God the ransom for human guilt so that we can find forgiveness. As far as I know, madam, Jesus Christ is the only one on the market (if you will allow me the crudity of the expression). I think it is true to say you will never get somebody else coming alongside you and saying, "You are a creature of God. You have sinned against the most holy God, and sin matters; but I love you with a Creator's love. I've come to bear the penalty of your sin before God that you might be forgiven and reconciled with God."''

I suggest to you that the Christian apostles did not make up that story.

## **The Gospel of Judas**

With one final topic I close. Someone will perhaps say, 'But what about that Gospel recently discovered, the Gospel of Judas? Does that not undermine Christianity, for it tells a very different story?'

It does tell a different story. Instead of Judas betraying Christ, this time he and Christ collaborated together so that Christ could die and Judas, being his soul mate and helper, organized it so that he should die. That is a very different story from the story of Judas the betrayer that we meet in the four Gospels in the Bible. How shall we judge it?

We should notice first that that document is a genuine document. It comes from the third century AD. Then we should notice what its religious and philosophical stance is. It is a *gnostic* gospel, so called. I shall not try to explain to you, in these few moments, what Gnosticism was, except to say it was a theory in which spirit was the enemy of matter and that, because of a fall of some kind, spirit had entered man but resented it and was imprisoned in the horrible prison of man's body. So the aim of knowledge, to say that you have a wise spirit within you, was to help this spirit break free of the prison house of the human body.

That kind of religion is well known to us. Classical Hinduism is precisely that. And the Gospel of Judas is a very different gospel from what the New Testament records.

You say, 'But isn't it the truer account of the facts?'

Well, you could ask yourself the same question about a whole number of reinterpretations of Christianity that have been given down the centuries. They claim to be based on the historical event. Some of them claim to be based on the Bible, but then they deny some of the very foundational things of the Bible.

Take, for instance, if I may mention it without offence, Christian Science, which holds this view that matter is unworthy. The only thing that counts is *mind*. And since matter is unworthy, pain doesn't exist and disease doesn't exist. Thinking that these things exist are all various malfunctions of the mind. The main thing is spirit.

Match that up, if you will, with what the New Testament says about the body. It says it was made by God and is not to be despised. Nor is rough treatment of the body in the form of religious aestheticism a good and healthy thing (see Colossians). Christ wasn't trying to escape his body; he freely gave his body and bore our sins in his body that we might be reconciled to God. And the final evidence was, of course, his resurrection. And by his resurrection the New Testament means the resurrection of the *body*. And when at times I have put that to my friends who are Christian Scientists, they find it difficult to retain their civility, because the idea of the resurrection of the body of Christ flatly contradicts their idea of the body.

I quote that modern example to remind us that there have been reinterpretations of Christianity right from the beginning. It would be helpful in our deciding about them to notice from what theological persuasion they come, and thus to put their claim alongside the claim of Jesus Christ.

Has the Bible been discredited? Well, in the eyes of many, it was often discredited. My opinion is, and I give it as my verdict, that none of the claims to discredit the Bible stand. Thank you very much for your patient listening.

## Has the Bible Been Discredited?

### *Questions and Answers*

#### **Question one**

*How do they scientifically date the manuscripts?*

That is a very interesting question. They have tried carbon-14 dating, for instance, but carbon-14 dating is not accurate enough, in the plus or minus range of possibility, to compete with the method of dating them according to the style of the handwriting.

Now, if you are not an expert in these matters, judging dating by handwriting might seem a very hazardous process but, of course, we have large collections of manuscripts from the ancient world in different languages. We have some in Greek going back to times BC, biblical manuscripts indeed, in Greek, and with them we can compare writing in ordinary secular writing. We can then compare it with writing on monuments. That does, of course, tend to be much more formal. And if you lay out a series of manuscripts side by side, you will see how writing styles change.

You could do it with writing in English. In my father's day, children were taught copperplate handwriting in school, and to my father's last days, he wrote, in his letters and ordinary things, copperplate handwriting—beautiful stuff it was. I cannot attain to that glory, and I notice a lot of my contemporaries don't either. The change in style of English writing is obvious. Given enough manuscripts, you can, therefore, allocate manuscripts, not only to their century, but very often to within ten or twenty years.

That is the most common way that they date the ancient manuscripts. There are other ways of dating when manuscripts are dug up and are found in a certain layer of material that can be dated. They know at least that the manuscript was not younger than the rubbish that was eventually placed on top of it, whatever dating that rubbish might provide.

#### **Question two**

*After some recent movies, are there no archaeological searches for the body of the Christ?*

The most recent thing that comes to my mind is the ossuary that was discovered just outside the walls of Jerusalem. An ossuary is a polite name in Latin for a 'bone box', and it was a way of burial in the ancient world in which people guarded their dead and buried them slightly, not in earth maybe, but in a pot of some kind, until the flesh had gone from the bones. Then they were left just with the bones, and they would put the bones into a small pot. It didn't

need such a large pot as a full body would. And these pots made of stone, these little boxes, so to speak, in which the bones were put, are therefore called ossuaries.

