

Hobbs Lecture

October 29, 2008

God's Omnipresence, God's Omnipotence, and the Problem of Pain

I've enjoyed all the chapel presentations so far in this year's series on the doctrine of God.¹ They've informed me and challenged me to dig deeper into one of the central beliefs of Christians. When I saw my assignment, however, I was really intimidated. Dale Griffin and his chapel crew gave me three topics: God's omnipotence, his omnipresence, and the problem of pain. When I saw the first two, I thought I might hold up these signs signaling the first two topics, sort of like Moses holding the two tablets with the 10 commandments. But, I can't hold three signs! Then Dale called me recently to ask if I could adapt my sermon for the Hobbs lecture series originally scheduled for this date. I am honored to be asked to contribute to a distinguished lecture series dedicated to the memory and legacy of Dr. and Mrs. Hobbs. One of my delightful memories from early in my career at OBU was having Dr. Hobbs speak in one of my theology classes. But I still have three topics to address. Talk about giving me a lot to juggle! But I will try to tie those three topics together in a meaningful way and still get us out of here by noon!

THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

¹ The 2008-2009 chapel series was tied to the classic, A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God: Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992 reprint).

Let's start with the problem of pain.² I realize how quickly the discussion of this topic can become very abstract and speculative, so let me use the story of Naomi to provide a snapshot of suffering. **Ruth 1:19-22** You know the story. Because of a famine Naomi, her husband, and their two sons left their Hebrew homeland and moved to Moab. Eventually her husband and her two sons died. Over time she experienced homelessness, hunger, being a widow, and the deaths of her sons. I've heard Naomi described as the "female Job" of the Old Testament. Her story is not told in as much detail as Job's, but she suffered in multiple ways. Certainly Satan is not mentioned in Naomi's story, and she did not have four theologian friends offering pat answers to her concerns. We are not told explicitly why she suffered. The idea of suffering as a testing of one's faith is not mentioned as clearly as it is in the book of Job.

I wish I could interview Naomi to see exactly how she responded to the problem of pain. From the text I read we know a few things. She refers to God twice as "the Almighty" (1:20, 21). She clearly attributes the primary responsibility for her problems to God. She understood the famine and her other problems as "acts of God," to borrow the language of insurance policies. She did not blame Mother Nature, luck, other humans, or Satan. When she and her daughter-in-law Ruth moved to Bethlehem, she asked the townspeople to call her Mara, not Naomi. Naomi means "pleasant," but Mara means "bitter." The play on words here could be rendered, "Call me Mara because God has marred me."

The Bible does not report Naomi agonizing over why she suffered. Perhaps, like Job, she did wonder why God let so many bad things happen to her. She told her daughters-in-law "the

² See C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962 reprint) for a classic overview of the topic. For Lewis's gripping account of his struggle with the death of his wife, see *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976 reprint).

hand of the Lord has turned against me” (1:13). Perhaps Naomi felt she was being punished for her sins.

If I interviewed Naomi, she might tell me she knew the great stories of early Hebrew history—how God created the world, how God called Abraham to become the father of a great nation, and how God delivered the Hebrews from captivity in Egypt. She might even have memorized one of my favorite verses from early in the Hebrew story: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6). Her testimony in the text, however, was that God had caused her to suffer in many ways.

Textbooks often divide our suffering into two categories: natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil includes hurricanes, avalanches, and other suffering caused by the forces of nature. Moral evil includes evil caused by free moral beings, either humans or demons. We hurt ourselves and each other. According to our text, Naomi and her family suffered partly because of the famine.

My theology students know that textbooks often discuss the problem of pain under the general category of a trilemma. In other words, theologians try to see how three Christian beliefs are consistent and compatible: 1) belief in God’s omnipotence, 2) belief in God’s omnibenevolence (his being all-good), and 3) the reality of evil. Textbooks also often use the word “theodicy” for the problem of pain. The term theodicy refers both to the question “Is God just?” and to the many attempts to answer that question.³

³ For a short introduction, see Warren McWilliams, *Where Is the God of Justice? Biblical Perspectives on Suffering* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), xiv-xvii.

Rather than attempt an in-depth analysis of theodicy and providence in the book of Ruth, I need to focus our attention on the other assigned topics for today.⁴ Every one of the divine attributes in this chapel series relates directly or indirectly to the problem of pain. Our focus today is on two of God's attributes. How does Naomi's story of suffering relate to our understanding of omnipotence and omnipresence?

