

Line of Despair, I

Father, we want to thank You for this day. We thank You for revealing Yourself to us. As we begin to look now at the dilemma that our contemporaries are in, we pray that You will give us understanding that we may really begin to see in a new way how people around look at the world and themselves. With understanding we may have compassion and a desire to communicate more faithfully. We ask it, Father, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Today we will start looking at some of the ideas in the *God Who is There* and *Escape from Reason*. Those were two foundational books of Schaeffer's. Much of what was in those books was the foundation for *How Should We Then Live*, both as a film series and as a book years later. Both *God Who is There* and *Escape from Reason* were published in 1967 or 1968. They were based on lectures that had been given many years previously in various different forms. I have a copy of the lectures as they were given at Wheaton College several years earlier. They are simply called "The Wheaton Lectures," and Wheaton printed them up for the use of their students. It is much of the same material that was in those two books.

The themes of these books are repeated over and over again in Schaeffer's work. He comes back to them in his very last book, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. There are things that he describes and warns about regarding the shift in thinking in our culture. He was very concerned before his death with cultural thought patterns that were increasingly infiltrating the evangelical church. We will come to that later, but he felt that his warnings were going unheeded. That is why he wrote that book as the last book. He felt a tremendous obligation before God to go around giving the lectures he did in the few months before he died and get that book out. He had to sound a warning to the evangelical church in terms of where it was going.

Today I want to start thinking about the line of despair. I want to talk about what Schaeffer meant by that, because it is foundational to all that he says in relationship to understanding our culture. Let me start with two introductory points.

The first introductory point is about why it is important to understand what Schaeffer calls the line of despair. There are two answers that he gives to that. One is that we have to understand this in order to communicate to our culture. Unless we understand the way people around us think and that their thinking has changed very dramatically, we will be equipping ourselves to work in a period that no longer exists. In fact, "rather than talking to unbelievers, we will simply be talking to ourselves"—that is the way Schaeffer puts it. I would suggest that even though he wrote those words 23 years ago in the *God Who is There*, they are still applicable to the church today. There are still many Christians who do not understand that the culture around us thinks in a very different way from the way we as Christians ought to think. That is the first point he makes. We have to understand our culture in order to communicate.

Second, Schaeffer suggests early on in *The God Who is There* that we have to understand this issue in order to be able to resist the spirit of the age for ourselves. It is in that context, you will remember, that he quotes Luther. Let me read this paragraph,

The importance of understanding the chasm to which man's thinking has brought him is not of intellectual value alone but of spiritual value as well. The Christian is to resist the spirit of the world. But when we say this, we must understand that the world's spirit does not always take the

same form. So the Christian must resist the spirit of the world in the form it takes in his own generation. If he does not do this, he is not resisting the spirit of the world at all. This is especially so for our generation, as the forces at work against us are of such a total nature. It is our generation of Christians more than any other who need to heed these words attributed to Martin Luther, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ however boldly I may be professing Him." Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved. To be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

It is precisely that point that caused Schaeffer to speak so strongly in *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. He felt that the evangelical church in many places gave in to the thinking of the culture. It compromised to the spirit of the age at this very point that he calls the line of despair.

The second introductory remark I want to make is the distinction that Schaeffer makes between rationalism and rational. It is very important to understand it because if you do not, you will get confused when you read Schaeffer as you think about where he stood personally. He says on page 9 of *The Collected Works*, "Rational means that the things which are about us are not contrary to reason. To put it another way, man's aspiration of reason is valid. So the Judeo-Christian position is rational." He means that Christianity is reasonable, and what it says about the world around us is true and fits. Human rationality is an important part of the way that God has made us. This is the point that Paul makes in Acts when Festus says to him, "Paul, your great learning is driving you mad." Paul replies, "Why should you think it unreasonable that God should raise the dead?" Paul teaches a reasonable message. It is a message that makes rational sense. By rationalism Schaeffer means that men and women, beginning by themselves, try to build rationally a system of thought and a means of explaining the world. By rationalism he means what he also calls secular humanism. Human beings try to build a view of reality, beginning from themselves with their own reason. They try to find an answer to the problems that confront them; they try to build meaning and values for themselves by their reason. By rationalism he means a trust in reason as the resolution to the problems that face us, whether philosophical or moral. In that sense he says Christianity has nothing to do with rationalism because we begin with God's revelation to us rather than trying to answer our questions by reason alone. We begin as those who stand before God, who has spoken, as Schaeffer puts it in his title *He is There and He is not Silent: The God Who Exists and Who Has Spoken*. He is not silent but has communicated to us. We defend rationality in that we have to read the Bible with our reason. There is no other way to read it. God has given us minds, and it has to be read in a normal way. Rationality is absolutely essential, but rationalism is something completely different.