This one turned up, and it was the ossuary, so the inscription said, of 'James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus'. Of course, the archaeologists have disputed this hotly. Andre Lemairé of France, a well-known Aramaic epigraphist expert, declared the inscription to be genuine, and says this was James, the brother of Jesus. More recently some of the Israeli scholars have contended that, no, the inscription on the front had been tampered with and was not original. The most recent thing I've read on it is a scholar who likewise is a profound expert in these matters. After his tests of the micro bits of dust in the letters and so forth, he argues very strongly that the inscription is genuine and belongs to the first century, so it was the brother of Jesus.

As far as I'm aware, there is no record, of course, of the body of the Christ. From my position as a Christian, I would say they will never find it, anyway, because the biblical account is that, on the third day, he left the tomb.

It is not for me in this lecture to talk about the evidence that the resurrection of Christ was an historical affair. So I'm not allowed to say this, but, if I were going to say it, what I would say is that, amongst all the other evidence, look at the way the Christian women treated the sepulchre.

These women came, of course, on the first day of the week to further embalm the body. They were obviously not expecting him to rise from the dead, in spite of what Jesus had told the apostles. But they were going to embalm the body as best they could to preserve it, to turn his grave into a shrine where they might come and pray. When Mary Magdalene came, she found the sepulchre with the stone rolled away, and the tomb empty. She went and called John and Peter who ran to the sepulchre and eventually went inside. They saw that the body wasn't there, but what caught their eye were the grave clothes. The rags that had gone round the body were still lying out there. The rags that had gone round the head and round the jaw to keep the jaw from opening were still there, rolled round as they had been wound round the head, but on that ledge upon which the head rested apart from the other part of the body. It was the evidence of the grave clothes that first brought them the conviction that Jesus had risen, for he must have come through the grave clothes, unless he was an utter fraud and had risen up and took off the grave clothes, and then folded them up to make it look as if they hadn't been disturbed. It was that evidence that first convicted John and Peter that Christ must have risen (John 20:1-10).

They went home, Mary didn't. She couldn't face life without Jesus, and she asked the angels, 'If you've taken him away, tell me where you've put him.' And then she heard a voice behind her. She thought it was the gardener and said, 'Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I will take him.'

He said one word: 'Mary.' And in that instant she realized it was the Lord. Then she went to cling to him.

He said, 'Mary, stop clinging to me. I've not yet ascended, but go and tell my brothers that I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' At that she ran to tell the other disciples (see vv. 11-18).

Why I find that evidence so compelling is precisely what the women did. That the men worked it out, like in a detective novel, that the body must have come through the clothes, and then went home to breakfast, was one thing. What stopped the Christian women from turning the grave of Jesus into a shrine? Contrary to the instincts of most women, and particularly Middle Eastern women, so much so did they abandon it that, for some century and more, the place of the tomb remained undiscovered and lost. How do we account for the behaviour of the Christian women then, in thus abandoning the grave? And the answer must be, of course, that you don't make a shrine to the memory of someone who is still living! They found in Christ what Christ said to Mary about this new relationship: 'I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' And since then, Christians will tell you the same thing about this personal relationship that the living Christ creates between God and those who trust the Saviour.

### Question three

*Must you be born again?*

The plain, straightforward answer is, yes, you certainly must because the imperative comes from the lips of Christ himself: 'You must be born again' (John 3:7). Those words were spoken to the man who, at that stage, was the leading theologian in Judaism. He was what we would call a systematic theologian, though after the Jewish rabbinic fashion. It was to him our Lord said, 'You must be born again.'

Why? Well, really, the Greek word in that phrase 'again' is *anōthen*, which can mean 'again', but means literally 'from above'. And that, you see, is what our Lord intended by the analogy he gave. 'What is born of the flesh,' he said, 'is flesh.' Understandably so. 'What is born of the Spirit is spirit' (see v. 6).

They belong to two different realms. You can improve the flesh; you'll never turn it into spirit, anymore than (to use a crude illustration) if you take a growing cabbage and you manure it, feed it, till the ground, spray it, and do all the things you should to encourage cabbages to grow big, you'll never turn it into a dog. Cabbages and dogs are two different categories. 'What is born of the flesh,' says Christ, 'is flesh.' You may do what you like with it. Make it religious, if you like. It remains flesh. The great imperative is you must be born from above, that is, born of God's Spirit.

So, the answer to the question whether you must you be born again, is, yes. Though, on reading the question, I'm a little bit uncertain as to where the questioner intended the emphasis to lie, because you could read it: 'Must *you* be born again?' as though the questioner were addressing me.

Well, I think I can claim, in all modesty and humility, that by God's grace I have been born again. But this was not meant to be a sermon, but a lecture. Thank you for your questions, and there I gather we must leave them.

## Why Does God Allow Suffering?

### **Two main sources of suffering**

The topic you have given me is: why does God allow suffering? It is a very big topic because, as you will have realized, suffering comes from two main sources. The one source is the evil that we human beings commit against each other, from the gigantic evils inflicted on the world, for instance, in the last century by Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia and Pol Pot in Cambodia, and so forth. By the evil in some countries in Africa where people teach little children to be soldiers and anaesthetize them against hacking off the limbs of their family members. Then there are all those unpleasant things that all of us, from time to time, do even against the people we love. This is the suffering that comes from evil.

