

Basic Bible Study Themes, III

Father, we want to praise You for this day. We thank You for the rain that has watered the earth. We thank You that You are so kind and gracious that you send Your rain and sun both on those who are redeemed by You and justified but also on the unbeliever. Our Father, we pray that we may learn to have that same perfection of character that You have. May we have the same compassion for those who are outside Your kingdom. As we think together about Francis Schaeffer, we thank You, Father, for the compassion You gave him and for his readiness to be constantly thinking about how to reach out to the unbeliever. We pray, Father, that we may, like him, reflect that longing of You to extend Your kingdom to bring people to Yourself. So be with us, Father, and teach us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We have been going through basic Bible studies, and last time we were in the second section and looked at some of the things that Schaeffer says about human persons. We got through point number one where we discussed the uniqueness of human beings as persons made in the image of God and what that means.

A second point I want to mention briefly is Schaeffer's emphasis on the goodness of life before the Fall. Schaeffer comments on Genesis 3:8, saying, "Man is shown here to be in perfect harmony with God so that man and God could walk together in the cool of the day. Being in harmony with God, man was also in full harmony with his wife, with nature, and with himself. There was no place for divided personality or schizophrenia in man as he was originally made." Schaeffer emphasizes the goodness of life before the Fall. He repeats this in a comment on Genesis 2:16-17, that man had constant fellowship with God and was surrounded by a perfect environment.

You may wonder why I emphasize this, and I think the point is that Schaeffer wanted to constantly get across to people that the Bible does not operate in some area of religious truth. Instead it describes what took place in history and what life was actually like before the Fall. It is so easy for a modern person to simply read the Bible as a kind of collection of legends and fairy tales. Schaeffer was constantly aware of that. When you comment or preach on any part of Scripture, if you want to communicate to twentieth century people, you need to emphasize over and over again in any way that you can that you are talking about the truth. You talk about reality, not about some religious thing in some separate area. That is how our whole culture is taught to read the Bible, particularly the early parts of the Bible and the book of Genesis. Schaeffer stresses that at a point in the past there truly was a situation in which sin had not entered. Human beings, man and woman, lived in perfect harmony with God, themselves, each other, and the environment in which they lived. That brings us to the next point.

Point number three is Schaeffer's stress on the present abnormality of life. On page 21 in the American edition he writes about Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:24, "They lost communion with God and were put out of the garden. Both the body and the soul felt the effects of sin." Then he comments on Genesis 3:17-18, "The external universe is now abnormal. It is not as God had made it. It was changed because of man's sin. All that was under man's dominion was affected."

Schaeffer brings out several points in thinking about abnormality. You may ask why he does not simply use a word like "fall" or "sin." Again he constantly tried to find ways to express what the Scriptures teach to communicate both to the non-Christian and the Christian. The non-Christian is completely unfamiliar with biblical terminology, and Christians are familiar with the Bible and can be so familiar with biblical terminology that they no longer understand what is said. I would say that for all of you in all of your preaching and teaching. You need to constantly think about different words to use that

actually get through that problem. First there is the problem with unbelievers, that they are now completely unfamiliar with our language. We need to understand that we live in a culture that does not understand biblical language anymore.

Second, there are people in the church who are so familiar with the language that they no longer hear it. You can think of the way Jesus constantly quotes that passage from Isaiah, “They have ears, and they do not hear. They have eyes, and they do not see.” He talks about the hardness of people’s hearts. That is one of the problems we face. We are so familiar in our churches with biblical language that it does not touch us any longer. In all of our communication, we need to try to break through that. C. S. Lewis says in the introduction to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* that that is what he wants to do. It actually says that people are so accustomed to hearing the message of Scripture that they no longer hear it at all. He told his story of the lion, the witch, and the wardrobe to present the Gospel of Christ in a very different way. He wanted to break through that barrier of familiarity and the contempt that comes from familiarity. It may not be a purposeful contempt, though sometimes it is, but it is a contempt nonetheless, even if it is not purposeful.

