

Where is God when things go wrong?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you very much for that, and thank you, Nick Lowe, for kindly inviting me to be here with you tonight. Now, a full church on a Monday night is unheard of.

So why in the world it's full tonight, I have no idea. I hope it's because of the subject and not because of the speaker. I wouldn't cross the road to hear this particular speaker, but I would cross the road to hear anybody who wants to discuss this particular subject.

And I've never had the subject introduced in a better way than it was tonight by your pastor reminding you that we do live in a broken world where things do go wrong.

I was speaking on this subject in Cambridgeshire, I believe, perhaps two or three years ago, and a friend of mine, Howard Williams, who usually comes with me when I'm touring in England at least, and handles the book table, of which more later.

And after I'd spoken, somebody came up to Howard at the book table and said, I want a copy of that booklet that John spoke about tonight. It's called Where Are Things When God Goes Wrong? And so Howard quickly corrected him on the title and was, of course, glad to sell him the booklet.

[1 : 0 8] You'll be able to get it later on. I was speaking in Northern Ireland some time ago and was told by the church there that they sent their young people out onto the street to ask people anonymously, so there'd be no danger of their answer being identified, to give an answer to this question.

And the question was, if you could ask God one question, what would that question be? And 80% of those who responded said, we would ask, where were you when things went wrong?

So clearly that is something that concerns a lot of people. I would even say that bothers a lot of people. And things do go wrong, as we've already been reminded this evening.

Sometimes they go wrong so catastrophically, so we can dare to say it famously, that you only have to mention one word and people know exactly what you're talking about.

You mentioned the word Titanic, and everybody's mind goes back to 1912, when that then the largest movable object ever built by man, a ship so impressive, the owners said not even God could sink this ship.

[2 : 2 2] And on its maiden voyage, it struck that iceberg and sank with the loss of 1,500 lives, the largest maritime disaster in history at that point. You mentioned the word tsunami, which I had never heard 11 years ago.

And everybody's mind goes back to 2004 and that dreadful shifting of the tectonic plates in the Far East, with the tides racing across the ocean faster than a jumbo jet, and the loss of 288,000 people in 10 countries.

And people asked the question then, as they did, I'm sure, when Titanic sank, well, where was God when that went wrong? You mentioned 9-11, and everybody's mind immediately goes to New York and to Washington and to that field in Pennsylvania, and the loss of nearly 3,000 lives then when those terrorists hijacked those four commercial airlines.

And people did ask on that day and in the days that followed, now where was God when this happened? But we don't have to go back into distant or near history.

We can look around today. I haven't had the opportunity of looking at a newscast today or reading a newspaper. But I'm absolutely certain that your national and local newspapers here in South Africa are full of things that have gone wrong.

[3 : 43] And there are thousands, hundreds of thousands of people in your country and mine who are asking that question, now where is God when this goes wrong? And sometimes the thing that goes wrong is much closer.

Someone we know, a member of our own family. A disease suddenly strikes. There is a very negative report from a consultant or a surgeon.

An operation is not as successful as was hoped. There is a death. And again, people ask the question, where is God when things go wrong?

What I find fascinating is that the question is often asked by people who never use the word God when things go right. Who never, when things go right, say, well, isn't this wonderful?

Shouldn't we be thankful to God that things have gone so well in my life, in my family, in our home, in the last month or year? But when things go wrong, suddenly God is dragged into the conversation in the form of this question.

[4 : 50] Now, why ask the question at all? Why bring God into the issue when things go wrong? What have they got to do with God? I suggest to you that there are two reasons, or one multiple reason, if you like, why people ask the question.

And that is that somewhere in their distant memory, or in some vague way that they can't quite identify, they are thinking of two truths about God, and they are true, as we'll see in a moment.

And that is what makes them ask the question. And the two truths that come to mind, they may not be able to state them as articulately as that, are these. First of all, doesn't the Bible say that God is sovereign, that God is completely in control of everything that happens in the universe?

And indeed, it does say that. God works all things, we are told in Ephesians 1, according to the counsel of his will. So here is a God who is totally in control of everything that happens in the entire universe, not only on our tiny planet.

So that's the first thing. But the second thing that flits through their mind, if only briefly, is, but isn't God supposed to be a God of love?

[6 : 07] And indeed he is, and it's been said that one of the clearest definitions of God, one of the most succinct, certainly, in the whole of the Bible, is that God is love.

So here are these conflicts going on in their minds. God is utterly in control of everything in the universe. God is a God of absolute love.

How, if those two things are true, do things go wrong? Now let me tell you how they put all of that together. Firstly, if God is absolutely sovereign, he would be able to prevent any evil and suffering in the world.

If God was all-loving, surely he would want to prevent all evil and suffering in the world. So that if God is sovereign and a God of love, there would be no evil or suffering in the world.