Then there is a lot of suffering that comes from a somewhat different source: the suffering that comes by volcanoes or landslides, or earthquakes that can destroy forty or fifty thousand people at one go. There are epidemics and illnesses that, sooner or later, come upon us and upon our loved ones. And, ultimately, you might say, if that's how this world is, how can you still believe in a God who is supposed to be all powerful, who can do what he likes, a God who is supposed to be all wise and, therefore, knows the best way of doing things? And how can you believe in a God who is supposed to be all loving? Why does God allow evil to carry on? Why doesn't he stop people like Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot, or others? Why doesn't he stop them if he's a God who cares for justice?

That is a very big problem for many people, and because of it they give up faith in God and say they can't believe there is a God. Then when illness besets people, the question arises once more: why does God, who is supposed to be the creator, allow such things as avalanches and tornadoes, and hurricanes and volcanoes, and landslides and earthquakes, and illnesses and diseases? That too is a very big problem.

The last time I was in Moscow, a German friend of mine invited me to dinner to meet some of his friends in that city. One of these friends directed the big psychiatric unit in Moscow. In his time he had seen a lot of suffering, as you may imagine. His wife was professionally a biochemist. Of course, they didn't believe in God; they were brought up under Marxism and were atheists. But towards the end of dinner, he smiled at me across the table. Not trying to be funny or difficult, he said, 'How can you, in the face of all the suffering there is, believe in a God who is all knowing and all powerful, all wise and all loving?'

I answered as best I could. I will try and do the same now. I take it my job is simply to tell you, if I may, how I, as a Christian, face those questions and seek to answer them.



## Two dimensions to suffering

There is another slight difficulty, for there are two angles to this great problem of pain and evil. One is on the intellectual questions it raises, such as: how can you believe in a God that allows such things? And we seek logical, intellectual answers to such questions. But of course, when people are actually suffering, or a loved one is suffering, the intellectual answers may not be of much help. They are looking for answers that can soothe their pain and bring some real sympathy and courage into the situation. When people are deeply suffering, it is hard to believe there is a God who cares for them. It is easier to believe that if there is a God, he has abandoned them.

I shall be concentrating on what I have called the intellectual answers to the question. I find it is a good thing when we are not suffering too much and can think clearly, to face the intellectual question, and to do it and find God's answer to it, before the time of trouble comes.

### The atheist solution to the intellectual problem

So, to come back to the dear Russian professor who asked how I could still believe in a God when there is so much suffering, let me begin to tell you what I answered him. I said, 'Sir, I admit that, as a Christian, I have a problem. I'm not sure if I can completely answer that problem and find particular answers to every aspect of it. But I can tell you right now how to get rid of the *problem*, if it's an intellectual problem you have.'

He said, 'How's that?'

I said, 'Well, get rid of the idea of God, sir. Banish God from your thinking. Now you don't have a problem, do you?'

'Why not?'

'Well because, if there's no God, then our little world and all of our vast universe has come into existence utterly by chance. There's no intelligence behind it, no mind, no purpose. It is a mindless product of mindless forces and mindless mass. What would you expect from such a process other than a lot of pain?'

But then I went on to say, 'You can get rid of the problem side of it by getting rid of God, but once you've done it, and got rid of God to your satisfaction, you won't have got rid of the pain, will you? You won't have got rid of the evil. In fact, you'll have made the pain ten thousand times worse. Because, if there is a God, there is ground for hope that, bad as pain and evil may be, there is hope that it's not the end of everything. There is hope for a glorious future, and that pain is not just destructive but will, somehow, result in something glorious. As the Bible puts it, "This affliction, which is for a moment, will work for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (see 2 Cor 4:17). There is hope, if there is a God.'

And I added, 'I don't know about you, sir, but when I'm in pain (and I've had my share in life) it is hope that keeps me going. Do away with hope and I'm as good as defeated.'

### Facing the idea of a universe without God

Let me make sure that I'm not just putting forward my own personal opinion. Suppose there is no God. I am a Christian, and I do believe there is a God, but let's suppose there isn't a God. What then?

Allow me to quote you from that nowadays very well-known Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, Professor Richard Dawkins of Oxford. He is a thoroughgoing atheist and is developing into an evangelist for atheism, if there can be such a thing. He preaches atheism with great fervour. He doesn't believe there is a God, then? I see. Well, how did we human beings come to exist? He says it's our genes, or our DNA, if you like.

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.<sup>4</sup>

He says this is what we should expect in a universe made up of blind, physical forces, that is, impersonal forces that don't have any purpose and act blindly; and genetic replication, that is, the genes repeat themselves, and so make us. In a universe like that where there's no God, and it's run by simple physical forces, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky. You won't find any ultimate justice in it, for in a universe where there is no God, there is no such thing as justice.

Indeed, in the universe where there is no God, even the concept of 'evil' disappears. That is a difficult point, so let me address it now. If you were out on a country walk by the Mountains of Mourne, where they sweep down to the sea, and a rock off the top had the impertinence to come hurtling down and land upon your toe, what would you say to it? Would you say, 'You *evil* piece of rock! I should report you to the police or the magistrate or somebody!'

