

WEEK 10 | SIN & ITS MYSTERY

The secret things belong to Yahweh our God. . .

– Deuteronomy 29:29

THE SECRET THINGS

Herman Bavinck wrote of sin,

We know neither whence it is nor what it is. It exists, but has no right to existence. It exists but no one can explain its origin. Sin itself came into the world without motivation, yet it is the motivation for all human thought and actions. From an abstract point of view, it is nothing but a privation, yet concretely it is a power that controls everyone and everything. It has no independent principle of its own, yet it is a principle that devastates the whole creation. It lives off the good, yet fights it to the point of destruction. It is nothing, has nothing, and cannot do anything without the entities and forces God has created, yet organizes them all into rebellion against him. . . It is the greatest contradiction tolerated by God in his creation, yet used by him in the way of justice and righteousness as an instrument for his glory.¹

As we come to the end of this course, I imagine most of us would agree with the thrust of Bavinck's statement: sin is an enigma, a metaphysical paradox that exceeds the ability of a finite mind to comprehend. We struggle to define and describe what it is, where it came from, and why it is in this world. At the same time, we are keenly aware of it and its effects. Admittedly, we will be left with unanswered questions. The goal of this lecture is to try and bring more clarity to one of the most vexing questions we have encountered.

THE BIG 'WHY?'

Perhaps the most difficult question that inevitably arises when we discuss sin has to do with its origins. The question is not so much where it came from—although that question is incredibly difficult as well—but why was sin allowed into God's universe at all? If God is all-powerful, how does evil exist? If He is omni-benevolent, why does He permit evil to continue?

Essentially, we are left with the problem of evil, first articulated by the Greek philosopher Epicurus somewhere around the early third century BCE and summarized by British philosopher David Hume who wrote, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not

¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:145.

omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then from whence comes evil?"² Hume's formulation can be portrayed as a *modus tollens* argument:

P1. If an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient god exists, then evil does not.

P2. There is evil in the world.

C1. Therefore, an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient god does not exist.

The argument expands as follows:

P1a. God exists.

P1b. God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient.

P1c. An omnipotent being has the power to prevent that evil from coming into existence.

P1d. An omnibenevolent being would want to prevent all evils.

P1e. An omniscient being knows every way in which evils can come into existence, and knows every way in which those evils could be prevented.

P1f. A being who knows every way in which an evil can come into existence, who is able to prevent that evil from coming into existence, and who wants to do so, would prevent the existence of that evil.

P1. If there exists an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient God, then no evil exists.

P2. Evil exists (logical contradiction).

Because premise 1 and premise 2 are logically contradictory, and premise 2 is confirmed by direct empirical observation, the logical conclusion (C1) is that no such God exists.

How can Christians respond to this indictment? Process and open theists have countered by denying the truth of P1b. They argue that God, while omnipotent and omnibenevolent, is not omniscient, at least not in the classical sense. They find a solution in what has been called the "limited omniscience" view of God. Proponents of this view argue that omniscience means knowing all that can be actually known. Richard Swineburne writes that omniscience is "knowledge of everything true which is logically possible to know."³ However, since the future is

² David Hume, quoted in Michael W. Hickson, "A Brief History of Problems of Evil," in Justin P. McBrayer, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to The Problem of Evil* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 6–7.

³ Richard Swineburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 175.

not actual, it is not possible to know it and does not count against God's omniscience.⁴ The limited omniscience view, in seeking to maintain the inerrancy of Scripture, ultimately degrades the nature of God, limiting His omniscience in a way at odds with how He is revealed in Scripture.⁵

In order to maintain the integrity of God and His word, we must find another way. Where, then, does the problem with the above argument lie? When we look at P1d and P1f, we begin to recognize that the logic of this argument is not as airtight as it seems.

P1d argues that an omnibenevolent God "would want to prevent all evils." Indeed, we know from Scripture that God is holy and hates evil, and we could concur that He would desire to prevent all evils. However, we must ask if it is possible for God to have competing desires and to elevate one desire over another. For example, God through his prophet Ezekiel tells us "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11; c.f. Ezekiel 18:23). God does not wish "that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

And yet, Scripture is equally clear that God will judge the unrepentant and send them to hell. He desires justice and demands recompense for sin. How do we reconcile these things? Did Ezekiel and Peter lie? Were they simply mistaken in their representation of God? A 'yes' answer to either of these questions would have devastating consequences to our view of Scripture and its inerrancy. We do, however, have another option.

