

Christian Doubts No. 13
“The Mystery of God’s Ways”
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We have recently considered, as another source of Christian doubt, that is, another reason why the faith of even devout believers is sometimes shaken, either the suffering that Christians themselves must endure – sometimes almost unbearable suffering, sometimes literally unbearable in the case of suicides – or the suffering they observe in the world. Such suffering seems in so many cases pointless, needlessly cruel, and, in any case, arbitrary, falling upon particular human beings with no discernible rhyme or reason. Some people suffer terribly while others – often the most defiantly unbelieving – suffer comparatively little. Think of Hugh Hefner in his pajamas living the high life while vast multitudes of others suffer the ravages of the very sin that he worked so hard to encourage in modern American life. Think of the billionaires, living the high life, that attend *Burning Man* in the Nevada desert every year and revel in their liberation from moral and ethical norms.

If we believe, as any Christian must – as even a nominal Christian will – that God is in control of events, or at least has the power to intervene in human affairs, then we must believe that such terrible sorrow and woe in human life is his will or, at least, that he could have prevented it had he wanted to. Think of the ubiquitous bumper sticker “God Bless America.” Those three words reveal such potent assumptions! 1) That God *can* bless America if he should so choose. 2) That he *might not* bless America, otherwise why the appeal, literally the prayer of the bumper sticker. 3) That America *needs* God’s blessing. All of those assumptions together lie at the bottom of the problem we are dealing with tonight. You read or heard, of course, of the recent earthquake in Italy. Centuries-old houses suddenly collapsed in the quaint mountain village of Accumoli. In one instance two boys, aged 8 months and 9 years, were killed together with their parents when their home imploded. As rescue workers carried away the body of the infant, carefully covered by a small blanket, the children’s grandmother blamed God: “He took them all at once,” she wailed. So terribly sad, and yet such things are happening every day all over the world.

But, of course, what Christian can disagree with the old woman. God *did* take them all at once. You and I may know better than *to blame* God, as if he had no right to do what he did, as if he were not acting wisely and justly, but we can hardly fail to acknowledge his sovereignty. To do so would be virtually to abandon our faith. To be a Christian you must first believe in the existence of the God of the Bible, the living God. And, as the Bible is constantly reminding us, *that God* kills and makes alive, *he* builds up and tears down; the lot is cast into the lap, but every decision is *from him*, and all things come to pass according to the counsel of *his* will. What we can’t do is solve the problem by stripping God of his authority over all that he himself has made. To resolve our doubts that way would be to seek to save our faith by removing its foundations. Indeed, if the world is not under God’s direct control, if he is not in absolute charge of human affairs, then we have no way of knowing that he will be able to keep the promises he has made to us. Perhaps they are simply his own wishful thinking. After all, it is not obvious to a thoughtful person observing the world that God is working his purposes out. In fact, the ancient religions typically thought of God, or the gods, in just this way: powerful to a point, but capricious, unreliable, unpredictable, rather easily influenced, and often overcome by events that were not

under their control. They thought so because that is what the way of the world seemed to suggest to them. Their view of God was small because the world so often seemed to make no sense to them and they deduced from that fact that the gods were not entirely in control of it either or were vindictive or unreliable or distracted, all that you find the gods of the ancient world to be. The living God, the God of the Bible, is of course very different.

The Lisbon earthquake that destroyed most of the city on All Saints Day, 1755 – estimated by modern seismologists to have been between 8.5 and 9 on the modern scale of earthquake measurement – caused an entire generation of Europeans to question what they thought they knew about God. How could he have allowed such a thing, to sweep away tens of thousands of people in a few moments? Would a good God, a wise God, and an all-powerful God have allowed such a thing?

Napoleon thought that the fact that Talleyrand, the French diplomat and sometime political advisor to Napoleon, a man of precious few principles apart from the service of himself, I say, he thought that the fact that Talleyrand died in his bed was proof that there was no God who ruled the world. If there were, he thought, a man such as Talleyrand would have been punished for his perfidy, punished for all the world to see. [Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon*, 146] Napoleon was punished for his crimes, but Talleyrand got off, or so it seemed, scot free.

