

# “Mystery and Meaning”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the almighty?” (Job 11:7)**

Several years ago at the Center for Theological Enquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, I heard Dr. Thomas Torrance of Edinburgh speak on the subject “Einstein and God.” Albert Einstein lived in Princeton for a number of years toward the end of his life. There are photographs of him in many of the restaurants and he had a number of friends at the Seminary there. Tom Torrance, in his address, spoke of Einstein's profound respect for the universe in which we live. For Einstein the creation of the universe was a great and wonderful mystery. He had a profound respect for the orderliness and symmetry of nature. On one occasion he was quoted as saying, “God does not play dice with the universe.”

## I.

One of the parts of the Old Testament that has fascinated me for years is a group of books called the “Wisdom Literature”: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The presence of this kind of literature was not limited to Israel. It is found in the writings of Babylonia, Egypt, and other of the great Mesopotamia cultures.

One aspect of the wisdom writings is quite simple. It presupposes that the world God created is one that is ruled by simple laws of reward and punishment. If a person is good, that person will be rewarded. If a person is evil, that person will be punished. This type of wisdom is found not only in the Book of Proverbs, but in the Psalms as well:

Depart from evil, and do good;  
So shall you abide forever.  
For the Lord loves justice;  
He will not forsake his saints (Psalm 37:27).

The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked,  
But he blesses the abode of the righteous (Proverbs 3:33).

But there is another side of the wisdom literature that is much darker. It questions whether there is a simple *quid pro quo* between doing good and being rewarded, and doing evil and being punished.

Nowhere is that side of Wisdom more evident than in the Book of Job. The Book of Job is really a drama, a series of poetic exchanges bracketed by a narrative prologue and epilogue. The narrative tells of a man named Job from the land of Uz. He is a righteous and blameless man who fears God and turns away from evil. And yet, for some reason not known to Job, Job is cursed by God. His children are killed, his livestock destroyed, and all his wealth taken from him. Furthermore, Job suffers from loathsome sores that inflict his entire body. In all of this, Job does not curse God. At some point in the story Job is visited by three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. These three friends represent the prevalent wisdom of the day. They believe that Job is suffering because he has committed some sin. Job proclaims that he is innocent. Out of this dilemma comes a series of speeches in which these three men argue on behalf of the prevailing wisdom of the day and Job rebuts their claims.

One of the speeches is that of Zophar (Job 11) who belittles Job for all his words and arguments. He asserts that if God were to answer Job, the answer would be devastating, given Job's unrepentant sin. In this speech, however, Zophar does point to an issue that is one of the main arguments of the book of Job, namely that there is a mystery to life that defies all human understanding.

## II.

Maybe, that is the place to begin. Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, says, "Now we see in a mirror dimly." Corinth was famous for its mirrors. Many were made out of bronze. They were crude and not like our polished silver mirrors. The image was somewhat diminished and imperfect.

Sometimes our knowledge is imperfect. There are groups in our society that pretend to know all there is to know about religion and ethics. They are certain that they alone have the truth. Often, they are dogmatic in what they believe. They allow no room for toleration or error. Someone once told of finding a pamphlet that read: "Baptists have the whole truth. No one else has. West Kentucky Baptists come nearer to standing for the whole truth and all the truth than any other set of Baptists in the world." Ah, you West Kentucky Baptists. How the world has waited for you. Even the East Kentucky Baptists, wonderful as they are, have not discovered the truth in the same fashion as you.

That kind of thinking is a far cry from the Bible. Listen to these words:

“Righteous are you, O God, when I contend with you; yet would I reason with you. When then does the way of the wicked prosper?”

That is the Bible.

“How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out.”

That is the Bible.

“My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me.”

That is the Bible.

You see, one of the things that we must all live with is the fact that we do not always see things as clearly as we pretend. Reinhold Niebuhr in his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man* has a section he entitles, “On Having and Not Having the Truth.” He points out that as Christians we have the Truth in Jesus Christ. But then he notes that there is another sense in which we do not have the truth. We are creatures, not the creator. We also see life through the lens of our own self-interest. Therefore, as Paul notes, we see through a mirror dimly.

### III.

There is something else as well. As human beings, we are surrounded by elements of mystery that defy our complete understanding.

That is certainly true of the universe in which we live. Today we know more about the creation of our universe than ever before. Scientists today speak about a great explosion or “big bang” that occurred 20 billion years ago. There are still echoes of that great explosion that radios and telescopes can still detect today. That explosion created an expansion of the universe that continues today. Although there are struggles today between the “creationists” and the “evolutionists,” there are some things about our world that we will never fully understand.

The same is true in our day-to-day life. Often we face illnesses, death, and tragic events, the explanation of which we cannot fully understand. That is why in the face of evil there is nothing more that we can say, except to affirm that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God’s grace is not only forgiveness and renewal, it is, as Reinhold Niebuhr once pointed out, “God’s providential working in history by which he makes the wrath of men to praise him and transmutes good out of evil.” That is why as Christians we affirm that while the human situation may become difficult, there is always hope. The Apostle Paul put it like this, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (II Corinthians 12:9).

In his book *Secrets of the Dark* Frederick Buechner has a sermon he entitles “Adolescence and the Stewardship of Pain.” In that sermon he points out that the period of adolescence, say in those earlier preteen and teenage years, most of us are keenly aware of the painfulness of those years. For most young people there is a certain awkwardness, embarrassment, and struggle as a young person moves from childhood to what we would loosely call “becoming an adult.” Most of us are glad to pass through those years and do not spend a lot of time reflecting on them. Yet, as Buechner so ably understands, there is a sense in which we are all adolescents, struggling in marriages, wrestling with difficult jobs, trying to balance work, family, and self. In that sense, maybe there is not as much distance between adolescents and adults. We are all in some way trying to find and fulfill our actual selves.

And that too is the mystery of the stewardship of pain.

#### IV.

Then, too, there is this. Granted we are surrounded by mysteries we do not fully understand. But it is also true that there is light enough. To be sure, there is truth in the words of Job’s friend, Zophar. There are the deep things of God and the limits of the almighty that will forever escape us. Paul calls it “seeing through a mirror dimly.”

But that is not all. There is more. For Paul there are three things that abide: faith, hope, and love. Paul says that our knowledge, great as it is, will one day pass away and that our prophecy, important as it may be, will too pass away.

Sometimes I wonder what it is that we expect our religion to do for us. Does it clear up all mysteries? Of course not! So often we who are preachers believe that somehow we can explain why there is suffering in the world, when we cannot. We do not understand nor can we explain why some people suffer and others do not or why some people die and others do not.

No, our religion does not clear up all mysteries or give us formulas to answer all of life’s most difficult questions. On the contrary, at the heart of our faith is the deepest mystery of all, the cross, where love was nailed to a tree by hate.

But here is what our faith can do. It can give us a kind of life and power to sustain us even in the most difficult situations so that our lives can be lived with dignity, with joy, and triumphantly. Our religion gives us light enough to walk by: faith, hope, and love.

That is why as Christians we rejoice that at the center of our faith is not a proposition, but a person. Propositions that try to clear up mystery are very temporary. But a person who faced all the pain, suffering, and confusion that you and I face, who was hated, deserted, crucified—and yet through it and above it lived victoriously and when the final mystery was closing in upon him said, “These things have I spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full”—that person gives illumination to our life in such a way that we are forced to say that he is “the light of the world.”

Tom Torrance pointed out that one of the ways that Einstein understood God was as “uncreated light.” God is eternal light. As Christians we believe that in Jesus Christ we have seen a glimpse of that “uncreated light” and that light gives us hope even in the face of great darkness.

Amen!