GOD'S OMNIPRESENCE

First, let's tackle God's omnipresence. Omnipresence means God is everywhere. Right now God is in Fort Smith, Arkansas, where my parents live. God is in Iraq. God is in this chapel. The Bible clearly teaches this traditional doctrine of omnipresence. Psalm 139:7-8 reports that the psalmist knows that no matter where he goes, God is there. God cannot be localized or limited to one place. When King Solomon dedicated the new temple in Jerusalem, he acknowledged that God transcends that building. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).

Sufferers, such as Naomi, however, sometimes experience the absence of God more than his presence. Naomi did not write Psalm 137:4, but she might have experienced that kind of longing for God's presence when she lived in Moab. "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" I recall hearing Dr. Randy Ridenour mentioning the significance of that psalm to him and other soldiers when he served in Iraq (biblical Babylon) last year. The exile who wrote Psalm 137 apparently felt distant from God. Perhaps you are suffering this semester. Maybe your parents are having marital trouble. Or, you have friends with cancer or some other serious illness.

⁴ For such a scholarly study, see M.C.A. Korpel, "Theodicy in the Book of Ruth," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. deMoor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 334-50.

Perhaps you long for the comfort of home and friends in another state or country. If you're suffering, perhaps it's hard to feel the presence of God right here.

Maybe we need to unpack the idea of "presence" a little more in order to grasp divine presence better. Today you are "present" in chapel, but you might be present in many ways. When you scan your ID card as you leave today, your physical presence will be recorded. But are you really here? Are you actively present? Are you studying for a test? Are you checking messages on your cell phone? Are you sleeping? Is your mind preoccupied with other issues? I worry that when we talk about God's omnipresence, we might be assuming God's presence is sort of like oxygen—a vague, impersonal presence.

The Bible is full of stories about people experiencing God's presence in a vital, active way. Jacob, for example, experienced God so directly that he gave new names to two places. After the dream about the angels on the ladder, Jacob named the place Bethel, or the house of God (Gen. 28:19). After he wrestled with God, Jacob named that place Peniel, or the face of God (Gen. 32:30). Jacob might have acknowledged the omnipresence of God in a theoretical way, but he felt especially close to God in these two places.

So, how have you experienced the presence of God in your life? Where is your Peniel or your Bethel? I've met God many times right here in Potter auditorium. For instance, I've come to this room several times for a memorial service or funeral service for close friends. Faculty and staff especially will remember names such as Alyce Dawson, Jimmie Russell, Dick Rader, Jim Hurley, Tom Dowdy, and many others. In this room we celebrated their lives and grieved their deaths, and this place became holy ground for us. But Owens Hall 106, my office, is also sacred

space to me. I often read my Bible, study, and pray there. I feel God's presence there as well as in this room or the church I attend.

I find it helpful to put some qualifiers in front of the phrase "God's presence" in order to reflect biblical teaching. For example, God's omnipresence is a **loving presence**. One of the Hebrew words for love appears in the book of Ruth. For example, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, "May the LORD show you kindness" (1:8 TNIV). The Hebrew word translated "kindness" could be rendered covenant love, steadfast love, loyal love, or "faithful love" (HCSB). On the human level you recognize this kind of love if you know someone who has been happily married for many years. My mother-in-law and father-in-law, for instance, have been married over 70 years. My wife and I have been married for 40 years. Every day Patty's steadfast love for me gives me a glimpse of God's steadfast love. God is present in our lives as a loving presence. His love endures throughout the joys and sorrows of our lives.

God's presence is a **compassionate presence**. One of my favorite verses is Exodus 22:27, where God says, "I am compassionate." God understands what you and I experience. He feels my pain and sorrow. He suffers with me as a compassionate companion. God told Isaiah and the Hebrews, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (Isa. 43:2). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that great German pastor imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote that "only the suffering God can help."⁵ I'm comforted when I suffer because I recognize that God is always with me. At the risk of using a trivial example, you might recall the Dr. Seuss story, "Horton Hears a Who." Horton the elephant rescues the Whos because he had big ears. He heard their cries for help even when the other animals in the jungle

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Rev. and Enlarged ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1967), 188.

ridiculed him. Like Horton, God knows our problems and demonstrates his compassionate, loving presence to us.