Schaeffer also speaks about the abnormality of the universe. We are now living in a fallen and abnormal world, but there is nothing as we look around ourselves that is the way in which God originally created it. Everything in our existence is now set awry. Schaeffer later came to call this the five-pointed curse. There is a sermon of his in the Schaeffer Institute on that subject, and he also writes at length about it in his book *Genesis in Space and Time*.

The five-pointed curse means, first, that our relationship with God is broken. Adam and Eve lost communion with God. Second, we ourselves have become abnormal, both physically and spiritually. He says the body and the soul felt the effects of sin. We ourselves have become abnormal. As he said, earlier, before the Fall there was no divided personality or schizophrenia in man as he was originally made. There were no psychological problems, but now every human being is psychologically damaged. There is not any person who is psychologically or spiritually whole. Every person is damaged, and every person’s body feels the effects of sin or the abnormality. All of us experience sickness, pain, and death. We all have mortal bodies. The first part of the curse is the loss of fellowship with God the Creator. We were made for fellowship with Him, and that fellowship is broken.

The second point of the five-pointed curse is that we have lost communion with ourselves. No one knows himself or herself anymore. Our hearts are now deceitful; you cannot really know who you are, let alone know anyone else perfectly. Third, our relationship with others is broken. Schaeffer spoke about the way Adam had harmony with his wife, and that harmony is gone. You see that in Genesis 3 where immediately Adam starts accusing Eve and says it was her fault. That is what sin is about: shifting blame. The account in Genesis shows the brokenness of their relationship with each other. That relationship of marriage, which is broken for everyone to some degree, is true of every other human relationship as well. So the third aspect of Schaeffer’s five-pointed curse is that our relationship with other people is now abnormal and damaged.

Fourth, our relationship with nature, man’s dominion, is affected. Man is no longer able to exercise dominion as he was. That is the point that Schaeffer makes. Man and woman are commanded in Genesis 1 to rule over the earth and be God’s vice-regents over it. Now instead of having dominion and ruling over the earth under God, we are now in a situation where the earth has dominion over us. We labor in the sweat of our brow. It produces thorns and thistles to us. Then it claims us, and we return to the dust. Rather than us having dominion over the earth, the earth has dominion over us. That is the fourth aspect of the curse.

The fifth aspect of the curse is that the external universe is now abnormal. The world itself is now under a curse, as Paul expresses it. Romans 8 says that the earth groans in travail under the bondage of decay. The physical world around us is no longer as it came from the hand of God.

Points four and five are connected to each other. Point four is that our dominion is lost and we are no longer able to rule the earth as we should. Schaeffer draws this out at much greater length in his book *Pollution and the Death of Man*. Everywhere we see the results in the physical universe of man's loss of dominion over nature. We see it in pollution, in the destruction of the environment, and in the tearing down of the rainforests with complete disregard for the effect that it will have on anything else. We see it in people littering the waysides. As Schaeffer puts it in that book, "our fair sister is ravaged." We ravage creation because our relationship with nature now expresses our sin. Further than that, we have lost dominion over it even where we try to have dominion over it rightly because of the brokenness of nature itself, so we cannot exercise dominion over the earth, which is the fifth point.

I am not a farmer, but I am a gardener. That is what I love to do; I love to grow things. But I constantly wrestle with weather, pests, weeds, and fungus problems. There are all kinds of problems, apart from children throwing balls in your garden or running over it! Rabbits may eat your tomatoes or whatever it happens to be. You have so many problems to face. Schaeffer expresses that loss of dominion by saying, "All that was under man's dominion was affected." It is obvious in Genesis that Adam's control over nature would take every effort when he tried to grow crops. It was in the sweat of his brow, and work was no longer something simply pleasant. It was not simply an exercise of dominion, but now it was something that was back breaking and soul breaking for many people. It is still that way for many people in the world. If you go to a third-world country or even places in this country, you can see the effects of over work, boring work, and soul-destructive work on human beings. Man's dominion is affected. No one ever had a perfect work situation any longer. It is impossible for us to create utopia because the creation itself is under a curse. Utopia cannot be created. There is no longer perfect harmony anywhere in this world.