But, then, how are we to resolve the problem caused by the mystery of God's ways, by his causing or permitting such terrible suffering in the world, suffering, in so many cases, for which there is no obvious rhyme or reason, suffering that befalls one person but not another, suffering endured by human beings who have little or no contact with the gospel? What's the point? Well, interestingly, the Bible's solution is never to provide an explanation for suffering as it is encountered in the world. It never tells us how to know why this terrible thing happened or that, The Bible is, in fact, very candid about how dark and mysterious are the ways of God. What it says, rather, is:

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. [Isa. 55:9]

Or, to put the point more simply, “What we know is very little; what we do not know is immense.” [LaPlace, cited in A.A. Hodge, *Life of Charles Hodge*, 607] We know many things about God and about what God has done and will do, because he has told us those things in his Word, but what we know is the tiniest fraction of what might be known.

Even Abraham Lincoln, no evangelical Christian, recognized that “the best evidence of God's hand in human affairs would be the incomprehensibility of what that hand wrought.” [Allen Guelzo] As he put it to a man who had complimented him on his second inaugural address:

“Men are not flattered by being shown that there had been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however...is to deny that there is a God governing the world.” [Cited in A. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 421]

The great Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck, opened his consideration of the doctrine of God in his monumental four volume *Reformed Dogmatics* with the sentence: “Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics.” He then goes on to say:

“In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding. In that sense it is all mystery with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself. From the very start of its labors, it faces the incomprehensible.” [vol. II, 29]

We nod our heads at that, but do we really understand what he is saying. Let me try to give you some sense of the distance, the immeasurable distance that separates us from God.

We might begin with the triune nature of God. We know the words we have been taught to use: “one God in three persons.” We know that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, that each person is distinct from the other, and yet there is but one God. That is what we are left with when the data of Holy Scripture are collected. All three persons are declared to be God in the Bible, the three are carefully distinguished from one another, and yet the Bible is adamant that there is but one God. But you don’t know, and I don’t know, indeed, we can’t even imagine how this is true. Our minds are so limited, so finite that I doubt there is any human being who can really, genuinely conceive of the triune God without thinking of the Father as a third of God, the Son as a third of God, and the Holy Spirit as a third of God. But none of the persons is a third; each is the whole God. A third of God would not be God! But how else can we conceive of the three persons in the single Godhead? Tell me, if you can, how to understand this, to visualize or imagine this in your mind? You cannot; no one can. But that is the same thing as saying we don’t even understand *who God is*, or *what he is* as three in one. So, Augustine, “If you can grasp it, it isn’t God.” [Sermon 117.5] Or consider the honest admission of Gregory Nazianzen:

“I cannot think of the one, but I am immediately surrounded with the splendor of the three; nor can I clearly discover the three, but I am suddenly carried back to the one.”

How both at the same time? Who can say? The way this diversity in unity was expressed in patristic theology – at the time an unquestionably brilliant theological invention – and, indeed, the way it has been expressed ever since, was with the doctrine called in Greek *perichoresis*, and in Latin *circumincessio*. What is confessed in this doctrine is that the life of God circulates through the three persons, that there is an interpenetration of being among the three persons. That is, each person coheres in both the divine essence and in the other two persons. That is our doctrine. But, again, in using such a term, in confessing such a thing, while we are stating what must be true, we are very definitely *not* explaining what this means or how it happens or even in what such intra-personal coherence consists. [cf. Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, 163-166] We can do nothing more than define the nature of the mystery!

What I mean by all of this is: at the very point at which we confess our faith in God as the living and true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we don’t really understand what we are saying. That is how far above us God is and must be! Forget for a moment the mystery of God’s ways. Before

we get to what God *does*, we must confess that we are stymied at a still earlier point; we cannot really even say who or what God *is*!

But I'm only getting started. Think of other ways in which the Bible and our own observation of life remind us of the vast chasm that separates us from the knowledge that God has, from his purposes, and from his motives. You remember the question that the Lord asked Job when he answered Job's complaints from out of the whirlwind.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements – surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when
the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.” [38:4-7]

The argument proceeds on the assumption that Job has some conception of how large the world is, however little he grasps its true scale, and, therefore, how mighty must have been the One who made it and gave it its form and its life. But suppose the book of Job were being written in our day. Might the Lord not have reminded Job that a light year is more than 6 trillion miles – a number that simply beggars our comprehension – and that the nearest star to earth, Proxima Centauri, is 4.3 light years from us, almost 26 trillion miles! At the highest speed capable with present technology – some 33,000 miles per hour – it would take some 81,000 years to reach Proxima Centauri. We can calculate the numbers and say the words, but we can't really grasp distances that immense.