Although what I'm stressing today is traditional Christian theology, I need to note that this emphasis on divine suffering would have been controversial to some many centuries ago. When I became interested in the topic of divine suffering several years ago, I saw it as a recovery of a biblical theme that had been neglected by some. I was delighted to discover, however, that some Baptist theologians had been pioneers in this area. Time would fail for me to recount a full history of Baptist interest in the topic of God's suffering. Two British Baptists, H. Wheeler Robinson and Paul Fiddes, wrote books on the subject.⁶ My own research in this field affirms the value of saying God suffers with us when we suffer.⁷ An eminent Baptist theologian in the United States tied the biblical teaching on divine suffering to the incarnation of God in Jesus and the problem of evil. He wrote, "The witness of Scripture is that God has voluntarily suffered in our place. Rather than simply observing and empathizing with our suffering in a world of evil, God himself personally experienced it to restore us to those relationships from which sin had separated us."⁸ After a brief discussion of the pros and cons of affirming divine suffering, another prominent Baptist theologian concluded, that "it seems to be necessary to affirm that God has the capacity to suffer, for he has participated in suffering."⁹ John Newport, a distinguished Southern Baptist philosopher and former Hobbs lecturer, included an emphasis on

⁶ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Suffering Human and Divine* (New York: Macmillan, 1939); Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

⁷ Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 616.

⁹ James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:250-1.

God's ability to suffer in his discussion of evil and suffering.¹⁰ Another Baptist theologian, Timothy George, offered a qualified endorsement of divine suffering.¹¹

Above all, God's presence is an **incarnate presence**. We experience the presence of God most directly through Jesus. Jesus is God incarnate, our Immanuel, God with us. I would suggest that all the attributes of God need to be understood in light of God's revelation in Jesus. To use the fancy jargon of academic theology, all divine attributes should be understood Christocentrically. We could avoid some of the abstract, speculative debates about God if we tied our doctrine of God to God's incarnation in the person of Jesus.

Jesus continues to be with us as the risen Lord. In the Great Commission Jesus told his disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the ages" (Matt. 28:20b). Earlier, when Jesus spoke to his disciples in the Upper Room, they must have been concerned about his destiny and what would happen to him when he was physically absent. Jesus assured them, "I will not leave you orphaned" (John 14:18). He promised them the presence of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Without going into the details of the doctrine of the Trinity, it's fair to say that the Bible teaches that God's omnipresence is a **triune presence**.¹² The Bible testifies to the omnipresence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we suffer, we are not alone. God is with us as a loving, compassionate presence.

GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE

¹⁰ John P. Newport, *Life's Ultimate Questions: A Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 248-50.

¹¹ Timothy George, "The Nature of God: Being, Attributes, and Acts," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 230-1.

¹² For recent Baptist perspectives on the Trinity, see two theme issues of journals: "Perspectives on the Trinity," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10 (Spring 2006) and "The Trinity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33 (Fall 2006).

But now we need to turn to the topic of God's omnipotence. Naomi referred to God's power when she identified him as "the Almighty" (Shaddai in Hebrew). We need to be clear about what we believe about God's power. The movie "Bruce Almighty" helped some of us recognize how complex the issue of omnipotence can be. God temporarily allowed the Jim Carrey character, Bruce, to be omnipotent. Bruce did not, however, use that power wisely. To say God is omnipotent is not enough for Christians; we need to affirm that a good, loving, and just God is sovereign over the universe. I won't try to deal with those classic questions, such as, Can God make a square circle? Or, Can God make 2 plus 2 equal 5? Questions such as these presume a more abstract notion of power than a biblically based view of omnipotence. God's power is guided by his character. Since the essence of God is love, his omnipotence is a loving power.

Again, I wish we could interview Naomi about her view of God's power. She would know that God created the world and can do miracles. She clearly knew God is "Almighty." Without turning a chapel sermon into a boring classroom lecture, I'll try to sketch out a few of the many possible views of God's power. One view is that God is the **direct cause of everything that happens**. Naomi might be close to this view. At least she believes God has sent suffering her way. An obvious danger with this view is that many Christians believe some suffering is innocent, undeserved, or disproportionate. If God is the direct cause of everything that happens, he seems to be the author of evil and sin. The view that God micromanages the universe is dangerously close to a divine determinism.

A second view is that **God is powerful, but not all-powerful**. One place you can find this view is in the best-seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.¹³ Having watched his son die as a teenager, Rabbi Kushner decided God was finite, not infinite. Kushner could affirm the goodness of God, but not his omnipotence.