We must first recognize that God's will is complex. Like us, His image-bearers, God is capable of desiring multiple things at once that are in conflict with each other. Theologians have drawn a distinction between God's preceptive will and His decretive will. God's preceptive will describes His will as revealed in His law. For example, God commands us not to steal, a command that reveals His holy character. Stealing is against God's nature, and thus He desires that His creatures would not act in a way contrary to His nature. However, that command—that revelation of His will—does not carry with it the immediate necessity of consequence. In other

⁴ Francis Beckwith has written a helpful critique of this limited omniscience view. Using the test for a prophet in Deuteronomy 18, Beckwith clearly shows that the limited omniscience is logically impossible no matter how one argues for it, either undermining the nature of God or the integrity of Scripture. He writes, "the limited omniscience view is inconsistent with the Biblical test for a prophet, for when they are juxtaposed the following conclusion is drawn: God is not God... Furthermore the five possible ways of avoiding this conclusion do not seem to work. Hence unless one wants to give up a high view of Scripture the limited omniscience position is logically untenable and ought to be rejected" (Francis J. Beckwith, "Limited Omniscience and the Test for a Prophet: A Brief Philosophical Analysis" [*JETS* 36:3, Sep 1993], 362).

⁵ One thinks of Isaiah's words in Isa 40:9-10: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'" In seeking to support a high view of Scripture by tampering with an attribute of God, this position undermines its own aim.

words, “Where it was not possible for the light to refuse to shine in creation, it is possible for us to refuse to obey this command. In a word, we steal.”⁶

Though God desires that no one would violate His preceptive will by stealing, people steal. Does this mean that God is less than omnipotent? Is He simply unable to enforce His will in the created universe? Again, Scripture is clear that this is not the case. God through His prophet Isaiah says, “By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return” (Isaiah 45:23). God affirms that all he decrees will come to pass. Later, he says:

“Remember this and stand firm,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, ‘My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,’
(Isaiah 46:8-10)

What these verses describe is God’s meticulous sovereignty. Nothing occurs in this universe outside of His command. Whether past, present, or future, history is unfolding exactly according to God’s predetermined plan. This is a description of God’s decretive will, His “sovereign, efficacious will by which God brings to pass whatever He pleases by His divine decree,”⁷ and it includes the presence and activity of sin and evil. Though God does not sanction evil, nor is He the immediate cause of anything evil, evil is a part of the universe that God has willed, and God uses the sinful acts of men to accomplish His ultimate purposes. Thus, God can declare a woe and pronounce judgment on Assyria even though Assyria is “the rod of [His] anger” and is used by God to punish Israel (Isaiah 10:5-19); He can call a pagan king like Cyrus his “anointed” (Isaiah 45:1); He can use the sinful actions of Joseph’s brothers for good (Genesis 50:19-20); He can use the murder of the Son of God to accomplish salvation (Acts 2:23).

All of this takes back to the initial premises stated in our formulation of the problem of evil. Specifically, as we read P1f we recognize there is an underlying assumption that is not proven. The premise reads “A being who knows every way in which an evil can come into existence, who is able to prevent that evil from coming into existence, and who wants to do so, would prevent the existence of that evil.” The underlying assumption is that we know what this omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omniscient God wants. Though His preceptive will is that there be

⁶ R.C. Sproul, “Examining the Preceptive Will of God,” <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/examining-preceptive-will-god>.

⁷ R.C. Sproul, “Comprehending the Decretive Will of God,” <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/comprehending-decretive-will-god>.

no evil, we have seen that, according to His decretive will, there is a place for evil in His unfolding purpose for His creation. Could it be that God is permitting sin and evil for an ultimately great good? It would seem that is the message of Scripture; that is the big 'Why?'

This does not make the evil we see in the world easier to stomach, nor does it mean we have no more questions relating to the relationship between God's sovereignty and evil. (We will not likely arrive at a satisfying justification for every instance of evil we witness.) It does mean is there is no logical conundrum with Scripture's description of God and the presence of evil in His universe. What we must recognize is, as finite creatures, we should not expect to understand the mind and will of God. The secret things do belong to the Lord. He is all-powerful and all-wise, and we must trust that He knows what He is doing in this world He has made.