These are very powerful points to make in any kind of apologetic presentation of the Christian message. There are all sorts of points that can be drawn out in terms of presenting the Christian message to unbelievers. One point is that the biblical account of reality really is the way things are. We do not have some pie-in-the-sky view of the way reality is. When the Scripture describes, as it does in Genesis and everywhere else, our lives as abnormal, that is what people actually experience. People often think of Christians as having some kind of naïve, romantic, and sentimental view of reality. We do not at all. We ought to have a far more realistic view of the effects of human sin than anyone else if we read the Bible faithfully. That is the point Schaeffer wants to make here: the Bible really tells us the way things are. It calls a spade a spade, to use an English expression. You really tell it the way it is so that the unbeliever, as he reads through these studies and goes through them, says that this describes the world as it actually is. Genesis is not a legend; it is not a fairy tale. It tells us about something that happened in history to change the world. The world as we see it is this way.

The first thing is to start speaking in this way, using slightly different language than one might normally use. This helps people to see that we talk about reality. This biblical account actually fits reality. The second thing is that the biblical account of the Fall gives us an answer to the problem of evil. It describes a situation where there was perfect harmony in our own psyche, in nature itself, and in our relationship with God, with one another, and with nature. Then sin does damage to that, bringing abnormality into all these five areas. People can understand from the Bible why the world is the way it is.

One of the points that Schaeffer implicitly makes is that God is not responsible for the brokenness of the world. The world is not the way God created it, and human beings are not the way God created them. Everything now is abnormal and is distorted by sin. Do not blame God for the way things are. Human sin has made things the way they are. This is the effect of sin as Schaeffer expresses it here.

In stressing this he makes several points that have tremendous value in communicating the Christian message to unbelievers. It is a very important point. I hardly ever hear Christians talking about the abnormality of the world. If we do not talk about the abnormality of the world, we have absolutely no answer to give to people who have problems with suffering and evil. We end up saying that “it is okay.” Someone dying of cancer might come to us, and we say, “This is really fine. God will take care of it. Everything is going to work out well in the end.” This is an artificial answer that simply does not meet the person’s needs and is not true. It is not faithful to Scripture. Unless we understand the reality of the Fall, we have nothing to say to the person who suffers. Scripture forbids us to heal people’s wounds lightly or to try to soothe them with emollient words that pretend that things are not as bad as they are. One of the wonderful things about Scripture is that it takes the brokenness of our situation really seriously. It says it like it is. That is why it tells you to weep with those who weep, not to heal their wounds lightly. Just go and weep with them. Jesus is described as a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. That is the way every Christian ought to be, those who really take people’s suffering to heart. We need to understand that people are having experiences that are abnormal. They are not the way God created them to be. Their reality and their experience of it is a broken one. Our call is to weep with them and have compassion on them rather than heal their wounds lightly.

The Bible also tells us that we do not have a superficial answer to the problem of suffering. Job’s comforters and the Pharisees said it was the fault of the sinner that these dreadful things happened to them. It is as if there was a direct equation here and now between people’s behavior and what happens to them. Scripture makes it very plain that that is not so; it is a superficial answer. There is not a balancing of the books in this life. That is one of the themes of the book of Ecclesiastes. The same thing happens to the good man and the evil man, the wise man and the fool, the drunkard and the sober. Of course there is an element of the judgment of God in the present, but things are not perfectly straight here. That is why Ecclesiastes finishes by saying that the answer to this problem is that there is a judgment of God in the end. That will naturally set it all straight, because there really is a balance in the end. It will really be dealt with, because God sees everything. He pronounces His judgment.