Evil? No, it isn't evil. You can't call a bit of rock evil, can you? It has no moral sense in its head. And it doesn't have a head anyway. It just is. It's a bit of rock. And if people are just bits of matter organized by blind DNA, it's no good calling them evil. They just are, like that bit of rock. The best you can hope for in a universe like that is that you will strike lucky, Dawkins says. And if you are lucky, you've got no one to thank. It just happened. You might be very unlucky. It's no good blaming anyone or anything. In the moral sense, there is no such thing as evil, if there is no God.

Perhaps you see why I said to the professor in Moscow that if you find it's an intellectual problem to believe in God because of all the evil and pain in this world, well, get rid of the idea of God and now you won't have a problem. What you find is the result of mindless forces working on mindless matter, without purpose. There is no sense in it, and there is no hope.

Listen to the atheist, Dawkins. (That's not my normal advice, but listen to him just for a minute.) If there is no God, well, the universe as we now find it is as we might expect it.

The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, 131.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, 131.

DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is, like the bit of rock. 'And we dance to its music.'

What does the man mean? Will your friends say about your behaviour that they think some of it's good, but some of it is, well, you know, not so good? They would say that behind your back, of course. But is it then that they don't blame you when you do something a bit off and say, 'Well, he's just dancing to his genes. It's they that control him, not him who can control them.'

Really? Do face it. Face it right now before the pain may start with you. Face what is the fact that if there is no God, we just dance to our genes.

What will you say of the boy in Erfurt in Germany, who a year or so ago, arrived at the school door with a gun and shot several teachers and a classroom full of children? He was just dancing to his genes, was he? And when Stalin murdered, eliminated—some people say twenty and some people say fifty million people—he was just dancing to his genes, was he? And if I got a little baby in front of you and with a sharp knife cut it to pieces while it was still alive, would you be happy for me to say, 'But why are you complaining? I'm just dancing to my genes?'

It is utterly repugnant, isn't it? Let me remind you that I am repeating to you the considered thought of the Professor of the Public Understanding of Science of Oxford University. He is pointing out to you the implication if there is, as he says, no God.

### **Being good without God**

A lot of atheists are going to say, 'That's not fair. We agree there's no God, but we don't all take Professor Dawkins' view. And the human race has evolved and, as part of our evolution, we've been able to work out systems of how we should treat each other. When we were monkeys' (as one of their favourite notions has it—or baboons or gorillas, or something), 'we found out we didn't like it when the other chaps stole our food, and they didn't like it when we stole theirs. So we came to an agreement we wouldn't steal each other's food. And thus we have made a great deal of progress in the villages, nations, and internationally. As we have evolved, we have been able to invent all sorts of moral codes, and we try to keep them.'

Now that last bit is true. I am not saying that atheists all behave very wickedly. That is not true. Many atheists are highly moral people and try to behave morally. But they say you don't need to drag God into it. These are moral codes that we go by as we humans have invented them. Yes, they will admit we haven't got to a perfect state yet in our laws, not even nationally, let alone internationally, but we are working on it and moving towards better and better laws, to make us behave better. So that's enough.

I have one big question for that type of person. I would say, 'Okay, you've invented the moral laws, and you're doing your best to improve them, and a lot of people have benefitted. And you say this is the result of evolution?'

'Yes.'

'Then what about those millions in the course of the centuries who have suffered evil and injustice because man hadn't evolved far enough? And what about those millions that, in this last perhaps fifty years, have perished in many different countries round the world in spite of the evolution of morality? What about them?'

And you know what the atheists will say in reply, don't you?

They will say, 'Well, then, they've had it.'

But what about justice? They were never going to get justice, and now that they've died, they won't get it in this life? Yes, and since, according to the atheist there is no life to come, they won't get justice there either. The vast majority of humans who have ever lived on this earth never get justice?

Are you happy with that result? It follows, by necessity, if there is no God.

### **Answering the problem as a Christian**

You say, 'But how would you then explain it? You say you believe in God. If there is a God then why does he allow all this evil? Is he responsible for it?'

The short answer to that question is that it has come about because God has given us human beings free will. Ponder that a minute, because that is the glory of the human race as distinct from the animals. We have free will, and then a moral sense.

The story in Genesis is very true to life. God told Adam and Eve they might eat of any of the trees in the garden except one particular tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He told them not to eat from it, for if they did then in the day they ate from it they would surely die (2:17). So he warned them not to, and he forbade them to eat from it. He told them the consequences of eating from it. But when Eve and Adam decided to eat it, they found they could. When Eve put out her delightful hand, she didn't find it suddenly paralyzed so that she couldn't take the fruit. She was free to do it and had the strength to do it, and God let her do it, though he'd forbidden her to do it. That is what we mean by free will that God gave to our human race.

### **The necessity of free will**

Now, I think you'll agree with me, for I see some of you nodding to the effect that you have free will. I must ask you a question, then. Do you blame God and curse him for giving it to you? Do you say, 'I can't believe God would have given me free will, and I've found out I've got free will, so now I can't believe in God?'

No, of course not. But why did God give us free will? Well, because you cannot have moral beings unless they have free choice. True morality, a moral decision, arises when there is free choice. Some people, when they have murdered someone, will say, 'But I had no choice. My captor put a gun to my head, so I had no real choice. If I didn't kill the other person, he would have killed me.' The argument is that, in that case, the person didn't have free will. Free will is a God-given gift. It is the glory of being human that we can understand the moral reasons for doing this or not doing that, the difference between right and wrong, and the ability to choose freely between them.