But as there is evil and suffering in the world, one of three things must be true. Either God is not all-sovereign after all, there are some areas over which he doesn't have control, or he is not all-loving after all, and he really doesn't care about what happens on our tiny planet, or he doesn't exist.

[7 : 35] And can you see how all of that is worked out in their minds, even if they can't structure it in that way? And there are people who come to the conclusion that because things have gone so wrong in the world, that is evidence that God does not exist.

During the dreadful events in Kosovo, the ethnic cleansing in the late 90s, the story was told of soldiers who took ten women from their families and said, we want your families to gather together by the roadside, and we're not going to kill you, but we are going to rape you, and we want your families to see what's happening.

And when that dreadful episode was over, one of the victims said to the international press, it was then that I came to see that God does not exist.

Now, I hope you won't misunderstand me when I say I can begin to get to the fringes of understanding why that woman would have said that in those circumstances.

Now, let's suppose for a moment that she was right, and that God does not exist. Now, that is some people's way of avoiding the question, or evading the question, getting rid of it altogether.

[8 : 52] Because if God does not exist, there's no point in asking the question. To ask, where is God when things go wrong, if there is no God, to be answerable when things go wrong, is a nonsense.

So, if God does not exist, at least we've got rid of the question. Because the question isn't an issue at all, and so it's not a problem. And that's precisely where atheism leaves us.

Arguably the best-known atheist in the world is a man called Richard Dawkins. He was at one time the Charles Simoni Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University.

He's no longer in that post. We could quite properly call him now the Professor for the Public Misunderstanding of Christianity. But he wouldn't like that title either, although it would be very appropriate for him.

Now, Dawkins once said this. Now, recall the occasion some young people had come up, I think, from the West Country along the motorway, the M4, to a concert in the Royal Albert Hall in London.

[9 : 53] On the way back, there'd been a dreadful accident, and there were some fatalities among those young people. And Dawkins was asked, what did he make of all of that? And this is what he said.

This is what we should expect if we live in a universe in which there is at bottom no design, no purpose. Now, listen to the next bit.

No evil and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.

Now, I don't know who you are tonight, and that is an advantage in a way. And there may be somebody here tonight, maybe more than one, and you have toyed with the idea as to whether atheism isn't the right way to go after all.

And that maybe in spite of all that we hear about God and the presence of the Christian church for 2,000 years and so forth, just maybe this is all make-believe and there is no God.

[10 : 54] Now, just be careful and think for the moment where atheism leads you. And Dawkins tells us it leads to a situation where there is no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

Peter Atkins, who was once a lecturer in physical chemistry at Oxford University, says of humankind that it is just a bit of slime on a planet. Now, he is also a passionate atheist.

And this is where he puts you and me and the rest of humankind. We're just a bit of slime on a planet. Now, again, and you may be surprised that I take this line at this part of the meeting, but we'll move on to more positive things, I promise you.

Let's imagine that Dawkins is right and that Atkins is right. Now, if Atkins is right in saying that we are just a bit of slime on a planet, why should we care when children are molested?

Why should we care when teenagers get stoned on drugs? I spent a couple of deeply moving hours in Hout Bay this afternoon, and among the group of people with whom I met in the township there was one young man who'd spent years on drugs and years in prison because of his involvement in the drug scene.

[12 : 13] Why should we be in the least bit concerned when that kind of thing goes on? Why should we be concerned when old people get mugged, when volcanoes erupt, when terrorists kill 3,000 people in a day?

Why should we even be concerned when Hitler kills 6 million Jews in the notorious Holocaust? He called them human bacteria. If we are just a bit of slime on a planet, why should those things bother us in the least?

But they do. If there is no God, what one animal does to another animal is inconsequential, whether the animals concerned have two legs, four legs, or none.

It just doesn't matter if we are just a bit of slime on a planet. Let me illustrate from 9-11. If atheism has got the right angle, 9-11 was a spectacular, colorful, noisy, exciting rearrangement of atoms and molecules.

Now, I'm sure you've never heard that said about 9-11 in your life before, but just think it through. If there is no God, 9-11 was just a noisy, spectacular, colorful, exciting rearrangement of atoms and molecules.

[13 : 37] And atheism has nothing more to say on the subject. But, you know, in the NYPD, in the fire department, in the hospitals, in the surgeries, in the wards, in the counseling rooms in New York and Washington, there were many people in those professions and services who were atheists.

Now, let me tell you what they did with their atheism when 9-11 happened. Let me tell you how they reacted to 9-11. They reacted to 9-11 exactly as I would expect someone to react who believed that God created humankind in his own image and that humankind as a distinct species were worthy of honor because of that creation.