Might he not have reminded Job that the most distant star that can be seen with the naked eye, Deneb in the constellation Cygnus, is 1,550 light years from earth, some 9,300 trillion miles? The Milky Way, our home galaxy – earth is not at all near the center of it; in fact earth is reckoned to be 165 quadrillion miles from its center – is some 100,000 light years across and contains within itself from 200 to 400 *billion* stars. There are, in addition to the Milky Way, some 170 *billion* galaxies – and those are the ones we can see – each of which has hundreds of billions of stars. The most distant stars so far observed are more than thirteen *billion* light years from earth. Thirteen billion times six trillion miles. We are literally struck dumb by such immensities!

Yet God, the living God is present in every part of this vast universe he has made. He controls absolutely the incalculable forces that make every part of it turn and spin and travel through space in the infinitely elaborate cosmic dance. He brought all of it into existence by the mere utterance of a few words: “Let there be light!” How did that happen? How can that happen? Who can say? *This* is who God is and *this* is what God has done and does at every moment. We cannot even conceive the vastness of his domain or of the power that gives him sovereignty over it. We cannot even grasp how it is that God is a spirit, immaterial, without a body, that his consciousness, his reason, his knowledge, his power are not contained in some spatial existence, but that, at the same time, he controls with an iron will all of space and time. What does that mean? What then is God? We don't know. How can he be present at every moment in every place? We know it is so; how it is so we haven't the faintest idea.

Or bring the measurement of his infinity and our finitude, of his knowledge and our ignorance closer to home. In chapter 10 of Augustine's *Confessions*, the beginning of the last part of the book that few ever read – the part that continues after Augustine has finished telling the story of his life – he embarks on an extended meditation on memory. It is a brilliant passage and I commend it to you. The point Augustine makes is that our memory is the key to our personal identity. We may not think of this, but it's true. It is your memory that defines yourself as you know yourself to be. We wouldn't know who we are if we didn't recollect our former life, the experiences we have had, the feelings, the relationships, the commitments, the loves, the disappointments, the jokes, the taste of food, and everything else. Without our memory we would be like the amnesiac who doesn't know his name or where he came from or like the Alzheimer patient who cannot identify his loved ones or remember the past that created the person he was but now no longer knows. We are a story, much of which only we know. But there can be no story if one cannot remember the earlier chapters or if you can't connect the previous few moments to what happened just before or what happened years ago! And for Christians the memory of our sins – only a comparative few which we actually remember – and of God's grace, of what we have learned of Christ and salvation, and of the hope of heaven shape our knowledge of ourselves, of the meaning of our lives, cause us sadness and joy, regret and hope, the most powerful and meaningful of human mental or spiritual states. It all depends on memory. Here is Augustine himself:

“Memory's huge cavern, with its mysterious, secret, and indescribable nooks and crannies, receives all these perceptions, to be recalled when needed and reconsidered. Every one of them enters into the memory, each by its own gate, and is put on deposit there.” [10.13]

“This power of memory is great, very great, my God. It is a vast and infinite profundity. Who has plumbed its bottom? This power is that of my mind and is a natural endowment, but I myself cannot grasp the totality of what I am.” [10.15]

“Great is the power of memory, an awe-inspiring mystery, my God, a power of profound and infinite multiplicity. And this is mind, this is I myself.” [10.26]

The memory is even capable of knowing that it has forgotten something. And, of course, it is selective, remembering certain things more accurately and comprehensively than others. [For the above cf. G. Wills, *Augustine's Confessions: A Biography*, 100-106]

But, now think of all the ways in which your memory fails you. How much you forget that it would be of immense help to have remembered. That person walking up to you in the narthex in church – you know you learned his name last Lord's Day morning, but you can't for the life of you recollect what it is. How many things there must be that would be good to remember but which you have forgotten entirely and so don't even make the effort to recollect. If only you remembered certain things, certain experiences, certain feelings and convictions you had and how powerful was their sway in your heart, how much easier it would be to live life as you ought to live it. But in this your memory fails you, so often a sieve that catches the chaff – we can remember a perceived offense for years as if it were yesterday – but lets the grain drop through –

the goodness of God to us, the answers he has given to our prayers, the blessings he has poured out upon us when we didn't even think to pray. How much different would your life be if you remembered everything in the way you ought to remember it. How wise you would be; how sturdy in the hour of temptation; how ugly sin would seem to you, how powerfully the prospect of heaven would control your thoughts at all times, and so on.