The other reason why God gives us free will is that, at the deepest level, you can't have love, true love, without free choice. Suppose you are sitting in your lovely drawing room, in your favourite armchair, and in through the door comes one of these modern robots. You know, you can get them now to do the hoovering for you and mow the lawn for you. Robots can call you out of bed or, if need be, push you out of bed. Suppose you have one of these, and one day the thing comes into the room and puts its arms round your neck and says in that

funny voice they have: 'I love you.' What would you say? I would kick it in the ribs and say, 'Don't be so daft!'

Why so? Well, you'd jolly well know that it wasn't free. It was programmed to say it. That makes it meaningless, of course. God gives us free will so that we can be moral creatures and choose what is right, knowingly, or choose what is wrong, knowingly, and be free to do it. He gives us free will so that we can genuinely love, and love him.

The late Professor Mackie of Oxford was an atheist, and he made the point in his writings when he heard Christians arguing this matter about free will. He said, 'But, look, it's no good that you're arguing about right and wrong because, if God is almighty, he could have so made us that we all freely did what was right, out of free choice.' He overlooked, of course, one very big thing to start with. For the deepest point of issue between us and God is whether we shall love him, or not. And God wanted us to be free. What use would it be to God if we found we couldn't do anything else, and it wasn't our free choice, and we had to love him whether we wanted to or not? That wouldn't be love. And God has so made us (and this is the staggering revelation of the Bible) that he wants our love but has given us free will so that we can choose whether we shall love him, or whether we shall not love him.

It is in that kind of context that the Bible will say, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). It is not that we have all murdered our mothers-in-law or fathers-in-law, or something of the sort. We've just gone our own way.

I was travelling on a train in England just after the war when rations were severe, and I sat opposite a young man in the compartment. He shared his sandwiches with me, and I shared my coffee with him, and we got talking. He was a bright, young thing and, in the end, the talk came round to these spiritual matters, and I happened to use the word *sin*.

'No,' he said, 'that's a silly term to use. Sin? I don't accept the concept.'

To change the subject for a minute, I said, 'Do you think you could ever be clever enough to make a motorcar?' He thought he was. I said, 'Suppose you made a motorcar and when you got behind the steering wheel, five times out of ten it went where you wanted it to go, and five times out of ten it went where it wanted to go itself. What would you do with that?'

He said, 'I'd scrap it.'

Now I said, 'Suppose nine times out of ten it went where you wanted it to go, and just once in ten it took no notice of you and went where it wanted to go itself. What would you do with it then?'

He said, 'I'd scrap it. If I made a motorcar, I would want it to go ten times out of ten where I wanted it to go.'

'I thought you would.' I said, 'Old boy, what the Bible talks about sin is this. Every one of us has gone his own way. You'd better look out lest God put you on the scrapheap of eternity.'

For the first command in the whole of Scripture is this:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:30)

God gave us free will so that our love for him should be free. That is one of the reasons why God doesn't immediately strike the wicked person and end their life, and they seem to get away with wrong deeds. God cannot immediately consign every sinner to death.

Suppose there is a room, and on the table there is a bar of gold. And you are watching me through closed circuit television, and you say, 'We'll see what this chap, Gooding, does. He thinks there's nobody around and nobody can see him. Let's see what he'll do with this gold. I think he'll put it in his pocket.'

So I look at the gold, and I stand there and think, 'Yes, I like gold. I could put it in my pocket and nobody would see me.'

And then through your CCTV you see me walk away, and I don't take the gold. You say, 'Gooding after all is a very moral man. Look at that.'

Ah, but you didn't know what I knew. I could see that the bar of gold was wired up to a lethal dose of electricity. I only had to put my finger on it, and I would be dead. I didn't try to take it, not because I was moral, but because I knew that if I took it, I would die instantaneously.

God has to let evil run its way for our choice to be free, and for us to be moral.

## **The two sides to God's answer to evil**

### **God's love**

You say, 'But has God no answer to evil?'

Oh, yes, God has an answer to it, and it is found in that magnificent love of God our creator, in spite of the fact we are sinners. Let me quote you what the Bible says,

But God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.  
(Rom 5:8 KJV)

We have misused our free will, gone our own way, sinned against God. Whether small or big, they are sins anyway. And then the Bible says this astounding thing, 'God commends his love.' I think that is an extraordinary description of God, and I'll tell you why.

I was born between the two great wars (though I was not the cause of either as far as I know), and when I was a boy people were unemployed, sometimes for ten years, and if they were going to get unemployment benefit they had to take any old job that was offered them. If they didn't take the job, the unemployment benefit stopped. And so they came round, perhaps to sell brushes around the doors. They would knock on the door, and the housewife would go to the door, and it would be the brush salesman. Well, she didn't want any brushes in the first instance and, secondly, she couldn't afford them. But this poor chap's job depended on it. He didn't want the housewife to shut the door in his face, so he put his foot in the door so she couldn't shut it, just to plead with the woman, 'But let me show you, my dear good lady, how marvellous this brush is.'