Let us talk about what Schaeffer means by the line of despair. He suggests that in about 1890 in Europe and 1935 in the United States the whole way of thinking changed. You may have seen some diagrams in his book of the line of despair. Above that line, before 1890 in Europe and 1935 in the United States, people were rationalistic optimists with a unified view of knowledge. By that he means that up until those dates, it was taken for granted that human beings, by their own understanding and reason, would be able to understand life. There were answers to be found, and truth existed and could be discovered. Moral values existed and could be discovered and applied to the individual and to society. While we may not have all the answers to our questions at the moment, eventually we would be able to find the answers. There was a unified view that everything would actually fit together. We can have a rational approach to knowledge, morality, truth, meaning, purpose, and society, and we will find answers.

Schaeffer suggests that after 1890 in Europe and 1935 in the United States, all of this changed. Now we live in a very different society where this is no longer taken for granted. Now there is no antithesis, which means that now two opposite things can both be true. To put it another way, there is relativism with regard to both truth and morals. Truth is something that is personal, and it is something that is true for me, though it may not be true for someone else. Schaeffer says we deal with a shift in the concept of truth. With that shift, modern man is born. We cannot understand people in our culture, and we will not communicate to them, unless we understand that they now live below the line of despair. The majority of people we meet no longer have concept any of truth and meaning that can be rationally found. There is no truth that will answer their questions. In another course I teach, *Outreach to Contemporary Culture*, I quoted Nietzsche's prophecy over 100 years ago. He said, "As soon as these new ideas begin to affect the culture as a whole, what they will produce is a gnawing and crumbling skepticism and relativism." That is what it means to live below the line of despair. Nietzsche knew very well that the ordinary person in the street does not say that they do not have a unified view of truth. They do not admit that they are no longer rationalistic optimists. They do not say that they have lost antithesis. Nietzsche's point is that the effect on the culture as a whole as these ideas percolate down would be a general sense of skepticism and uncertainty about life. It creates a general cynicism.

If you go anywhere in Europe, you will find this cynicism tremendously powerfully. People do not have to have read philosophy or know anything about this discussion. People are simply cynics, particularly most of the population in France. That is one of the reasons why it is terribly hard to plant a church there. You could be there for 20 years, and you might end up with 15 people in your church. The culture is deeply cynical. People have no notion whatsoever that there is truth that can be found. If you try to tell them there is truth, they simply do not believe. British society is also filled with cynicism. If you go to any high school, you will find that teachers are mostly cynics, and most of their students are completely cynical as well. It affects everything. In most of our schools in Britain, there is no concept whatsoever of the value of working hard and studying. They do not believe that there is something to be learned. Cynicism is a mentality that pervades the schools from top to bottom. There is nothing that is really worth putting yourself out for. Another way to express it is to say that there is apathy.

People may agree or disagree with Schaeffer precisely about the way he traces the development of these ideas. He talks about Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, but whether they agree or disagree about the details is simply fiddling while Rome burns. The fact that Schaeffer's outline is unquestionably correct and that modern man has been born and there has been a shift in the concept of truth is unquestionable.

This morning I said in one of my classes, *Apologetics and Outreach*, that one of the great problems we face is that many Christians are still not aware of this. Many of us as Christians live behind a wall. As believers, we still operate knowing that there is truth that can be found. God Himself, who is truth, has found us. We are certain that there are answers and that we have meaning and purpose to our lives. We have no doubt about this, and we are absolutely confident that there are sure moral values. This is what Christianity is; it tells us what the truth is. There is a meaning to history and our lives, and we have hope. Our culture does not think that way, though. Much of our communication still assumes that the culture understands the way we think. People simply do not think that way anymore or understand us. It is a foreign idea to them that there is truth to be found or moral certainties that apply to everyone in every situation and are always the same.