In other words, they threw their atheism out of the window. I remember seeing one of the post-9-11 films based on the work of the fire department, the NYPD, and the people who worked in the fire department in particular, and of them being ordered by their superior to walk up the stairs of one of the trade center buildings.

And one of them saying, we knew that the likelihood is we would never come down again. Alive. Now, if we are just a bit of slime on a planet, why would anybody bother to go upstairs, to walk up that spiral staircase, to try to rescue somebody, knowing full well that the chances were that they themselves would be engulfed and would die?

What I'm trying to say is atheism doesn't work. Atheists make a big noise and they get on our national media and they draw hundreds, thousands, millions of people to follow their beliefs.

[15 : 27] But in practice, where the rubber meets the road, atheism does not work. So if God doesn't exist, asking the question is a waste of time.

And when things go wrong, we're on our own. There's nowhere to turn. Some time ago in the UK, there was an uproar caused by a group of atheists who wanted to take part in a program.

It's on BBC Radio 4, the main sort of speaking radio program, the main news program, called Thought for the Day, quite early in the morning. And these atheists complained that every group of people, every religion, every denomination had a shot at Thought for the Day.

Why shouldn't they? And I thought, well, no, that's very interesting. My first thought was they might even say something a bit more useful than some of the rubbish we hear on Thought for the Day. But I was more charitable than to pursue that line of attack.

Instead of which, I wrote a letter to the Daily Telegraph, one of our best-known national newspapers. And my letter, in effect, said this. Because I'd be very interested to hear an atheist on Thought for the Day.

[16 : 37] And I wonder what it is that they could say that would put a spring in my step and a sparkle in my eye and a glow to my cheek as I began the day's work. Because their creed is this.

We began as a farce. We began as a fluke, rather. We live as a farce and we end as fertilizer. And the editor phoned me up and said, I like that phrase and we really would like to publish your letter.

And I said, well, go ahead, because it's absolutely true. The atheist says we began as a fluke. We were not created. We are accidents of biology.

We live as a farce. There can be no meaning, no real eternal purpose in what we do. And, of course, we end as fertilizer. As a very colorful British philosopher Bertrand Russell said some years ago, when I die, I shall rot.

So that's their creed. Now, personally, I prefer the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, the Westminster Confession.

[17 : 44] I prefer all of those. But this is their creed. We began as a fluke. We live as a farce. And we end as fertilizer. But if God does exist, then we're facing the question head on.

And in the light of that question, where is God when things go wrong, we really do have to ask some serious questions. Think, for instance, of natural evil.

Floods and hurricanes and tornadoes. And, for that matter, poisonous animals and plants that can cause us all kinds of difficulty and, indeed, death. Where is God, a sovereign God, utterly in control of the universe, and a God of love, when those things happen?

And when those things cause such terrible disaster? And then think of accidents. And, again, the pastor so carefully mentioned all of those at the beginning.

Mentioned the word Chernobyl, and everybody's mind goes back to 1996 and the explosion in that nuclear plant, which meant that 800,000 children were exposed to the possibility of contracting leukemia.

[18 : 54] When it's said that it will be 600 years before anyone else can live in that area. Where was God? A God utterly in control of everything.

Could he not have controlled the elements in that nuclear plant and prevented that dreadful event taking place? And, of course, there are literally countless other accidents in the air, on the sea, on land, in the home, on the sports field.

Where is God when things go wrong? And then there's moral evil, what somebody has called man's inhumanity to man. In World War I, some 30 million people were killed in the war.

It was called, of course, the war to end all wars. But a few years later, an even worse one took place. And the death count in World War II has never been accurately determined.

But as I've already indicated, it certainly included 6 million Jews who were extinguished by Hitler in his notorious Holocaust. And since the end of World War II, it's been estimated that there have been 45 million violent deaths.

[20 : 05] In the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1950s, the opponents of Mao Zedong were executed at the rate of 3,000 a month.

In the 1970s, the atheist Pol Pot slaughtered 1.5 million of his fellow Cambodians in the notorious killing fields.

Where was God when those things went wrong? And then think of what's happening in Syria today. It is becoming difficult to keep count of all of those who have died as the result of that dreadful conflict.

But the last time I saw a figure, it was in the region of a quarter of a million. Where is God while all of that is going on? Where is God when hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of people are drowning in the Mediterranean in their desperate attempts to reach what they consider to be the safety of Europe?

And then there are, without number, cases of rape and murder and child abuse and other crimes. Where is God when all of that is happening?

[21 : 19] And the worst thing that we would say could happen to anybody, the thing that goes most wrong in anybody's life, is that that life comes to an end. And some 250,000 people came to the end of their physical life on this planet today.

Now where is God when that very worst of things happens to any human being, let alone to a quarter of a million? Now this, in a nutshell, is the case against God.

The case against God is that we live, as has been said so excellently at the beginning of our time together tonight, we live in a broken world. It's coming apart at the seams.