This has tremendously important points. I passionately agree with Schaeffer’s emphasis of this. The Fall is one of the most neglected Christian doctrines, even by those who believe firmly that Genesis is literal history. In England, many evangelical Christians are so frightened of being thought foolish for believing in Genesis 1-3 as actual history that they never talk about creation and the Fall for fear of what unbelievers will think of them. Most of the people from England who ever came to stay at the English branch of L’Abri had never heard anyone talk about the Fall or say that the universe was abnormal. It was a completely new idea to them. If that is so, you really end up with superficial answers to the problem of evil. Even worse, you end up making God the author of sin. If you do not recognize a historical fall, you communicate that the world as we know it is the way God made it. It is like saying God is directly responsible for all the appalling things that happen, including human sinfulness. This is the very opposite of what Scripture teaches. James says God is not tempted with evil, and He does not tempt with evil. You can only say that if you live in a world that is not the way God created it and has been destroyed by human sin and rebellion against God.

In England we were in a situation where hardly any Christians were taught about the historicity of Genesis. They were not taught that Genesis describes the world as it truly is. They were not taught that it

is a broken, damaged, and abnormal world. It gives you such wonderful answers when you start speaking that way. Even Christians who do believe literally in Genesis do not talk about the abnormality of the world. They do not have answers to the problems that people struggle with. Schaeffer used to point out, over and over again in thinking about this, Jesus' response to the death of Lazarus. When Jesus came to Lazarus' sisters and to the grave of Lazarus, Schaeffer made the point that Christ weeps with sorrow, and He is angry. The Greek words that are used there are very strong. He snorted in anger and distress. That is what it actually says. The point Schaeffer makes is that Jesus is God and the creator of the universe, but He is angry. He is filled with sadness when He faces death and the abnormalities caused by the Fall. He is not the one who made human beings to die. He made them to live. He is filled with compassion when He sees people in their suffering, because their life is now distorted, broken, and abnormal.

Schaeffer used to relate that over and over again to Albert Camus' story *La Pest* (The Plague). One of the struggles in that story is in a city where there is a plague, and the people are being killed by it. How can you fight against the plague if the world as it is came from the hand of God? You cannot fight against it without fighting against God. How can you fight against God? Genesis 3 makes it plain that God is not responsible for the plague. He is not the author of the plague. It is the sinfulness of human beings and their rebellion against God that has brought this brokenness into being. Therefore Schaeffer draws the conclusion that Christians can be doctors and have sorrow and compassion for the person who suffers without thinking that they fight against God. We side with God, who hates evil and came into the world in Christ to deliver us from evil and the abnormality of our situation. This is a very important point.

We have been talking about the abnormality of suffering and that it is a consequence of the Fall. Let us talk about how that relates to the positive things that Paul says about suffering. The most central illustration of this is the death of Christ. We may look at the death of Christ in several different ways. First, you may say that this is the most appalling event in the history of the world. Scripture presents it that way. Here, the Son of God, who was perfectly righteous, was put to death at the hands of sinful, wicked men. It was brought about by, among other things, the activity of Satan himself, whose intention was totally evil. He enters Judas so that Judas will betray Christ. He tries to destroy the Messiah. What Judas does is seen by Scripture as absolutely wicked. He is called the son of perdition and damnation because of what he does. He knows who Christ is; he does not have any doubt about it. Yet he sells Him and betrays Him for money. It is presented as a dreadful thing, the result of the working and purposes of Satan in the world. Paul expresses it in 1 Corinthians 2:8 by saying, "The rulers of this world have conspired together to crucify the Lord of glory." By "rulers of this world" Paul means both Satan as the ultimate wicked ruler of this world and the sinful human rulers of this world, Pilate, Caiaphas, Ananias, and Herod.

We may look at it from another perspective and see that God uses that wicked event to bring about our salvation. God's purposes are good. What happens is an expression of His love for us. He is able to take the choices and actions of the wicked, even of Satan himself, and because their wisdom is not as great as His, He uses them to bring about our redemption. That is what Paul says in Corinthians. He says, "If they had understood the secret wisdom of God decreed before the ages for our salvation, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." They did not understand that secret wisdom. God is able to take events that the wicked intend for evil, really evil, and bring their judgment before God, and He is able to use them for our salvation. He is able to use them for good.