A third view is voiced by C. S. Lewis in his delightful book, *The Screwtape Letters*. Two devils, Screwtape and Wormwood, correspond about many issues, including God. While discussing God's power, Screwtape notes: "He cannot ravish. **He can only woo.**"¹⁴ My students know that I really like the word "woo." I grew up singing the old hymn ("Wonderful Words of Life") about God's words "wooing us to heaven." In Hosea 2:14 (NEB) God said "I will woo her," referring to the Hebrew nation. I saw paintings of Jesus standing in front of a door, politely knocking, based on Rev. 3:20. "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking."

I like Lewis's emphasis on the wooing dimension to God's power. God is all-powerful, and he can exercise that power in many ways. The best clue we have to the essence of God's omnipotence is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our view of God's power, like our view of God's presence, needs to be Christ-centered. The apostle Paul insisted that we see God's power most clearly in the weakness of Christ, dying on the cross. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25)

Although I call this view of God's power a Christ-centered view, this view is evident in the Old Testament. For example, Hosea reports that God's power is a suffering, loving power. God is the divine parent who loves his child, even when the child is a prodigal. God says, "My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (11:8). God exercises his

¹³ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon reprint, 1983).

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 38.

power in a loving, compassionate, patient way. When Jesus encountered a rebellious Jerusalem, he lamented: “How often I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37b).

This understanding of the God who woos will help us avoid some dangerous conclusions. God is the ultimate cause of everything that happens. “God created a world with the possibility of suffering, but He does not directly cause all pain.”¹⁵ For example, God allows some things to happen rather than directly causing them. We can affirm divine sovereignty and omnipotence without calling God the direct cause of every event. God allows humans to exercise their freedom, which means sometimes people hurt themselves or other people. Although Herschel Hobbs did not, to my knowledge, use the “wooing” image for God’s power, he often presented a summary of divine omnipotence that balanced divine sovereignty and human freedom, identifying it as the view of Southern Baptists.¹⁶ God is Lord over his creation, but we should call tornadoes natural evil rather than acts of God. A belief in divine omnipotence does not require us to believe God directly causes all tornadoes, hurricanes, murder, rape, infertility, and racism.

In fact, God wants us to use our ingenuity and creativity to address much of the world’s suffering. When God gave humans dominion over the created world, he expected us to use our science, technology, and other skills to make the world better. I often tell my students that I am making a theological statement when I wear my eyeglasses. I believe God empowers humans to diagnose my eye problems and prepare glasses that help me function well. Indeed, given more time, I would talk about “reverent creativity,” a stance that includes both our acknowledging

¹⁵ Warren McWilliams, *When You Walk through the Fire* (Nashville: Broadman, 1986), 158.

¹⁶ See Herschel H. Hobbs, *What Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Broadman, 1964), 16-17; *Fundamentals of Our Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, 1960), 33-34; *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971), 36-37.

God's lordship and our responsibility to be creative stewards of our gifts and talents and the world in which we live.¹⁷

I began by talking about Naomi as a case study in suffering. You know the rest of the story. Her daughter-in-law Ruth falls in love with Boaz, they get married, and they have a child. The story has a happy ending! If you came to chapel today with a heavy heart, due to some suffering or adversity impacting you or your family and friends, I do not want to sound insensitive. Not all stories have happy endings, at least in the short term. No matter where you are in the process of suffering, know that God is here and cares for you.

So, I close with a story. This past summer a friend reminded me that he had heard me preach on the problem of pain years ago. He found the sermon helpful and thanked me. One reason he found the sermon meaningful was that several years earlier he and his wife had suffered the loss of a young child, one of the most agonizing experiences I can imagine. As I thanked him for his compliment, I mentioned that another family in the audience this summer had lost a young child several years ago. Quickly my friend told me how he and his wife had ministered to the other family in their time of grief. I like that: suffering people helping other suffering people. If you have experienced the power and presence of God in your life during a time of suffering, please find a way to help someone else. You could help a suffering friend by doing something as simple and easy as giving a hug, writing a short note, or making a phone call. You could volunteer your time in a community project that helps the homeless or poor. You might choose a career that enriches the lives of others, such as teaching, nursing, business, or

¹⁷ McWilliams, *Where Is the God of Justice?*, 174-81.

politics. Whatever your vocation, God can use you to be a “wounded healer,” someone who helps the suffering.¹⁸

The apostle Paul said it this way: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4 NIV). I leave you with a “homework” assignment. If you have felt the powerful, loving, compassionate presence of God in your life, find a way to help others who are suffering around you.

Well, the sermon is over. Let’s get started on that homework!

¹⁸ I borrow the title from a classic. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979 reprint).