And there is never a day when things on a massive scale don't go wrong. Well, where is God? And we have to face up to that. Now this is a Christian church. It is a meeting organized on a Christian basis, on a biblical basis.

And therefore we need to turn to this book and to see whether it has an answer to our question. But before we do that, let me just say this, that we need to realize that God exists independently of our needs and our pleasures.

[22 : 30] God does not owe us comfort or pleasure or success or health or wealth or even life.

To fine tune that, God does not owe any one of us another year, another month, another week, another day, another hour of life.

So that if in some extraordinary way every one of us was to be dead an hour from now, God would not have shortchanged one of us, not even the oldest, let alone the youngest.

Because God does not owe us any of those things. So can we blame God when we don't have health and wealth and prosperity and a long life and popularity and success and comfort and pleasure and all of those things that mean so much to us?

Now when we turn to the Bible, the first thing to say is that it doesn't give us all the answers to all the questions that we could ask about the subject.

[23 : 47] Now the skeptic immediately says, well, there go those Christians. See, they go off to church to St. Mark's or elsewhere on a Sunday carrying their Bibles and they say the Bible is God's word.

It's our only final authority in all matters of faith and practice. But then you ask them the big questions and this is a big question and suddenly they back off and say, well, it doesn't actually explain in detail the answer to every question that we could ask.

Well, let me respond to that in four ways. Firstly, if God is transcendent, now that's a great word. That's one of my very favorite words.

In fact, it may be my favorite word. Well, actually, it's a toss-up between that and creme brulee. But creme brulee is two words in French, so I guess transcendent even beats that.

Transcendent means over and above and beyond and nothing to do with us. God is not the best of us or the biggest of us or the greatest of us. He's not the man upstairs.

[24 : 55] He is transcendent. He is other than us. Now, if God is other than us, is it a surprise that there is bound to be an element of mystery in our understanding of all that he is and all that he thinks and all that he says and all that he does?

And God points us to that very clearly in Scripture. Secondly, leaving us with some questions is not the same as leaving us in the dark.

Thirdly, the Bible does not tell us everything we want to know. It does tell us everything we need to know.

And there's a difference. It doesn't tell us everything we want to know. I've studied this book now for about 60 or so years. And there are all sorts of things I'm not clear about.

I'm not sure that the Bible gives us that answer. In the township today, I was bombarded with fine young people asking me all kinds.

[26 : 14] I simply couldn't get away. I nearly had to be dragged out of the building. And still people, young people came and said, could I just ask you, sir, could I just ask you one more question?

And I think now the last one that was asked, and I said, no, truthfully, the Bible doesn't give us a clear answer to that question. What the Bible says is true.

It is not complete in that it answers every question we could have. It dots every I and crosses every T. So the Bible doesn't tell us everything we want to know. It tells us everything we need to know.

Everything we need to know about God, about man, about the world, about life, about death, about what lies beyond death. Everything we need to know, God tells us in the Bible.

If we needed to know it, if it was essential for us to know it, God would have told us. And fourthly, it does tell us a great deal about sin and suffering.

[27 : 12] It paints the big picture. It not only tells us why things go wrong, it goes all the way back to a time when nothing did go wrong. It goes back to a time when God created the universe, created our planet, and then created the first human beings, and then nothing went wrong.

They lived in a perfect relationship with their creator. Everything was perfect. Perfect in their relationship with each other.

They were perfect in their own lives. They had a perfect relationship with God. They had a perfect relationship with the planet, the circumstances in which they lived.

And then, and we're not told when, there came a moment when they made what I guess you could call a unilateral declaration of independence, which is a good word to use on this continent.

And they decided to go their own way, do their own thing. And it was the most catastrophic thing that's ever happened on this planet. Because let me tell you, suddenly these things happened.

[28 : 23] Their relationship with God was broken. Their relationship with each other was shattered. So instead of perfect love, there was now misunderstanding and distrust and the blame game.

Their relationship with their surroundings, with the very planet on which they lived, that also went wrong. And it went even further than that. Because beyond that, the whole of the cosmos was thrown out of sync.

And all the sin and the suffering and the wrong, the natural evil and the moral evil that has happened since then, was the result of that. And the Bible puts it in these very clear words.

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin. And in this way, death came to all men because all sinned. Sinned.

And we must take it beyond that. While God created man in his own image, and intended him to represent his creator on the earth, and with the ability to have a relationship with him, at that point everything was perfect.

[29 : 34] So God created man in his own perfect image. But then a little bit further on, we read this. After the fall, what theologians call the fall.

So here is man living in a perfect condition. There is a fall into sin. And then we read this very fascinatingly, that Adam fathered children in his own likeness, in his own image.

Let me try to illustrate if I can. God creates man in his perfect image. Man falls into sin. Man then begins to procreate and to father children in his fallen image.