Can you picture him, standing at the door, commending the brush to the woman? But to think of God Almighty doing it? But that is how Scripture speaks of him, putting his foot in our door, so to speak. Sometimes, if we won't listen otherwise, he'll put his foot in the door

by letting us suffer pain or some difficulty, putting his foot in the door of our heart so that we don't shut it on him, pleading to be allowed to commend his love to us; and his plea is this: that while we were still sinners, still sinning, Christ died for us. Or, as another verse puts it,

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

That is, he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that pays the penalty of our sin, so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. That is the beginning of God's argument.

### **God's judgment**

But God isn't going to let evil go on forever. That is the other side to his story. There is going to come a final judgment. I don't know how you will react to the topic of the final judgment. You say, 'What a gloomy subject to get on to: the final judgment!'

Oh, you don't like it? I thought you were going to clap your hands with joy. 'There's going to be a final judgment? Hallelujah for that!'

You don't? Why not? Would you like evil to go on forever? Surely not. Well, let me tell you, God says there shall be a final judgment, when the world ends and the great white throne of God's judgment is set up (Rev 20). This, ultimately, is a moral universe, and the dead, small and great, shall stand before God. Evil is not going on forever. People shall be judged according to their works (vv. 11–12).

But listen next to the ultimate, decisive thing. Whether a person is admitted to God's heaven or consigned to the darkness forever depends on this, whether that person's name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. That is a decisive thing. If anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, they were cast, it is said, into the lake of fire (v. 15).

### **Assurance of eternal safety now**

That is such a basic and fundamental question in life. I confess to you I wouldn't rest my head on my pillow tonight unless I were utterly sure that my name is written in the Book of Life.

The disciples of our Lord Jesus came back to Christ at one state when he was here on earth, and they were overly excited. They said, 'Lord, we went out and preached like you told us to, and even the demons were subject to us in your name!' Yes, they were excited. And our Lord replied, 'Well, okay, but in that don't rejoice particularly. Rejoice in this, that your names are registered in heaven' (see Luke 10:17–20).

They knew it, you know; here on earth they knew it. Paul was writing from prison to his Christian friends in Philippi. He has a lot to say to them, and then, in the end, a lot of practical things, like friends do at the end of letters. And eventually he says, 'Help so-and-so and so-and-so; give my greetings to them.' And then, as though it were a casual remark, he adds, 'whose names are in the book of life' (4:3).

It is, therefore, open to all who come to God through Christ, to know that they have been reconciled with God, forgiven, justified, with the gift of eternal life, and have a sure place in God's heaven where no evil shall ever come. It doesn't mean that, for a Christian, this life is going to be free of suffering evil. It is the evidence of the New Testament that when Christians

in those first days got converted, more often than not they had to face more evil than they ever had to face before, because the Romans didn't always like them, and threw them to the lions. And they suffered this, and they suffered that, and they lost their jobs, and they lost their homes, and they lost their furniture very often. And to this day, in some countries, if a person puts their faith in Christ, sometimes even their family and friends will murder them. Christ says, 'In the world you will have tribulation' (John 16:33). Yes, but, the great hope offered is to know oneself loved by God and to have eternal life, and if, in faithfulness to him or for some other reason, we pass from this temporary world, with all its evil and suffering, into eternity, and our names are in the Book of Life, this will be merely going home to be with Christ, to be in one of the rooms in the Father's house in heaven.

## Conclusion

I am aware I have not touched on all the many implications of the problem of evil. You have a right to complain. Don't complain to me though, but to the organizers. And if you do that, they'll never ask me again, so that is your sure fire way of saving yourselves from further distress.

I have not talked about that other source of pain and suffering that comes, not from the evil of our fellow men and women, but from what we call natural disasters for which humans are not responsible, and the only one responsible for them ultimately is, of course, God himself, who made the world that way, with volcanoes and mudslides, and all sorts of things of that order. Although, as we now know, humans, by the superheating of the atmosphere by various means, and by our own selfishness, are responsible for perverting the climate. But there are a lot of things for which human beings are not responsible. What is the answer to that, if this is God's creation? There are a lot of illnesses that we suffer, not because anybody else has tried to do us harm. Why does God allow those?

But I mustn't keep you any longer. I shall get bad marks for keeping you so long. If God so will, tomorrow night, when we start our Bible studies, I think that some answers to this question will come very near the beginning of our study, because our study will tell us why God made this world and the universe to start with, and what he had in mind when he made it, and what he made it for, and what his ultimate plans were. For this world was never meant to be eternal. It is, as the Bible says, subject to frustration at every angle. We shall have to consider that, in order to answer our question properly.<sup>6</sup>

But I've said enough, perhaps too much tonight. Thank you for your patient attention.

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<sup>6</sup> The teaching sessions mentioned were studies in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. David Gooding's teaching on that letter can be found at [myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://myrtlefieldhouse.com).



## Why Does God Allow Suffering?

### *Questions and Answers*

#### **Question one**

*If you have to take Richard Dawkins' theories into account, what happens to concepts like human intelligence or emotions, or reactions to experience?*

Of those three possibilities, the one that his theories mostly destroy is the one about human intelligence because, though he would stoutly deny it, if a human being is nothing but matter, if even our brains are simply pieces of wiring with electrochemical reactions in them, and the synapses, as they are called, in the brains, firing now and again, then why should I listen to what you say? Excuse me, I'm not being rude, but if that is the state of affairs, why on earth should I listen to what you have to say or treat your argument seriously?

