

## Seminar 2 – Developing a robust theology

“Theology is not about preparing for an exam – it is about preparing for life – it is about living and dying well.” Michael Horton

### What do we need when we suffer?

- Compassion
- Robust theology
- Hope

### ❖ **Ephesians 3:14-21 - Celebrating the goodness of the Lord**

- **3:17** - A solid foundation
- **3:18-19** - A staggering description
- **3:19** - A stunning outcome

## I. **The better story**

- World views try to answer four fundamental questions.
- Everyone – even postmodernists - need a story to live by.
- Christianity offers “*the better story*.”
- The story we live in is a credible, comprehensive and effective story.
- This is a good contact point for evangelism.

### ❖ **Creation – Life inside the garden**

- **Genesis 1:1** - God creates everything out of nothing by the power of His Word for the purpose of his glory.
- **Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31** – Creation is good - affirmation by repetition.
- **Genesis 1:31** - After the creation of humans it is “*very good*”.
- Evil is not eternal, and suffering was not there from the beginning.
- **Genesis 2:1-3** – God sabbaths.
- **Genesis 2:4-25** - God places humans in a suffering free environment.
- **Genesis 2:9** – Eden is a royal garden - a temple where God is present.
- In every realm – fellowship with God, health, work, relationships, and personal identity - human beings are satisfied and free from suffering.

### ❖ **Fall – Life outside the garden**

- **Genesis 2:15-17** – Human beings are not God.
- **Genesis 3:1-13** – Man rebels against his Creator.
- **Genesis 3:14-19** – The creation is cursed.
- **Genesis 3:20-24** – Man is expelled from the garden into a cursed world.
- It is right to distinguish moral and natural evil – but they are both a result of sin
- **Genesis 3-11** – Sin has entered the blood stream of the human race.
  - ⇒ **4:8** - Cain kills Abel.
  - ⇒ **5:1-31** – Every generation after Adam dies.
  - ⇒ **6:5-7** – It grieves God that he made the world.

- ⇒ **9:18-27** – The flood has not washed the world clean.
- ⇒ **11:1-9** – Humans seek acclaim without God.
- **Romans 8:22-23** – The creation groans – and so do we!

### 1) **Redemption - Jesus came to rescue the whole creation**

- **Genesis 3:15** – The first hope for a fallen world is that Christ will crush Satan and undo his work.
- **Genesis 12:1-3** – Hope comes through the seed of Abraham.
- **Ephesians 1:10** – God’s ultimate purpose is to unite all things under Christ.
- Through the ministry of Christ, the Kingdom has dawned – but we are still waiting for its consummation.
- Redeemed by Christ we are new people but not totally new people.
  - ⇒ The kingdom has come (Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46)
  - ⇒ The kingdom is yet to come (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-52).
- We live within the tension of the “*already*” and the “*not yet*”.

### 2) **Consummation - One day the universe will be restored**

- **Revelation 21:1-4** – A new heavens and a new earth are assured.
- We receive new resurrection bodies in the new heavens and earth.
- These bodies experience perfect physical/mental/relational health for eternity.
- **Revelation 22:1-6** - The ultimate goal of God is a restored Garden.

*“We may say that in the possession of the Spirit we who are in Christ have a foretaste of the blessings of the age to come, and a pledge and guarantee of the resurrection of the body. Yet we have only the firstfruits. We look forward to the final consummation of the kingdom of God, when we shall enjoy these blessings to the full.”*

(Anthony Hoekema – The Bible and the Future – 1994 - page 67)

❖ ***What the implications of *already-not yet* dynamic the for the pastoral care of those who are suffering?***

## II. **The Truth about God**

**PT Forsyth** – “Our problem today is the shallowing on the Christian mind. We think that we should seek after simplicity because safety lies in simplicity. But the when it comes to God the safety lies in the depth.”

### 1) **God is Sovereign**

#### ❖ **The denial of God’s sovereignty**

- **Harold Kushner** – “When bad things happen to Good People” (1981).
- **Clark Pinnock** - “The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God” (ed. C Pinnock 1994).
- For two thousand years the church has misread the Bible.
- The classical view has more to do with Greek philosophy that the correct exegesis of biblical texts.
- There are massive “positive” implications of this view:
  - ⇒ “God is not a distant, aloof monarch removed from the contingencies of the world. Love is the most important quality we can attribute to God and love involves being sensitive and responsive. God is a caring parent, generous, sensitive and vulnerable”.
  - ⇒ “Our prayers are worth something because they can actual change an as yet undecided future. Keep at it!”
  - ⇒ “This accident was not God’s will. He did not see it coming and could not have prevented it. God is **not** the ultimate explanation of everything that happens. But he does know how you feel, and you will find him wonderfully sympathetic”.