So that the next generation was not here in an unfallen state, but it was already here in a fallen state. So that Adam's children were by nature sinful and depraved and corrupt.

And godless and unrighteousness and unrighteous. And so were their children. And theirs. And theirs. And theirs. Until we reach you and me in this building tonight.

[30 : 41] Many years ago, the Times newspaper ran a subject called What's Wrong With The World?

Readers were invited to send in their opinions on the subject. Many did. And the best letter of all was the briefest. Now remember the subject is, the question is, what's wrong with the world?

And here is the best letter that was written to the editor of the Times. And I'll give it to you in full. Sir, I am, yours faithfully, G.K. Chesterton.

Chesterton was a very famous author. And he gave the perfect answer to the question. So the question was, well, what's wrong with the world?

And Chesterton was saying, well, I'll tell you what's wrong with the world. I am. Oh, I don't rob banks and rape children and murder people. But I am making my contribution to what is wrong with the world.

[31 : 41] Sin entered the world through one man and death through sin. And in this way, death came to all men because all sin. So we are part of what's wrong with the world. And the situation is worse than that.

Because of our sinfulness by nature, left to ourselves, mark my words carefully, left to ourselves, we are exposed to the wrath and the anger of a holy God who has zero tolerance of sin of any kind.

And it's worse than that. Because if we die in that condition, we are exposed to God's anger forever. The Bible speaks much more about hell than it does about heaven.

It doesn't mean that one is more certain than the other or more important than the other. But it certainly shows that both are true and need to be reckoned with and thought about very carefully. And the Bible speaks very clearly about everlasting punishment.

Or to look at it from the heaven perspective, the Bible says that no unclean thing will ever enter the kingdom of heaven.

[32 : 49] And we shouldn't be surprised at that. How can a God who is utterly righteous, who himself is without sin, who is light, and every other phrase you want to use for him, which speaks of his utter perfection, how could he sweep our sin under the carpet and just say, well, boys will be boys, and even worse, girls will be girls.

Why don't you all just come in and be at home with me forever? A God of utter righteousness responds in utter righteousness to the way we have behaved, to the people we have become.

Jesus put it so clearly in this particular way. Light is coming to the world, and men prefer darkness to light. I want you to think about that with me for just a moment.

Light, Jesus is speaking of himself, light has come into the world, and men prefer darkness to light. I'm not very familiar with what goes on in South Africa.

I've been here many times in the last probably 20 or 30 years. I've been to the Cape many times in recent years. I've spoken a great deal in the Cape Town area.

[34 : 10] But let me just think, if I use the phrase Cape Town from now on, just assume I mean this whole general area in which we live. Most people in Cape Town did not go to church on Sunday.

Most people in Cape Town did not, when they got up this morning, read from the Bible, accepting it to be the Word of God, and ask for his blessing on the day.

Most people in Cape Town did not today deliberately and consciously and carefully seek to live in a way that was pleasing to God.

Most people in Cape Town tonight will not reach the end of the day thanking God for it and committing themselves to him for the night hours. Now, why is that?

There's no law in this country that says you must not go to church, you must not read your Bible, you must not pray, you must not seek to live a righteous life.

[35 : 09] Then why is it that people behave like that? It's perfectly obvious. It's here in Jesus' own words. Men prefer darkness to light.

That is how people prefer to live. They are not forced to stay away from church. They're not forced to keep their Bibles shut if they have one. They're not forced not to pray.

They're not forced not to live a godly life. This is what they choose. So they go through life choosing to have God at the very best on the periphery of life, not at the center of life at all, and then having spent 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, or 90 years keeping God out of their lives, they die.

Would it be just of God to say, well, why don't you come home anyway? The just thing for God to do is to say to men, your will be done because that's what you chose.

But that is not the Bible's central message. The Bible's central message is that in spite of that appalling situation in which we find ourselves by our own choice, God has done something amazing to put that situation right.

[36 : 29] And many people would say that it's summarized in one verse in John's Gospel, God loved the world. Yes, this torn, broken, sinful, unrighteous, godless, fractious, skeptical world.

God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. God is not immune to the suffering that's caused by sin.

He endured it in the person of his son. And the Bible explains the death of Jesus in this way. Jesus died, the righteous, in the place of the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

And the skeptic will listen to all that I've said so far and will say, well, I'm not sure that we've answered this question, where is God when things go wrong?

And whilst I listen to what you've said, but you know, at the end of the day, all you're saying is that you do the right things and there's pie in the sky when you die. I want to know, but where is God here and now when things go wrong in my life?

[37 : 42] Well, I will answer that before we're through, but in all of these meetings, what I love to do is to give people an opportunity to make their own comments, to agree with me if they want to, but do that very briefly, to disagree if they want to, but to do that very agreeably.