It is to be observed that Professor John Polkinghorne, a mathematician, physicist, expert in quantum mechanics, and so forth and so on, of that other university called Cambridge, makes that very same point in one of his scientific books. If what the materialist who says there is nothing but matter anywhere, not even in you or your brain, is true, why should I even listen to his arguments? Because if my brain functioning is simply a lot of synapses, firing off, and electrical impulses, and that's only matter, and what his brain is doing is the same, well, so what? As C. S. Lewis used to say, the argument of the materialist cuts off the bough of the tree on which he is sitting.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Question two**

*Did God create evil?*

There is a verse in Isaiah the prophet, where in the old English translation it appears to say, 'I, the Lord, create good and I create evil' (see 45:7 KJV). But there we have to be very careful about the translation, because the Hebrew word involved can mean 'evil' in the bad, moral sense, or it can mean 'bad' in the experiential sense.

During the war, the air invasion of England with the doodlebugs and all the rest was a very bad experience for people. Now, it is true that God will sometimes use bad experience, even with his believing people, like parents used to do in the old days. It is illegal to do it now, but in the old days parents used to 'chastise' their children. And the Bible comments that chastisement is not pleasant, not pleasing, though in the end it had a very good result (Heb

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues, see David Gooding's book *Being Truly Human* co-authored with John Lennox.

12:11). God uses difficulties and bad experiences to treat and train even his people. But 'evil' in the moral sense, no, God does not create evil. 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5).

### Question three

*Not all people have free will or choice.*

This apparently is not a question; it is a statement. The person who wrote this appears to hold that not all people have free will or choice. Well, in the law of the land, the law recognizes that some people are not morally responsible. So a man might be up for murdering somebody, but the judge will take into consideration whether he was mentally disturbed and deficient, and decide whether he was, in the true sense of the word, *responsible* for his actions. A little baby that takes some poison that happened to be around and puts it in your tea, doesn't know what he's doing. You couldn't say he's exercising his free choice to poison you. So, yes, the law realizes that some people, in that sense, do not have genuine free choice.

To be faithful in answering your statement, there are a lot of philosophers these days who say, yes, you may have free choice in that there is no compulsion on you from the outside. Here, for example, is a lady, and she's gone down to town. She has an unexpected ten thousand euros to spend, and she's going to find a beautiful dress. And as she goes down, she is determined that this shall be mainly a reddish colour. And her husband doesn't object, and the police don't object; nobody objects. She is perfectly free. There is no outside external constraint, so her choice is absolutely free, in that sense. But there are psychologists and some philosophers who say that, in actual fact, her choice wasn't free. If you could somehow have known all her history from babyhood onwards, and all her memories, and all the emotions in her brain, you could predict she's going to choose a red dress and wouldn't choose, say, green. Well, she's jolly well not free in that sense. Experience and habit, and so on, have made her decision almost certain before it happens.

Is there any truth in that? Well, yes, psychologists will tell us we have a lot of hidden emotions and reasons for doing things that we've long since forgotten. We have developed a lot of habits and likes and dislikes and associations. Is it true that you could normally predict she's liable to choose the red and not the green? If you knew her well, you could say, yes, you might try to predict that. Does that mean that, internally, she's not free? Well, no, you don't believe that, nor would any judge in the land, because if a man in some insurance firm cheated you, and you took him to court, and the man argued, 'But, you see, I've been under such influence from my youth, and I like money, and I couldn't help myself,' you wouldn't accept it, nor would the judge accept it, nor would anybody else. In spite of all our predispositions, we are responsible to exercise choice and, to a great extent, we jolly well can.

I once was at a conference and present at it was a psychiatrist who practised in Bristol. He had a very bright reputation there as a psychiatrist because he got more people cured than did his associates. He told us what his secret was. He said, 'You know, when people are recovering, if they have a tantrum and break the window, I make them pay for it. I start to treat them as being responsible. It is part of their cure.'

When we start regarding people as not responsible for their choices, they are either seriously mentally ill or you're reducing them to the state of a cabbage.

### Question four

*Is all hope gone for those people who eventually find themselves in actual darkness?*

Well, ladies and gentlemen, as far as I'm aware, there is no hope. Perhaps if you would like, tomorrow or some other time, to call my attention to some Scripture that seems to you to suggest there is ultimate hope for them, then do by all means. As far as I read holy Scripture, there is no hope. There comes a point when God himself decides, and the decision is, if I may put it a little crudely: 'Have your own way.'

### Question five

*When did you get saved?*

Well, that is fair enough to ask. I mean to say, why should I come and lecture you and you not be able to investigate my soul? Yes, fair enough. When did I get saved? Well, to be frank with you, I think when I get home to heaven the good Lord will tell me I was saved long before I thought I was. I remember as a child saying, and sincerely meaning it, as best as a child can, a part of a Christian chorus that I had been taught:

Into my heart, into my heart,  
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus;  
Come in today,  
Come in to stay,  
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

And our blessed Lord has promised, 'I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in' (Rev 3:20). But if you ask me when I came to personal faith and assurance of salvation, it was at the age of ten, and I'm not going to tell you my age, but it was over seventy years ago.