❖ **What are the weaknesses of this view?**

### ❖ **The affirmation of God's sovereignty**

- “God has an eternal and all-embracing plan which cannot be defeated and will result in His glory and the good of His people”
- God reigns over all creation and his will is the final explanation of all things.
- **Daniel 4:34-36** – His dominion is an eternal dominion.
- **Psalm 2:1-6** – The one enthroned in heaven laughs.
- **Ephesians 1:11** – All things are conformed to his will
- **Genesis 50:20** – Who sent Joseph to Egypt?
- **Acts 2:22** – Who sent Jesus to the cross?
- **Romans 8:28** – God works **all** things for our good.

### ❖ **Conclusions**

- God is sovereign over evil
- God cannot do evil and can never be blamed for evil.
- God uses all things – even evil to fulfil His purposes.
- God rightfully blames and judges moral creatures.

**See Appendix**

## **2) God is Good**

### ❖ **Evidence**

- **Exodus 34:6-7** – God's goodness is his glory.
- **Deuteronomy 32:4** – “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”
- **Psalm 34:8** – “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”
- **Psalm 100:5** – Scripture affirms his goodness.
- **Psalm 147:3-4** – God's greatness and God's grace.
- **Romans 5:6-8** - The death of Christ proves that God cares.

### ❖ **Significance**

- The word “good” means “worthy of approval”.
- The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good and that everything that God does is worthy of approval.
- God's character, actions and intentions are always worthy of approval.
- God's sovereignty is determined by his character – God cannot do anything, but he can do anything that he wants to do.
- It is manifested in his mercy, grace, and patience.

## **3) God is Wise**

### ❖ **Evidence**

- **Deuteronomy 29:29** – The secret things belong to God.
- **Psalm 18:30** – God's way is perfect.
- **Job 38-41** – God does not explain all His ways.
- **Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30** – The plan of redemption is the supreme expression of God's wisdom.

❖ **Significance**

- God's wisdom mean that he always chooses the best goals and the best means of achieving those goals.
- He is a personal, wise and inscrutable God.
- The need for humility – goldfish and jigsaws.
- The Problem of evil – David Hume – *“Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.”*
  - ⇒ Is he willing to prevent evil, but unable to do so? Then he is impotent.
  - ⇒ Is he able but unwilling to prevent evil? Then he is malevolent.
  - ⇒ Is he both able and willing, whence then is evil?”
- There are two types of response:
  - ⇒ *“Theodicies”* – attempt to justify God's ways to men.
  - ⇒ *“Defences”* – God had his reasons – even if we cannot fathom them.

❖ **What other attributes of God help us to reflect on the nature of suffering?**

### III. The Truth about Jesus

#### 1) The Incarnation makes Christianity unique

❖ *Man's maker was made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother's breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Foundation be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.* – Augustine

#### ❖ Evidence

- **John 1:1, 14** - God is not a distant deity or an infinite iceberg.
- **John 4:6** – Jesus experienced thirst and weariness.
- **John 11: 35** – Jesus shares our human emotions.
- **John 12:27** – Jesus experienced distress and grief
- **1 John 1:1-3** – The “physicality” of Christ.
- **Hebrews 2:18; 4:15-16** – He is a sympathetic Saviour.

#### ❖ Significance

- The main reason God can be trusted in suffering is that he has firsthand experience of it.
- **Don Carson** - *“The God one whom we rely knows what suffering is all about, not merely in the way in which that God know everything, but by experience.”*

#### 2) The Cross makes Christianity unique

*“The only person who deserves to be called a theologian is one who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen though suffering and the cross.”*

**Martin Luther**

*“We must learn to climb the hill called Calvary and from that vantage point survey all life's tragedies. The cross does not solve the problem of suffering – but it supplies the essential perspective from which to look at it. I could never myself believe in God's love if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche ridiculed as the God on the cross”*

**John Stott**

#### ❖ **The cross reveals the character of God**

- **Romans 3:25 ; 1 John 2:2** - The cross reveals the awesome majesty of God's holiness in his antipathy to sin and his unflinching commitment to justice.
- **John 3:16; Romans 5:8** – The cross reveals the indescribable love of God, demonstrated in who he gives and what he gives him to and those for whom he is given.
- The cross is the final and definitive triumph of justice **and** love.
- **2 Corinthians 5:19** – The cross leads to reconciliation.