Let me give you a few illustrations of the dilemma we face. Think about the whole battle between Christians and others over the abortion issue. What happens is people throw slogans at each other that neither of them understands. We talk about being pro-life, and we are, because we believe that human beings are made in the image of God and human life has an absolute value. Clearly the fetus in the

womb is a human life. It is not anything else. We assume that everyone ought to agree with us that it is a human life, and therefore it has absolute value. The people on the other side of the wall have as their fundamental value personal choice. The individual should be free to do what they want to do. That is their moral certainty. If we just shout at them louder, they will not understand us any better. Somehow we have to get to the point of actually trying to communicate with people. Otherwise we just throw bricks over the wall from one side to the other. That issue illustrates the problem. There is almost no dialogue between Christians and non-Christians on this issue. There is simply confrontation. Actually, during the confrontation we pass each other. I am not saying that dialogue is impossible, but simply by shouting loudly what we think will not initiate the dialogue. It is not understood because we appear to threaten what is basic to so many people today. Many feel that they have a right to choose for themselves and a right to privacy.

We are always amazed at how our culture has changed. When you think of the legal case in Cincinnati over the exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, I think most Christians were probably astonished by the outcome of the trial. If you, like I, read the account of what the content of the photographs actually were, there is no question whatsoever that they were obscene based on any definition of obscenity. There was no conviction in the trial, and the gallery was acquitted. There are all sorts of reasons for it, but the fundamental one is that we live in a culture in which there is no sense of absolute moral values. You can talk about community standards, but they constantly change. That will not help you at all. The real issue, which the defense lawyers exploited to the full, was that these photographs were an authentication of Robert Mapplethorpe's life. They represented his lifestyle as a homosexual who was dying of AIDS. They expressed something about that sincerely and authentically. That was the convincing issue, that an individual was able to express himself. He authenticated himself by his expression and photographs. It was a thoroughly existentialist argument, but it won the day. The ordinary jury of ordinary men and women were convinced by it. Most Christians were horrified that something like that could possibly happen in America in 1990.

If we do not understand that such things can happen and why they happen, we have not understood what Schaeffer talks about here. The whole concept of truth has changed in our culture. The whole concept that there are certain moral values that everyone understands, accepts, and can find if they look hard enough has disappeared. That is not where we are anymore.

The most obvious area where this is true is one at the very ordinary and everyday level. There is a newspaper article in the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* where a child asks his father who God is. The father does not really know how to answer the child. In the article he says,

What was so difficult about the question was that it required me to lie. The God of a 4-year-old and the God of a 40-year-old cannot be the same. To inflict mine on him would not be just disillusioning but disorienting. I owed him, I figured, not the truth as I know it but as I knew it once. I offered him the God of my childhood. The colloquy lasted only a few minutes, thank God. It ended when I not only informed that God created the world but cares about it—a proposition of which the adult in me is radically unconvinced. Daniel came back with “why?” Desperate for an exit, I was visited with inspiration, “For the same reason that mommies and daddies love their children.” He appeared satisfied and turned to talk of dinosaurs. Back on safe ground, I resumed speaking the absolute truth.

It is amazing that he actually uses the word “lie,” because it shows that he still wrestles with the older view. For most people like this man, they still think that they have only lost truth or the certainty of knowledge in the area of religion. I have tried to tell you over and over again in class that people around

us do not have any notion that we claim that Christianity is true. This article is a very good illustration of that. Everyone has his or her own truth about God. The God of a 4-year old cannot be the same as the God of a 40-year-old. What is true for me is quite different from what is true for my son. It would have been nonsense to talk that way 150 years ago. People would have wondered what on earth you were saying to speak that way. That is the way almost everyone speaks now. People want to maintain some areas of their knowledge that are certain. They think that this is something that just applies to religion when, in fact, it applies to everything. I am sure this man knows very well that what he says about dinosaurs is partly research and partly speculation and hypothesis. As you read the article, it seems like he wants to make a distinction between religious truth and other kinds of truth. He feels that perhaps it is still possible to have absolute truth in other areas. That distinction disappeared a very long time ago in philosophy.

Schaeffer has chosen the dates of the line of despair as moments when it was not just an individual here and there who thought that way. At that point, the shift in thinking began to affect the culture as a whole. In the class on Schaeffer's early years, we came across a pamphlet he wrote in Saint Louis in 1944, "Sin is Normal." It is very interesting, because he looks at the issue of moral relativism. It was after the first Kenzie Report was published, which described the moral behavior of Americans. It said what they do should be the law. It was the whole notion of sociological law, that the laws of this country should be based on the behavior of the citizens. That is a radically new idea, and at the time I am sure it was not something that most evangelical pastors talked about or responded to. Many of us are still only waking up to the notion that we live in a society that has changed. He refers to the Armory show back in 1913, which was an art exhibit. He says that was a point where in art in the United States there was a radical change in the way of thinking. That was what he calls below the line of despair. He does not say that this thinking did not exist at all before 1935, but it became a whole cultural shift at that point. The same is true in Europe in 1890. I have chosen examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for this reason.