I was in bed at the time, and my father had come, as he normally did, and prayed with us before we went to sleep. I didn't listen to his prayer, actually, but there came into my head that famous verse in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 'That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved' (see 10:9). I said, 'Well, I do' (just talking to myself, of course); 'I do believe and confess Jesus as Lord. I do believe that God has raised him from the dead. The verse says I'm saved.' I turned over and went to sleep. I have lived nearly seventy-two more years since then to prove that that was true. In that sense, it is not any complicated thing. It is simple, but real. And when I grew up I learned, of course, the context of it.

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<sup>8</sup> Harry D. Clarke (1888-1957), 'Into My Heart' (1924).

Some people do say, don't they, 'But it's so difficult getting *saved*, that word you keep using.' And Paul says, 'Nonsense, it isn't difficult. The word is near you, even in your mouth.' All you have to do is close on it and say, yes. Believe it. Thank God for it.

'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. (Rom 10:8-10)

But in my experience, a lot of people find it very difficult to get hold of that bit. I was told of a preacher, and he was a little bit unusual, and he'd been preaching, like preachers do. And, at last, a lady of some substance had invited him to tea. And he went round in the afternoon to talk to her, and she was saying, yes, she'd enjoyed his sermons, but she couldn't get this business of eternal life, and how you could be sure you have it. She'd often prayed for it, but couldn't be sure. And the preacher tried to explain it to her: uphill, down dale, sideways on and backwards as well. No good. So he suddenly said, 'Madam, I wonder if you'd make me a cup of tea.'

'Oh, yes,' of course she would. So out she went, and brought back the tea on a beautiful tray; it looked lovely with a doily on it, or whatever you call them, and china of the best and the milk and the sugar and the tea, and said, 'There you are.'

He said, 'Oh, how I wish you would give me that tea.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, well, I've made it for you.'

'Ah,' he said, 'but if only you knew how much I wanted that tea, you would give it to me.'

She said, 'Yes, you asked for it, didn't you? I made it for you.'

Then he got down on his knees, 'Oh, madam,' he said, 'give me this tea!'

She thought he'd gone bonkers. She wanted to know why he was behaving like that.

He said, 'Why do you treat God like it, madam?'

This is the testimony. This is what God is saying to us. God is not saying, 'I will give eternal life', but 'I have given eternal life. That life is in my Son. He who has the Son has the life' (see 1 John 5:12). How would you know? Well, simply because God says so.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)

Listen again, 'I have given eternal life, and that life is in my Son. He who has the Son has the life.'

Now, suppose there should be some extraordinary reason why you would like this bit of paper that I have here in my hand; perhaps it was antique or something. And I said, 'Right, as far as I'm concerned, I've given you that, and if you want that paper, I've given it to you. There it is, and the paper is tucked up in this closed book here. So, he who has the book has the paper.'

I shall be watching you to see what you do next. You wanted the paper. Will you come and take the book? And then I should watch you very closely after you'd taken it. If somebody

saw you going out the door with the book and said, 'What have you got that for?' you might say, 'Because I wanted the bit of paper and he said it was in the book.'

They might reply, 'Do you think you've got the paper?'

What would you say next?

'Well, he said it was there but, you know . . .'

I would say, 'Madam, is that what you think of my truthfulness?'

And God is listening to us, isn't he? He says, 'I've given eternal life. It's in my Son. If you have the Son, you have the life.'

How do I know? Because God says so, and God says, 'If you don't believe me when I speak, you are making me a liar.' I don't have that option, ladies and gentlemen, of making the almighty God a liar. What he says, I believe and must believe, and I want to believe it anyway as best I know how. I'm not boasting of anything for I, like all, am a sinner. I cannot lay any claim to salvation, but I need to be saved, and I want to be in God's heaven. He says to me, 'I've given you eternal life, and that life is in my Son. He that has the Son has life.'

Do I accept Christ? Have I got Christ as my Saviour? As best I know how, ladies and gentlemen, I have Christ. I have no other hope, and I have taken Christ, and I have Christ, and he, of course, has taken me, and I have eternal life because God himself has said so.

## Question six

*It seems to me that the idea of life after death is key to your understanding of the experience of life here and now. What makes you think that there is life after death?*

Someone from the audience has said just now, 'Because God says so.' And I say, yes, an excellent answer. And, as a Christian, I've another big reason for believing it. Can anybody guess what that is? Well, perhaps you're not Christians, because if you were Christians, you would know. The Christian gospel is,

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3-4)

Jesus is alive. That is the absolute centre of our Christian message: that he was buried, as literally as you or I may be, one of these days. He died for our sins that we might be forgiven, was buried and, the third day, rose again. There is tremendous evidence that the New Testament supplies, and that history supplies, that the grave in which he lay was found to be empty on the third day. It was the resurrection of Christ that pushed the early apostles out onto the streets, because Christ had been raised, and they wanted to tell the people. And what they preached was 'Christ is risen'.

So, yes, because God says so, and because of the resurrection of Christ, I believe there is life after death, along with a whole large host of other reasons as well.

But thank you for your patience. It amazes me how long you can sit. Thank you for your questions and your friendship. I hope I shall see you again before the weekend is out, but God's blessing be on you all.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019)** was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.