I would expect you to do it agreeably in South Africa. We're not in Japan, after all. And if you want to ask any questions on this subject, not, well, what are our chances in the World Cup now?

Forget about that. You haven't played England yet. But on this subject, then you're free to ask any question you like and I'll do my best to answer.

And if I can't answer, I'll be honest enough to tell you that I can't do so, but it will be helpful to hear your question anyway. So what I'm going to do is make sure, oh, there is a seat over here. I'm going to sit down here on that bench for about a minute.

That's all. And you can make all the noise you like. You can huffle and shuffle and talk and whatever and say to the person next to you, why don't you ask him? And I'll be back in a minute's time and then there'll be your chance to interact and to contribute to our evening and we'll see whether that lasts one minute or ten and then I'll go on and give a much more practical approach in answering our question, where is God when things go wrong?

[39 : 07] So you enjoy yourselves for a minute and then we'll see where we go from there. Right. Time up.

Time up. If you'd like to contribute in any way, just raise your hand. You don't have to come up here. Yes, sir. I hope you heard that question.

Why does God allow any evil and suffering in the world, any suffering, and especially to believers? Let me get back beyond that question to one which is much more difficult, but which embraces your question, which is, why did God allow evil to enter into the world at all in the first place with all of the suffering that results from it?

The answer to that question is, we are not told. God does not tell us in the Bible why he allowed evil to enter into his universe.

And I have a very clear mantra on this. what the Bible does not give us by revelation, it is pointless to decide by speculation.

[40 : 22] And I've heard all kinds of reasons given, or projected, suggested reasons given, as to why there should be any evil in the world at all. None of them convinces me. For this simple reason, not that they're not very cleverly thought out, but that what we don't have by revelation, we cannot get by speculation.

Let me go back to something I said earlier. God tells us in his word everything we need to know, not everything we want to know. And part of me wants to know why this should have happened, but we're not told.

And so, there's no point in me speculating, or in anybody else speculating for that matter. Now, if anybody wants to follow that up and add to that comment, that would be absolutely, oh my goodness, hands all over the place.

Yes, sir? Yes, following up to that question. That's a follow-up to that question to which the answer is precisely the same. Why did God let Adam fall?

He clearly gave him free will, which we now don't have, by the way, and that's another can of worms for you. And they're not very nice worms either.

[41 : 30] And he had perfect free will amongst the other perfect characteristics he had. And he chose. And if you say, well, why would he choose? I guess you and I would say, look, if we lived in a perfect world, living a perfect life with a perfect partner, I mean, I do have a perfect partner, but that's, we won't pursue that.

Why would we ever wreck it? We're not told. There was somebody just beyond you there. Yes, sir?

That's a wonderful comment, and for those who didn't hear it, go and see the man afterwards. Wonderful quotation from Deuteronomy 29, 29, which says, the secret things belong to God, and God has revealed things to his, I'm paraphrasing here, has revealed things to his people, and that is for his glory and for our good.

That's going beyond the paraphrase now, but that's precisely right. There are things which are known to God and only to God and are not to be known by us.

God intends us to live by faith, not knowing everything that we want to know. If we knew everything we wanted to know, I guess faith would not be necessary, at least not to the same degree.

[42 : 49] Somebody else? Well, no, I don't think it is the answer to the question. The gentleman is making the point that God allowed Satan to tempt Job and to deal so violently with him.

That doesn't explain why, and it's very interesting that if you read the book of Job, which is a fantastic and extraordinary book to read, at the end of it all, rather than answer Job's questions, God asks Job a question or a series of questions and says, were you there when I created the heavens?

Were you there when I named the stars? And the answer, of course, Job finally gives in and says, in effect, well, no, I wasn't, and I'll simply accept your dealings with me. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. It's a wonderful book, but we need to be crystal clear that God doesn't answer Job's question. He asks him a bigger question to which Job has no answer and leaves Job submitting to the perfect will of God.

Somebody else? No? That's fine. I told Nick that we'd be finished by 11, but at this rate, we'll be finished a little earlier.

[44 : 05] So let me get back to the question, where is God now when things go wrong? Well, the answer is that God is still, remember the two characteristics we mentioned at the beginning, sovereign and loving.

Nothing takes God by surprise. There's no emergency telephone in heaven. and God is using even the worst of things. When things go at their most wrong, God is there and he is saying something.

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful phrase that I never tire of quoting. God whispers to us in our pleasures, he speaks in our conscience, but he shouts in our pains.

It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. That's a great statement. God whispers to us in our pleasures. God has given us all things richly to enjoy and when we are enjoying things, whatever it is, we should be thanking God for those things.

But there is a sense in which we can get so wrapped up in them, whether it's sport or music or business or whatever, we can get so wrapped in those things, it's as if God's voice is way out there and it's like a whisper.

