

THEODICY: THE JUSTIFICATION OF GOD

Study 1

'To justify God is the best and deepest way to fortify men' - P. T. Forsyth¹

Trevor Faggotter

Prayer: Dear Father, we give you thanks for your great and amazing grace towards the human race, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. We praise you for the work of the Holy Spirit, deep in our hearts, revealing your nature, your love and your gift of redemption, through the Cross of Christ. We pray for a fresh hearing of the gospel, in our lives, in our day, and among the nations of the world, in Jesus name, Amen.

A STRANGE TITLE

Theodicy: The Justification of God! The title of this series of studies is unusual. Since the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit and Scripture, have given the human race a revelation of the grace of God, in the beauty of Jesus Christ, in his holy love and kindness towards us. For those of us who have come to know God, as Father - in and through his dear Son Jesus, the Messiah, we *do now* – in all our joy, as well as in our frailty and weakness – *actually love God*. We also love his world, his humanity. We love *because he first loved us*. We trust him concerning his plan for for creation. We also seek to know God more and more, in all his ways – even his *seemingly* strange ways, in all his deeds and actions.

Many things, we barely understand. However, to a person stirred, gripped, moved and motivated by the grace of God, the very notion that God needs justification may now, in our renewed frame of mind, appear to be a foolish one. In many ways, it is. Just as it has been said: *Defend Scripture? Defend a Lion!* – it can also be said – *Defend God? Defend the Lion!* However, as responsible members of the human race, and of our present world, Christian people continue to wrestle with the difficult questions, which confront us - in order to more helpfully proclaim Christ, and all that he means to and for the world.

In the Foreword to the 1988 reprint of this book by P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, Dean Carter says: 'God is justified in and by the crucified Christ'.² That is the premise, or basis, upon which the book proceeds, and concludes: 'Christ crucified and risen is the final, eternal answer to the riddle of life'.³

The book is the gospel expounded - with a view to grasping something of the dynamics of evil, grace and holiness, outworking in human history. It has its roots deeply implanted in the Scripture, and is written amidst a time of global crisis.

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988, p. 14

² P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 4

³ Ibid.p. 221

THINK IN CENTURIES

Our studies are based upon the text of a book, which was first published in 1917. That is, it was written during World War One – ‘the war to end all wars’. It is important also to consider that New Creation Publications Incorporated reprinted this book in 1988, some 71 years later. If my maths is correct, the contents of this book (here in 2008) are now 91 years old. A short comment once made by the author, P.T. Forsyth (in a different book), is prophetically coming to pass in our own day:

Theology simply means thinking in centuries.⁴

Forsyth thought deeply, and wrote works that have endured, and continue to speak to us today. It takes time to grasp his meaning, but it is well worth the effort. This is a difficult book. But I urge you to persist with its contents. For the reading of a book beyond our current ability can become a defining moment in the way of maturity.

Following the September 11th 2001 attack upon the New York *World Trade Centre Twin Towers*, like us all, I too needed steady insight. So, of all the possibilities open to me, I reached for this book. Apart from my own need, I was confronted once again, with:

1. A shocking event – evil and terror
2. The sudden death and suffering of everyday people - who seemed much like me,
3. A barrage of political - and at times very shallow - media comment, and
4. A pastorate, a community of people, and a world of nations that need wisdom.

I found here, valuable wisdom, which I have sought to share, as able. I trust others heard it too, and took heart.

WHAT IS THEODICY?

Our studies focus on the matter of *Theodicy*. That is, the attempt to justify God in the face of all the evil, misery, suffering and all injustice in the world. Theodicy seeks to answer the question: How can the justice of a sovereign God be defended in the face of evil - especially human suffering, particularly the suffering of the innocent? Our society and indeed all nations need to be equipped to grapple more fully with such questions. For our world is blessed with so many benefits of modern technology, and advanced medicine, that we have often become fixated upon the idea of endless ‘progress’ – as if that is all there is, and all that matters. When something like a Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, or a complex, volatile war, shatters the settled domestic lives of millions, and touches our own lives, we are easily prone to erroneous, foolish or unhelpful responses. We just react.