The same thing can happen in your or my personal life. We may think of Paul's thorn in the flesh. Paul calls it a messenger of Satan, which has been sent to harass him. We do not know whether it was a

physical disability, some kind of sickness, or a temptation—a besetting sin that he struggled with. He does not tell us enough about it, so there is no point in speculating.

I used to think that it could not possibly be a physical problem. How could Paul describe a physical problem so seriously? I thought it must be some spiritual struggle that he had, until I got really ill myself for a few years. Then I understood perfectly well how it could have been a physical problem. I have a very dear friend of mine in England who struggles with what my wife did several years ago. She had severe back problems, was on her back for six months, and was in constant pain. She sometimes wished she were just dead. When you are in pain all the time you just want to die. I have a good friend in England about whom I just got a letter the other day who said his quality of life was zero. He has back problems and has been on his back for months and months. He is in acute pain all the time. When you have those kinds of physical problems, you know that they are sufficient to be a thorn in the flesh from Satan. They can destroy you and tear you apart. Do not ever be naïve about the seriousness of physical problems and try to pretend they are not the real problem. They may very well be.

Whatever it was that Paul struggled with, he longed to be delivered from it. It was part of the abnormality that was brought about by the Fall. It is part of the power that Satan has in this world in the brokenness of our bodies and minds. Paul prayed that God would deliver him from it, but He did not, because He knew Paul's heart. Paul, like the rest of us, has as his fundamental problem: pride. That is our fundamental problem as human beings. Adam and Eve's rebellion against God was a rebellion of pride. They exalted themselves over against the Creator. Satan's problem was pride, too. Paul acknowledged that he had wonderful revelations from God. He says God did not take away his thorn to prevent him from becoming puffed up by the surpassingly great revelations that God had shown him. Paul was able, through that suffering, to learn the lesson that God's power was made perfect in his weakness and that God's grace was sufficient for him no matter what he had to endure as he struggled with this thorn in the flesh.

As we experience suffering of one kind or another, it seems that we always pray for two things. One is to be delivered from temptation and the physical suffering that we face. At least we want to have it eased. Scripture encourages us to pray for that because these are parts of the brokenness of reality. We long to be delivered from them. The second is to encourage us to pray that, because God has our good at heart in His design for us, we can trust Him no matter what we have to endure, to bring about the glory of His kingdom and the honor of His name even if He does not deliver us from the situation. We always pray both for deliverance from the situation and for deliverance in the other sense of praying that we may learn to say that God's grace is sufficient for us. That is why the New Testament is able to say that the trials we go through test our faith. That testing produces endurance, and that endurance produces strength of character and hope. It also enables us to be a comfort to other people who suffer.

The Christian pastor or teacher who has naïve ideas about suffering has almost nothing to say to people who really struggle. That is why Hebrews emphasizes so strongly the point of why Jesus is able to be a high priest to us. He has been tempted in every way we have, and He has suffered in ways even beyond our imagining. He really sympathizes with us. Like us, He learned obedience through what He suffered. That is how Hebrews expresses it. We know He really understands what we struggle with. He does not rebuke us. Jesus was so gentle with people who suffered. The people He was harsh with were people like the Pharisees, but He was very gentle with people who suffered. We are often just the other way around: we bruise the broken reed. We tell people to get their act together. "What do you think you are doing? You are full of self-pity, lying there in your misery. Exercise some significance, be responsible, and put your life back together." You do not see Jesus speaking that way to people.

There are some people who are really broken. In the descriptions of the Messiah in the latter part of Isaiah, he speaks about the Messiah as the one who does not bruise the broken reed or quench the smoking flax. He is a person who is really gentle with people in their brokenness. We have to learn to be that way as well. As we go through things that are really painful, we learn to have a gentle spirit toward others rather than hardness and arrogance.