[45 : 26] But God speaks to us in our conscience. When we have, and conscience is more than instinct or desire, we have an instinct or desire to do something and the conscience says you shouldn't do that.

Or we have an instinct or desire not to do something and the conscience says you should do that. And if you ask, well, where does the conscience come from, there is only one answer, it is God's voice in our heart.

God is speaking to us in our conscience. But, says Lewis rightly, he shouts to us in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse the deaf world.

So, directly to answer our question tonight, when things go wrong, God is there and he is saying something. For example, he is certainly saying whenever things go wrong that we are not in control.

control. Somebody said to me today, in the course of just a casual conversation, I am a control freak. Well, we all are, to a measure. We are control freaks.

[46 : 32] We are never happier than when we are in control of everything that happens. But when things go wrong, God is surely saying to us that we are not in control.

We are not in control of the natural world. We are not in control of the weather, for example. My wife and I wish we were because of one particular thing we want to do while we are in Cape Town this week and you don't get two guesses as to what that is.

But it will depend on the weather. We are not in control of other people. If we were, they would never say anything nasty or unhelpful to or about us.

But we are not in control of them and we are certainly not in control of our own lives. If we were, on reflection, how many of us would go back 24 hours, 48 hours, a week, a month and say, I wish I hadn't done that.

And I'm sorry that I did. So when things go wrong, one of the things that we should be recognizing is we are not in control. Secondly, God is surely telling us that we are very frail and fragile.

[47 : 38] I'm very fond of playing golf. And a few years ago, my very best friend on the golf course, a man with whom I played many, many competitions, died on his 52nd birthday.

And the family invited me to preach at his funeral, a funeral in which they told the clergyman concerned, we don't want to sing any hymns because we never go to church and we're not involved in any of that.

And I was nevertheless invited to preach at his funeral. It was a great opportunity so to do. Now I remember saying three things about him, that he was a very friendly man, and he certainly was, that he was a family man, he was always telling you about his children and grandchildren, but that he was a very frail man.

Now the one thing you would not have said about Norman Smith is that he was frail. We called him Storming Norman after the American general in the Middle East. He was always dashing around in great energy and all the rest of it and on his 52nd birthday he dropped dead.

And so I said to them, he was a very frail man, unknown to him and unknown to us, and so are we. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed.

[48 : 54] Whenever I see a road accident, for example, and we passed another one on the way here tonight, the thought that goes through my mind is, there but for the grace of God go I.

So we are very frail, and when things go wrong we're reminded of that. Often surely we are reminded of our own sin. It's not God's fault when people lie or steal or cheat or wound or murder or break their marriage vows.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. And some people treat that rather lightly and say, well yes, but only in a relatively small way.

I was speaking at a meeting in Edinburgh a few years ago, or just on the outskirts of Edinburgh, a very informal meeting, and at a Q&A; time in the course of the evening, I remember vividly one young man saying to me, if I steal a candy bar from a supermarket, that is a sin.

And I said yes. And sin sends people to hell. Yes. Hitler killed six million Jews in the Holocaust. That was a sin. Yes. And that would send him to hell.

[50 : 06] Yes. Well, I don't think that's fair. I steal a bar of chocolate, he kills six million Jews, we wind up in the same place. I don't think that's fair.

I don't know how you would answer that, but let me tell you what I did. I said, that's very interesting. And you know, I'm inclined to agree with you. I don't think that's fair.

But let me ask you this. Is stealing a chocolate bar the only thing you've ever done that's wrong? Let me tell you what Jesus said on one occasion.

Somebody asked him which was the first and great commandment. And his reply was, the first and great commandment is, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength.

Now this is the first and the greatest commandment. Tell me, have you loved the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, all your strength? And he said, no.

[51 : 06] I said, so you have broken the first and the greatest commandment, therefore you have committed the first and the greatest sin. Now do you think it's unfair? And you know, all credit to him.

He said, no, I can see that it isn't. And it's not unfair. Of course it isn't. And when things go wrong, God is often reminding us of our own sin.

And surely God is always speaking to us about examining our own relationship with God. You know exactly where you were when you heard of 9-11.

I know where I was. I was on the little channel island of Jersey, which I don't like mentioning very much because I come from Guernsey. And I won't pursue the Japanese element, but it's like telling us that African he's got Japanese relatives.

But we've passed by that. But I know exactly where I was when I heard that news. I was in Jersey for two weeks preaching twice a day and I had all my preparation done and my sermon for the Sunday morning at the end of that tour was done.

[52 : 17] 9-11 was on a Tuesday. As soon as I heard of 9-11, I did what thousands of preachers did throughout the world, scrapped my sermon and prepared another one. And I prepared a sermon on a tower falling and many people being killed.

