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Peoples' Community Baptist Church

Tuesday Bible Study

September 24, 2019

SESSION 3 – THE SOVEREIGN: GOD (The Justice of God in view of all the injustices in the world; good vs. evil)

TERMS

Divine Justice - This term may be framed in at least two ways:

1. **God, the law giver**, is depicted as the **righteous warrior** who metes out justice through the law of retaliation “lex talionis” (theology of retribution). This is a popular view among ancient Near Eastern society and central to the Israelite understanding of justice. **Justice**, in this sense, **equates to retributive and punitive judgment against persons, communities, and nations who practice evil or frustrate God’s purposes** (Exodus 7 -plagues, Deuteronomy 28-prohibitions, Micah 2:1-3 – sovereign who plots and plans deeds against evil doers).

But not all Old Testament passages present the justice of God along punitive lines. In stories such as Cain slaying Abel or Joseph coming to the rescue of his famine-stricken brothers who abandoned him and left him for dead in Genesis, God exercises justice compassionately.

2. **God, compassionate and just**, confronts offenses but **restoration to community** is still made possible (deuteronomistic theology of love and compassion). Another passage of this sort, Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (compare with Jesus’s teaching on the great commandment in the law recorded in Matt. 22:34-40), in fact, provides the basis for **Jesus’s theological orientation toward justice**—one of holy rage but even holier compassion.

Opportunity to relationally connect to the grace and mercy of God is not closed off to the law violator in Jesus’s approach to the law. Even in the face of his accusers and crucifiers, Jesus’s words are: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

So, from a biblical perspective, it’s important to keep in mind how divine justice is conceptually depicted in the Bible.

Theodicy - This term brings two Greek words, “theos” (God) and “dike” (justice). A modern term invented by 18th century German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried

Wilhelm Leibniz. *Theodicy refers to a theoretical justification of the goodness of God in the face of the presence of evil in the world.*

I. What is the theodicy problem and why should it matter to us?

Theodicists asked the question: *How can believers hold together four seemingly incompatible faith claims?*

1. That God exists
2. That God is loving and just
3. That God is omnipresent or All-powerful
4. That there is undeserved suffering in the world

According to Leibniz, if God is the first three, then God has some explaining to do. Based on logical reasoning, at least one must go. For how can there be a God who is good, loving, just, and powerful and there be evil and suffering in a world God has created?

Here's the problem of faith. It centers on this question: **If God is all-powerful, all-loving, would not that God if having the strength to do so intervene, for example, when children suffer?**

Several theological positions

Rabbi Harold Kushner – turn to Job - God is loving and just, but God is not all-Powerful.

Freewill theodicists (which is the most popular view of American Christians) - God is not to blame or responsible for the problem of evil, but God has given us freedom to choose to do good or evil, some of the evil is due to human choices.

Theodicy and Black Suffering

Redemptive suffering – unmerited agony, though intrinsically evil, can lead to a positive outcome. The reward for enduring suffering may have a soul-building effect: a person may become stronger in faith, more virtuous in character, or more knowledgeable. Whether (in this life) a blessing comes at the end of a time of suffering or does not end here but meets reward in the afterlife, both evil and suffering would have served some divine purpose. African American Christians have overwhelmingly regarded suffering as redemptive. (Ware)

King – “unearned suffering is redemptive” - associated the concept of redemptive suffering with nonviolence and direct action to achieve social change. According to King, as Jesus suffered to achieve our salvation through suffering, we must be willing to suffer in our struggle to be free and transform society. Faith in God – God is seen as

“**Waymaker**” – creates out of nothing and makes (from existing things) ways—opportunities for persons to survive and thrive. (Ware)

II. What is a faithful response of believers to the theodicy problem?

“Ultimately, our objective tools for analyzing and interpreting pain will always fail us because there is an aspect of suffering that is not within our rational reach.” – Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*

Three Responses

1. We are in a middle time
2. God is love
3. Jesus lives

Further Study Resources: Consult the “Whole Counsel of Scripture”

Scriptures texts for **confronting human tragedy and communal despair:**

- **Exodus 8:1; 23:9-12** – (*Egyptian bondage* – alienation, courage, oppression, and vindication)
- **Psalms 22; 23; 37; 82; 91; 103:1-6** – (*Lament and Celebration* – suffering, hostility, emotional distress, trouble, wickedness, trust, patience, protection, provision, mercy, goodness, vindication and salvation)
- **Habakkuk 2:1-5; 3:17-19** – (*Complaint and Woe*- violence, surveillance, pride, arrogance, foreign threat, spiritual vision, and righteousness)
- **Matthew 5:1-11; 25:31-46** – (*The Beatitudes* – poverty, mourning, persecution, kingdom access, comfort, spiritual satiation, heirship, and promised reward)
- **Romans 8:18-28; 12:9-21** – (*Future Hope and True Discipleship*- spiritual slavery, orphaning, communal suffering, bondage, pain, freedom, mourning, heirship, adoption, love, affection, and goodness)
- **Revelation 7:9-17** – (*God’s Righteous Reign and Eschatological Vision*- hunger, thirst, death, mourning, fellowship, diversity, salvation, power, blessing, glory, shelter, guidance, and comfort)

Suggested Reading:

Frederick L. Ware. “Suffering” in *African American Theology: An Introduction* (Louisville: WJKP 2018), 131 – 139.

Rabbi Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

Martin L. King, Jr. “Good and Evil” in *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Companion*. (St. Martin’s Press), 50-52.

Thomas G. Long. *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and The Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns 2011)