But now think of this. *God never forgets*. True enough, he promises to forget and not to remember our sins when we have confessed them to him. But we know what he means in saying that. He doesn't mean he will have no knowledge of our past misdeeds; he means only that he will not hold them against us. No, his memory, if we can even use the word in regard to God, is perfect, infinite, and eternal. Everything – past, present, and future to us, every human life past, present, and future – is immediately present to him in its every detail. He sees eternal reality as a single whole, the connections between one thing and everything else in human history from beginning to end are immediately obvious to him. This is a vastness of thought, a capacity so immense that it exceeds even the vastness of the universe he has made. God knows us so perfectly he knows what we *would do* in a situation we have never encountered. Whether we would sin or practice righteousness.

How profoundly it must alter the meaning of any and every event, small and great, triumphant or tragic, to a mind that sees that event in its connection with all of reality in time and eternity. We stand utterly silent before such infinite knowledge and power. Our little, faulty, unreliable, and so terribly limited memory is an amazement to us and we realize how profoundly that memory is ourselves. But what then must total knowledge, intuitive knowledge, known but not learned, infinitely detailed, unlimited by time or eternity, I say what must God's knowledge be and how profoundly must he see everything so differently than we can see it, than we will ever be able to see it!

We read in Ecclesiastes, "God has placed eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." What that means is that we can't help but want to know *why* even if we cannot! As one of the finest scholars on Ecclesiastes put it:

"Events happen to us from time to time, but God has given us a longing to know the eternity of things, the whole scheme; but, try as we will, we cannot see it, though we can declare by faith that each event plays its part in the beauty of the whole." [J.S. Wright, in *Classical Evangelical Essays in OT Interpretation*, 141]

We must all admit that a great many things, often terrible things, often good things happen in the world, things we cannot explain. We cannot say why they happened or what purpose is being served by them. We may be troubled by them; troubled greatly. We usually don't bother to ask the question "why?" if it is a good thing, a happy thing, which, of course, is revealing in itself. We either think we know or don't care to know if what happens is something we are glad to have happened. But when it is a hard thing, a sad thing, a tragic thing, we wonder what in the world God is doing. It bothers us that we cannot explain, cannot say "why." But our ignorance is an argument against God and against our faith, a legitimate reason for doubt, *only if it should be true that if God had good reasons for allowing this suffering or tragedy or heartbreak, we would know what those reasons are.* [Evans, *Why Christian Faith Still Makes Sense*, 71] And that, I

hope you see, is pure, unadulterated presumption! Why on earth should we ever imagine that *we*, pipsqueaks that we are, whose grasp is so limited, so miniscule compared to God's, will understand anything of God's reasons apart from those that are revealed in his Word? He is so far above us in every way that the very idea that we would be capable of tracking his thoughts is absurd, more than absurd.

We have examples to teach us this lesson, if only we are willing to consider them. Children very often do not understand what their parents require of them; they often resent those requirements. They seem to them unnecessary or unfair or unpleasant. An adult can easily see the wisdom of the requirement or the commandment, or the punishment or disappointment imposed by the parent; but the child cannot. Why? Because the child's perspective is so limited. They do not know enough! They are not able to appreciate the reason why it must be so. They don't know enough. A vaccination is simply a painful shot to a child because he or she knows nothing about disease and cannot really calculate the danger. But, then, we know so little of the last judgment, human beings are so profoundly indifferent to the specter of the world to come, or of the importance of faith or humility or a thousand other things. So who are we to say what the best for human beings actually requires.

Or, perhaps even better, C.S. Lewis uses the pet instead of the child. Our dog doesn't understand the decisions that are made for him by his master. He wants to roam free in the house, he wants to eat whatever he wants when he wants it, and so on. The master, who loves his dog, makes a great many decisions that the dog cannot understand precisely because the master knows what the dog does not.