Oh, not the one in New York, but one in Jerusalem and not that Tuesday, but 2,000 years earlier. And Jesus said, those 18 who died when the tower in Jerusalem fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

Jerusalem. See, the received wisdom of the day was when there was a multiple event like that and many people were killed. This was God raising his fist, getting fed up with those people and he had enough of them so he just wiped them all out.

That was the received wisdom of the day. So when 18 people were killed when that tower collapsed, people said, well, they must have been the worst people in the whole city. So Jesus asked the question, do you think they were the worst people in Jerusalem?

They were more guilty than all the others. And then he answered the question, I tell you no. So that's not the reason they died. And then he added this, unless you repent, you too will all perish.

[53 : 37] And he wasn't advising them to steer clear of towers. He was telling them that unless their lives were changed, unless they turned to God, they would suffer something far worse than being killed by a fallen tower.

So the greatest need that they and we have is to get right with God. And God longs for us to do that. And God has given us his son in order that we might come to that living relationship with him.

The most important thing in your life and in mine is our relationship, a living relationship with God, to be in his family able to draw on his love and grace and strength.

Christians are not exempt from trials and temptations, from sorrow and pain and heartache and grief, but they never have to face those things alone.

God promises strength and grace to sustain them and the strength to endure them. about seven years ago, my wife went to the GP and was referred to a consultant in a local hospital for some tests.

[54 : 54] And she was there most of the day and I went along, was advised to go home and came back later in the day and met the consultant with her. And the consultant said, I wish I didn't have to tell you what I have to tell you.

And Joyce said, you can tell me anything you like as long as it's the truth. I'm a Christian and you can tell me. What he told her, I paraphrase, is that she had cancer, which was terminal.

And from then on, we went through the long process of chemotherapy treatment and visits to hospital and all kinds of other tests and interventions until eventually she did die.

And the Bible speaks with great clarity about this and says, as a Christian writing to Christians, we grieve. We do grieve. We're not exempt from these things.

I didn't say when my wife died, well, that's fine. I'm a Christian and everything in life is coming up roses. I grieved. I was telling people earlier today that when the postman delivered, I remember one particular day, a stack of cards, it must have been that big.

[56 : 04] And I saw him coming to my front dormant to meet him. And he said with a big smile on his face, my, somebody got a birthday in this house. And I said, no, my wife just died.

And the poor fellow nearly fell through a hole in the ground. And I started reading those cards and, of course, cried like a child. Of course I did. I grieved. But this is what the Bible goes on to say.

We grieve not as those who have no hope. That's the difference. We have hope. And, you know, in the New Testament, the word hope always means absolute certainty.

When we use the word hope in normal language, have you realized this? It always has a tinge of doubt about it. I hope we'll make it in time. I hope we'll have enough money for this. I hope they'll be there. I hope they respond in this way.

So there's always the possibility that those things won't happen. But when we read of the word hope in the Bible, it's got a positive note to it. So we are not exempt as Christians from suffering and difficulty and danger and pain and sorrow and grief and bereavement.

[57 : 09] We're not exempt from those things. But if we're putting our trust in Jesus Christ as our own personal Savior, we have his grace and his power to see through them.

Things went wrong for my friend Johnifer E. See, the moment he was born, he was born with spinal muscular atrophy, which means in layman's language, he was never able to use his arms or his legs.

Not able to sit up in bed for years, constantly in pain. But was a great character, sports fan, great sense of humor, shared the gospel with people all over the world on the internet.

Don't ask me how. When I heard of his story, I said, would you write your testimony in a book that I'm writing at the moment called Is God Past His Sell-by Date? And I had a chapter called Where Was God on September 11th?

And he wrote his testimony, and I close by reading just a part of it here. He says, one of the psalmists wrote, Come and listen, all you who fear God. Let me tell you what he has done for me, unquote.

[58 : 15] And I gladly do so. He has turned my mourning into laughter and my desolation into joy. He has made my heart rejoice with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

When I struggled to escape from his grace, he drew me to himself. Now listen to these words. This from a man who's never known the absence of pain or disability for his whole life.

I bear witness that never servant had such a master as I have, never brother such a kinsman, never spouse such a husband. No sinner ever had a better savior than Jesus.

No mourner, a better comforter. I want none beside him. In life he is my life and in death he shall be the death of death. In poverty he is my riches, in sickness my health, in darkness my son.

Jesus is to me all grace and no wrath, all truth and no falsehood. And of truth and grace he is full, infinitely full.

[59 : 17] Now do you know Johnny Ferrisi's savior? Johnny Ferrisi did and now does in a much fuller way because he died in March last year.

Where is God when things go wrong? He is present and he is speaking. And he calls us to listen to what he is saying and to respond to him in a way that will bring glory to his name and even in the darkest of days bring blessing to our lives.

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