There are many things that we may learn as we struggle with suffering in our own lives. We must never turn that around and say that evil is good. Nor must we ever say that evil comes from God's hand. God is not the author of evil, and we must never declare evil to be good. I encourage you to read C. S. Lewis' book *Voyage to Venus*. It is the second one in his space trilogy. In that book he deals with this issue. The devil in the story tries to suggest that evil is good and the Fall is fortunate. The devil says he should be praised for bringing about the Fall because of what God was able to do through it in sending His Son into the world. He says that evil is really good because it brought forth greater good. Christians often speak that way, but we should not. Scripture does not speak that way. Evil is evil.

I spoke about how we pray for deliverance and how we learn to grow in our trust of God and our capacity to be a help to others through suffering. The third thing that Scripture holds out for us is the hope that we have that one day we will be delivered completely from this suffering. Every tear will be wiped away. The whole goal of the work of Christ is to overcome the abnormality of this world. He will overcome every aspect of this five-pointed curse that Schaeffer speaks about. He will restore us to fellowship with God and make us whole psychologically and physically. Our bodies will be raised from the dead, and there will no longer be any deceit, brokenness, and shame in our hearts. Instead there will be integrity and wholeness. He will restore us to perfect relationships with one another. There will no longer be brokenness and disharmony in any of our relationships with our family, friends, or anyone. He will restore us to our relationship with our environment. We will again have dominion over nature, and creation itself will be restored. There will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells and the curse is completely removed. Evil is evil, and we must never call it anything else and not pretend it is all right. Because of this evil, we are able to look forward with such hope, expectation, and joy to the transformation of everything and deliverance from evil. That is why the Scripture uses words like redemption, salvation, restoration, regeneration, and renewal. The old, what is now, is abnormal. It is bad, and God hates it. Do not ever look at someone suffering from cancer and say, "Well, this is a good thing." It is not a good thing; it is a horrible thing. Until you learn to see it as a horrible thing, you will not really help people who deal with it.

Some have wondered if every bad thing that happens to us has a purpose or a meaning. It is not naïve to think that way, but it is important to understand what we mean when we say that. Paul says very clearly that God works all things together for our good. The very hairs of our head are numbered. There is nothing that comes to us that is outside of the sovereign control of God. It is wonderful to be able to say that. It gives me complete confidence with which to face the future. I will not face something that God is not aware of and does not have His hand over. God is strong enough to help me through everything. With every single temptation that we will face, God provides a way of escape. He does not send the temptations, and Scripture says that very plainly.

We have to ask what we mean when we say "purpose." Do we say that God sits there, designing nasty things for us with the purpose that I will grow through this? Scripture does not speak that way. God is not the author of evil. He is not the one who brought cancer, traffic accidents, the breakdown of insurance companies, or job losses into the world. They are all the results of human sin and its consequences as they work themselves out in the individual's life, society, and human history as a whole. We see these results in the brokenness of our created reality and in the rule of Satan. Having said

that, we know that God is the ultimate sovereign Lord. Satan and sin bring nothing into our lives that God is outside of or out of control of. He does have a purpose for everything that comes our way so that we may grow in fellowship with Him. It is not automatic. You will not necessarily grow as you struggle with the flu or long for employment. You do not automatically grow. We grow as we learn to trust God and look to Him for strength and help in our weakness and times of need. The resolution is not simply to praise God for everything that happens.

You may have seen Merlin Caruthers's books *From Prison to Praise* and *Prayer and Praise*. He has it as a formula to praise God for everything that happens. Your child gets drunk or someone gets cancer, and you praise God. That is not what Scripture says. I have to learn to praise God in every situation I face, because He is always greater than the difficult circumstances that come my way. And He is always able to help me grow as I learn to trust Him. That is why Paul is able to say, "Therefore I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses. I will even glory in all these difficult things that happened to me. God's power is made perfect in my weakness." Our fundamental problem is trusting in ourselves. Paul says he will boast about the things that have taught him to really trust God and see that it is His power that can transform other people and me. His power can extend His kingdom, not mine. That is not the same as saying these things are good after all. We must not turn them around the other way and pretend they are all right. It is a very different thing. There is a very careful line that we must not go over; otherwise we will be unfaithful to Scripture.