But, of course, the distance between our understanding and our perspective and God's is far, far greater than that between an adult and a child or a person and his pet. If you compare a 40 watt bulb and a 100 watt bulb, you can tell the difference, especially if you wish to read by the light of that lamp. But if you hold both the 40 and the 100 to the sun, the difference between them is annihilated; it is now utterly insignificant, unworthy of mention. Such is the difference between Creator and creature!

What is more, there are so many other things of which we have no knowledge and can have no knowledge. What is Satan's part in the event? Think of Job and the independence he exercised to afflict that righteous man. We do not know why, we do not know how, we do not know to what extent, but this world, even the Bible says, is ruled by Satan. The Devil may be God's devil, as Luther put it; true enough, but it certainly means something to say that this world is the kingdom of the Evil One. The entire question of Satan's agency in human life is still another profound mystery which it is entirely beyond our capacity to unravel.

Summing up, then, it is absolutely true that we cannot explain why certain terrible things happen in life. But, then, if God is God, if he is the God revealed to us in Holy Scripture, if he is the creator of all that has been made, if he infinite in his knowledge and his power, we should never imagine that we could explain his ways and works, his purposes, his intentions. The problem with the immensity of God and so what seems to human beings to be the utter mystery of his ways *is that in our pride we really imagine that God owes us an explanation or that his ways ought to be obvious to us*. We forget, sometimes almost entirely, our real situation as mere

creatures, and tiny ones at that. If the nations are, as Isaiah teaches us, a mere drop in the bucket to God, how much more the individual human being.

These doubts that arise are, in our own day, fueled by the culture in which we live, a culture of entitlement, perhaps especially among younger American adults. Even in the church the nature of God as high above us, impossibly high, has been largely lost; not through overt denial, but through an almost exclusive concentration of the other side of the Bible's revelation of God, that is, his nearness, his love, and his compassion. Let no one ever take our crown in proclaiming the grace and mercy of God, of his tender interest in the smallest details of human life and, especially, the life of his children. But this God who loves us is, at the same time, the God who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.

Indeed, in the same way that we will never see God, even in heaven, even when we are perfect, so I very much doubt that we will be able to understand why things unfolded in the world as they did. We may have a greater understanding than we now do or can, but *finitum non capax infiniti*, that which is finite is incapable of comprehending or grasping or receiving what is infinite. And as human beings we will be forever finite. *So, the answer to those who doubt because they cannot discern the purpose of God in events in this world is to remind them that they never should have imagined that they ever could do such a thing, God being who and what he is and we being who and what we are.*

So when Job, brokenhearted, stunned, desolate at the sudden collapse of his fortunes and the death of his children, says,

“The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord,”

He is as much as saying in every event in this world, however tragic, 1) that we must look to God as the one who orders our steps (though evil men committed the crime, the will of God lies behind everything); 2) that whether or not we can explain what has happened we can know that God is just and that all his ways are right (even in our woe he is to be blessed); and 3) that can only be true because he knows infinitely more than we do about what has happened and why.

The Bible is candid, open, and honest about how heavy the burdens of life – which is to say, the burdens of divine providence – can be. It never makes light of the pain that we must endure. The Lord Jesus, remember, suffered our pain and much more than we suffer precisely because he loved us and wanted to deliver us from the pains of life and bring us at last into a world free of suffering of any kind. The Bible was not playing with words when it called him “the Man of Sorrows.” But that same Bible never allows us to think that we are in any position or ever could be to pass judgment on the ways of God. We know too little and we care too little even about what is most important to our own welfare. We are, even the most mature Christians so sinfully minded. We are in no position to say what a holy God would do or want to do. When we presume to doubt God's goodness, we are only demonstrating our own pride and our own ignorance. We may not be able to say what righteous purpose is being served by some tragedy, but, then, we can't say very much about much of anything, whether what or how or why!

We may not know how, but the whole Bible teaches us and the history of the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming of the Son of God proves that the will of God is in all things determined by his infinite love, justice, and wisdom which always and in everything seek what is eternally good.

But remember this: a God who does *not* rule over all things, a God who is *not* so much larger than we are, a God who is *not* infinite in wisdom and power and authority, a God of simple good humor – which is to say, the God of so much modern imagination, non-Christian and Christian alike – is utterly uninteresting, unimportant, and insipid. Only the living God, the God enveloped in impenetrable majesty and terrible righteousness, only *that* God can satisfy the human soul. Because it was in the image of *that* God that we were created. [Machen, cited in Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 73]