N.T. Wright identifies three things that characterise much of our current day inadequate approach to problem of evil:

Firstly, we ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result.⁵

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, NCPI, 1993, p. 144

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, SPCK, 2006, p. 8

AN OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

Foreword

Overture and Outline

- I. The Expectations of Popular Religion and their Fate. Religion as centred on God and centred on Man
- II. The Problems: Revelation and Teleology
- III. Metaphysic and Redemption
- IV. What is Redemption?
- V. Salvation Theological but not Systematic
- VI. The Failure of the Church as an International Authority
- VII. Teleology Acute in Theodicy
- VIII. Philosophical Theodicy
- IX. The Eternal Cruciality of the Cross for Destiny
- X. Saving Judgment
- XI. History and Judgment
- XII. The Conquest of Time by Eternity

Bibliography

P.T. FORSYTH – A WORD ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Taylor Forsyth was born in 1848, and studied at the universities of Aberdeen, Gottingen and New College, London. He served various Congregational Churches in England, and became Principal of Hackney Theological College, Hampstead – a position he retained until he died, in 1921. He was a member of the theological faculty of London University, and also a one-time chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales. He wrote over 30 books and many other pamphlets and articles, championing in his writing, *the cruciality of the cross*. Reading Forsyth will undoubtedly deepen one's understanding of God as holy love, and of the gospel as the power and weakness of God.

WHAT IS FORSYTH ON ABOUT?

Forsyth's concern is *for* the nations, but his eyes are set upon Christ:

In many forms my belief will appear that the site of revelation and the solution of history it to be found, not in the moral order of the world, but in its moral crisis, tragedy, and great divine *commedia*; not even in the conscience. But in its Christ and His Cross. It seems quite certain that it is only a living faith in the right kind of unity, unity with power that can bring to the race public peace and concord.⁶

The focus of the race is moral, in the conscience. 'Morality is the nature of things.' Guilt is therefore the last problem of the race, its one central moral crisis; the Cross that destroys it is the race's historic crisis and turning point. Were there no sin, there would be no war. Were there no world sin, there would be no world

⁶ Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 16-17

As you might expect, many of our studies, will include a good sprinkling of quotations from Forsyth.

war. War makes at least one contribution to human salvation – it is sin's apocalypse. It reveals the greatness and the awfulness of evil, and corrects that light and easy conception of it, which had come to mark culture and belittle redemption.⁷

This book is a coming to terms with the very fact of evil, and of its enormous effects and impact upon the world.⁸ It comes to grips more closely with its remedy, its nemesis and doom, in the Man Jesus, the Lord Jesus. His triumphant Cross, we pray, will open to us in ways which will deepen us, and so bless our proclamation.

DEPTH NEEDED FOR OUR OWN DAY

Our own culture in Australia in 2008 has emerged from a mixture of many peoples, nations and historical factors, for good and for ill. We live this peaceful side of two world wars, and a strange war in Vietnam. We live amidst other global conflicts, which we witness nightly on our TV screens. We live this side of the rebellious 70's where many values, foundations and institutions were questioned, challenged, rejected, replaced or ignored. However do we now have the wise insight we need to approach the future?

Many Christian people in our land laid excellent foundations in their love for Christ. We benefit from their good work. However, as churches today, we are prone to live by image, rather than substance. It won't do. So many nations, are such a long way away from the things of Christ, and his gospel. It is depth and substance that is needed, and not the creating of impressions and the projecting of images. Only a profound understanding of the depths of the cross can produce anything more than a shallow culture. And only the Spirit searches the deeps of God and reveals them to people like us. '*... for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God* (1Corinthians 2:10).

This being the case – and given that the Spirit comes to us – we can embark upon a deep and profound and difficult book, with great expectancy. God reveals himself through his Word, written, preached, expounded and imparted by his servants, such as Forsyth.