Look at the poems by Thomas Hardy, "In Tenebris" and "The Darkling Thrush." Some of his novels include *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. He wrote in the 1860s up until 1930. If you remember reading his novels, you will remember that they are filled with a sense of unease, the melancholy nature of human existence, and the sense of foreboding about the future. There is a very famous line at the end of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* where, after she is executed at Winchester Prison for murdering her appalling husband, Hardy says, "The chief of the immortals has finished his sport with Tess." He is saying that finally God had stopped playing with her. He did not believe in God, but that is how he viewed what happened to her.

Let me read something that is written about Hardy in this book of his poems: "His work is concerned mainly with suffering and in particular with the human sense of impotence in the face of a ruthless destiny. He described himself as an agnostic, but he was in many ways closer to being an atheist, combining disbelief in God with a venomous dislike of Him for not existing. The strength of his work comes mainly from a tragic stoicism, a blind will to go on living in spite of the malignancy of fate." You can see the sense of a total hopelessness of the human condition if you look at these two poems I chose. Both of them have the theme that there is no hope at all for the human person. "The Darkling Thrush" says,

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky

Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted night
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

The other poem finishes in just the same way. The other one all the way through describes over and over again the hopelessness of his existence, that he lives in darkness. "In Tenebris" says,

Wintertime nights;
But my bereavement-pain
It cannot bring again:
Twice no one dies.

Flower-petals flee;
But since it once hath been,
No more that severing scene
Can harrow me.

Birds faint in dread:
I shall not lose old strength
In the lone frost's black length:
Strength long since fled!

Leaves freeze to dun;
 But friends cannot turn cold
 This season as of old
 For him with none.

Tempests may scath;
 But love cannot make smart
 Again this year his heart
 Who no heart hath.

Black is night's cope;
 But death will not appal
 One, who past doubtings all,
 Waits in unhope.

Hardy describes himself as in a position where there is no hope at all anymore. There is not even the possibility of hoping for hope. He is even in a situation where pain cannot hurt him anymore because he has already been so destroyed by the emptiness and absurdity of his existence. That is what this writer meant by stoicism in the hands of a malignant fate. It is not stoicism created by hope or courage but by being so abused that there was nothing left to abuse any longer.

Hardy wrote in the 1860s and 1870s, and it is interesting that these poems were not popular at the time. He stopped trying to get his poetry published because magazine editors did not like it because it was so pessimistic. In a way he was ahead of his age, and it was not until much later that many of his poems were published and began to get a bigger and bigger audience. Today you will find many critics who will say that Hardy is remembered as a poet rather than a novelist. At the time his novels were widely read, and they have always been considered his classic works. Today you hear an increasingly stronger voice saying his greatest work is his poetry. It speaks directly to our age today, people understand it immediately, and it fits with where they are. Here you have someone who wrote before the time that Schaeffer describes.

If we looked at Stephen Crane, you have someone who wrote ahead of his time in the 1890s in the United States. Schaeffer speaks about 1935 as the date for the line of despair. He did not say that there were not people earlier who thought this way. He talks about the way the culture as a whole moved. Stephen Crane was tremendously popular in the 1960s and 1970s, which was 70 or 80 years after he wrote his poems. Let me read his poem from the "Black Riders," which I read as a non-Christian. It described exactly what I felt in 1965. It became almost a badge for me, and it came from his book *The Red Badge of Courage* and his civil war description and other stories and poems. This poem was like a badge in terms of describing what I felt and the cynicism that is expressed in it. It says,

God fashioned the ship of the world carefully.
 With the infinite skill of an All-Master
 Made He the hull and the sails,
 Held He the rudder
 Ready for adjustment.
 Erect stood He, scanning His work proudly.
 Then at fateful time-a wrong called,
 And God turned, heeding.
 Lo, the ship, at this opportunity,

slipped slyly,
Making cunning noiseless travel down the ways.
So that, forever rudderless, it went upon the seas
Going ridiculous voyages,
Making quaint progress,
Turning as with serious purpose
Before stupid winds.
And there were many in the sky
Who laughed at this thing.

It is a very similar to the end of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in some ways. He does not believe in God, but he uses this image to describe the meaninglessness of human existence, history, and what happens in this universe.