#### ❖ **The cross demonstrates that suffering can have a purpose**

- **Hebrews 2:10** – It was the means of bringing many sons to glory.
- **John 12:23-28** – The seed must fall into the ground and die.
- His suffering unlocks the blessings of God
  - ⇒ **Romans 8:1** – Past – no condemnation – the fullness of forgiveness.
  - ⇒ **Romans 8:28-30** – Present – God has a purpose that cannot fail.
  - ⇒ **Romans 8:31-39** - Future – no separation – we are in the grip of grace.
- At the cross *“destruction was destroyed; torment tormented, damnation damned, death dead, mortality made immortal.”* Calvin

#### ❖ **The cross makes Jesus a sympathetic Saviour**

- **Hebrews 2:18** - *“For because he himself suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*
- **Hebrews 4:15** - *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”*
- **Hebrews 5:7** – He cried with fervent tears
- *“The other gods were strong, but thou wast weak”*

#### ❖ **The cross gives Christians a model to follow**

- **Mark 8:34-38** - We are called to follow his example.
- **Hebrews 12:1-3** - We need to keep our eyes on him.
- **1 Peter 2:18-23** - The cross inspires patient endurance.
- Joni Eareckson – *“He was paralysed too.”*

### 3) **The Resurrection makes Christianity unique**

#### ❖ **His Resurrection conquers death**

- **John 11:33** – Death is the last enemy.
- *“Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state not of uncontrollable grief but of irrepressible rage”* (BB Warfield)
- Christ destroyed the *“violent tyranny”* of death (Calvin)
- **Hebrews 2:14-15** - He destroys the fear of death.

❖ **His Resurrection gives hope**

- **1 Peter 1:3-5** – The assurance of hope.
- **1 Corinthians 15:20** - Christ is the firstfruits of those who will be raised – our new body will be like the body of Christ – the same but utterly transformed.
- Our hope is not the bliss of a disembodied soul but the restoration of life - we get our bodies back.
- **Thessalonians 4:13-18** - Christianity offered a radical solution to death – you will be reunited with your loved ones.
- *“But resurrection is not just consolation — it is restoration. We get it all back - the love, the loved ones, the goods, the beauties of this life - but in new, unimaginable degrees of glory and joy and strength.”* Tim Keller

❖ **His Resurrection assures a new creation**

- **1 Corinthians 15:20-28** – Christ is the firstfruits of the new creation.
- *“The New Testament writers speak as if Christ’s achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the ‘first fruits,’ the ‘pioneer of life.’ He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has been opened.”* (C S Lewis – *Miracles* – 1947 pages 236–237.)
- **Revelation 21:1-4** – The certainty of the new creation
- Justice will triumph.

❖ **How would you apply these truths to a dialogue with unbelievers?**

❖ **What other Biblical truths help us when we suffer?**

## Appendix

### ❖ Concurrency

- Concurrency is an aspect of God's providence whereby he cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do.
- It acknowledges that there are two emphases in Scripture
  - ⇒ Passages that emphasize the sovereignty of God (Genesis 14:8; Proverbs 21:1; Matthew 10:29; Romans 9:20ff)
  - ⇒ Passages that emphasize human responsibility (Matthew 25; Romans 2:1-16; Revelation 20:11-13)
- Two or more parties can act in the same event and produce a given outcome without all parties having the same intent.

*“God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”*

**Westminster Confession of Faith - 3:1**

### ❖ Don Carson - Compatibilism

- 1) *“God is absolutely sovereign but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized or mitigated.*
- 2) *Human beings are morally responsible creatures – they significantly choose, rebel, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.*

*(D A Carson – “How Long O Lord?” –1990 - Page 201)*

- *“God stands behind good and evil in somewhat different ways; that is, he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically.”*
- God can ordain evil and not be guilty of sin.
- Evil is not morally chargeable to him.