And so the first work before the Church is to set her own house in order, ... to acquire that note of moral authority which gives practical power and historic weight to all her mystic insight and her sympathetic help. It is not help that either the Church or the world needs most. It is power. It is life. It is moral regeneration. If the greatest boon in the world is Christ's Holy Father, the greatest curse in the world is man's unfilial guilt. Whatever, therefore, undoes the guilt is the solution of the world. Everything will follow upon that peace and power.⁹

May the Spirit of the Lord impart to us, that which is most needful in our day, that we might share his gospel with others, with conviction.

⁷ Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 19

⁸ For a biblical theodicy, see also Martin Bleby, *Where Was God on September 11th 2001*, NCPI, 2001

⁹ Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p. 22

THEODICY

SOME QUOTATIONS

Study 1B **APPENDIX** *Trevor Faggotter*

- Gottfried Leibniz** (Philosopher): Described theodicy as: "Thee-ODD-I-see".¹
- Jurgen Moltmann:** Since Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Christian thought is *only* authentic where it is concerned to come to grips with the question of evil.
- Georg Buchner:** Described the problem of evil as 'the rock of atheism'; once the atheist has take up position on it, he considers himself unassailable.
- Jackie Kennedy** When her husband US President, John F. Kennedy was shot in a motorcade, she cried out 'No!'. (Later Jackie Onassis); also her brother Bobby Kennedy also assassinated. It is this cry of 'No' which is at the heart of theodicy - all who cry out against evil, are objecting to such a world, where this can happen.
- Kevin Carter** The 1994 Pulitzer Prize, Winning photograph was of a vulture waiting for child to die, so that it could eat it; the photo was taken during the Sudan famine. No one knows what happened to the child. 3 months later he committed suicide due to depression.
- Geoff Bingham** There is no such thing as good and evil. There is only God and Satan.
- World War 1** Over 40 million casualties resulted, including approximately 20 million military and civilian deaths. (Context of Forsyth's book)
- Karl Heim** Guilt alone is the absolute evil, the absolutely terrible and unbearable, the simply irrevocable loss. Compared to guilt all else that may be terrible in the world is very slight indeed. If one weighs guilt against all other suffering in the world, unhappy love which makes life a hell, life-long hard labour in the mines of Siberia, continuous suffering from cancer without any hope but the prospect of a painful death, softening of the brain leading to madness, epilepsy with increasing stupefaction - the guilt will easily outweigh all the other evils in the scale. And if on the other hand we think of all that the world offers by way of good things, then all the riches, power and happiness of the world cannot balance and replace the damage caused by one guilty act.
(Karl Heim, *Jesus the World's Perfecter*, p. 15)

¹ <http://theodicy.blogspot.com/2007/01/problem-of-evil.html>

GLOSSARY:

For difficult or unfamiliar words in P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988 the following *Glossary* may help:

Anthropocentric	the assumption that man is the central fact of the universe
Apotheosis	the elevation of a person to the rank of a god
Empiricist	one who relies on observation and experiment
Eudemonism	A system of ethics that evaluates actions in terms of their capacity to produce happiness
Denouement	the final resolution of a complex sequence of events
<i>Faux pas</i>	A social blunder
Heterogenous	completely different; incongruous; not homogenous
Impolitic	Unwise; not expedient
Pelagian synergism	Pelagius taught a denial of original sin, and the ability of man to be righteous of his own free will; the results is a co-operation between God and man in the matter of salvation: grace, plus human effort
Penetralia	the innermost parts, or sanctuary
Rousseau	Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an 18 th century philosopher who taught that man is good by nature
Stupefied	a state of mental numbness
Sublimated	to make nobler, or purer
Surfeit	excess—perhaps from indulgence
Tableau	a dramatic scene; in a play, an interlude where everyone freezes
Teleology	the study of a purposed goal [telos] planned by God
Theocentric	viewing life with God as central to all things
Theodicy	A vindication of God's goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil
Unfilial	not befitting a son or a daughter
Weal	prosperity and happiness