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# THE MYSTERY OF LIFE

## God's Purpose in Permitting Sorrow and Trouble...

### Definition of What is God

### Westminster Shorter Catechism the Nearest to Truth Yet Promulgated By Man of a Fact Beyond Human Ken—Hard to Comprehend—A Far-Reaching Commandment—The Blessedness of Sickness—An Easy Task

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the year 1905, by F. J. Irving, Toronto, at the Dept. of Agriculture, Ottawa.

Los Angeles, Cal., Feb. 5.—That God has a purpose and a design in permitting trouble and sorrow to continue in this world is claimed by the preacher in this sermon on the mysteries of life; text, Genesis xviii., 13, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

"God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." This is the definition of God found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. No man or body of men could give a complete definition of all that God is. His nature transcends all attempts to describe his infinite perfection. Strive as we may, we realize that he is far beyond all that we can think or imagine. Probably no one has framed an utterance that comes so near to the truth as this of the Westminster divines, and though it is confessedly inadequate, it stands unparalleled in the struggle to reach the unattainable.

It is a strange story that is told of its origin: The convocation of the Westminster divines was drawing to its close. For nearly six long years, since July 1, 1643, they had been meeting daily in the famous hall of Westminster which now bears their name. They had organized for the church a "directory of public worship" and had almost finished the larger and the shorter catechisms. Their work was practically finished with but one exception. They could not frame a definition which would clearly, comprehensively and completely answer the question, "What is God?" At last, in the midst of a heated debate, a young man who was comparatively an obscure member arose and said, "Let us pray." Then he commenced his prayer in these simple words: "O God, thou who art a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in thy being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth, teach us what thou art!" "With that," so says tradition, "all the members of the Westminster convocation leaped to their feet crying: 'That is our definition of what is God. It is an inspiration from his throne.'" So it was inserted in the catechism as the best and fullest definition that could be made of the Being whose attributes are beyond human knowledge.

Many profess to believe that God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. Yet it is awfully hard for us in truth to comprehend this. We say, "He can do all things." But when some one begins to pin our faith down to a practical illustration of "Can God do this?" we say, like Nicodemus, "How can these things be?" We need constantly to remember that there are no limitations to the divine power and that all that He has promised He is abundantly able to perform. When we see some gigantic evil that needs to be removed; when we think of some benefit that seems necessary to the world, our hearts often sink in despair as we regard it as impossible. Then new courage and new hope ought to fill our minds as we reflect on the omnipotence of the God in whom we trust and to say with the angel who talked with Abraham's wife, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" A great flood of inspired light now fills your soul. You answer: "No, no; nothing is impossible for God. God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

God is all powerful, all present and all seeing. You grant it. Then I would invite you to consider the natural influences of your belief. We ask ourselves why a God of unlimited power does not annihilate some of the evils that cause so much misery in the world. We know not. But I would urge you to trust His wisdom and love as well as His power. Not ours is the fatalism that declares whatever is right, but let ours be the faith that trusts God to work out in His own time the true development of the world.

Easy would it be if God wished to take all poverty out of the world. With a mere word he could create for every man a palace in which to live. With a mere word He could place that palace in the midst of a garden. With a mere word he could have rainbows playing hide and seek among the falling, springing, tumbling waters of the fountains of that garden. With a mere word He could have every man's table groaning under the richest treasures of orchards and gardens and fields. He could furnish to each home the "finest of wardrobes" and the most resplendent of jewels and the costliest of earthly treasures. The sheep upon a thousand hills all belong to God. The gold buried in the darkest of mines is His. The pearls glistening in the opened shells of the oysters lying by the coral reefs among the entangling "gardens of the seas" are all His.

The far reaching commandment which God spoke to Adam of old He speaks to us: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground, for out of it wast thou taken, for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return."

"Cursed be the ground for thy sake," I remember being struck with a practical illustration of what God meant by that sentence. Some years ago out in the country I was walking over the hillsides overlooking a beautiful valley filled with rich farms. I said to the companion by my side: "Look! Did you ever see a more beautiful country than that? God is certainly a rich provider for His children." "Yes," answered my companion, "but did you ever stop to think that though God's wealth is unlimited, He gives but few of the necessities to man unless man is ready to work for them? God gives us the soil; God gives us the seeds. But the essential food products which come from that soil must be developed by unceasing toil. This fact is emphatically true of all the cereals." Then I commenced to ponder over the words of my friend, and I said: "Yes, you are right. Never since the fall of man has God provided for man wheat or rye or corn unless man as a farmer will cultivate those cereals. All kinds of weeds may grow wild, all kinds of thorns and thistles certainly do grow wild, but the cereals will not grow wild. From the earth man must obtain his bread. He must work or starve. The soil must be prepared; the seed must be sown; the harvest must be gathered. The divine warning to Adam that he and his descendants must labor for the means of life has been fulfilled. Man has been sowing and planting ever since. Other forms of vegetable life may grow wild, but not the cereals.

Let me remind you, too, how limitless are the energies which God has in His control. Everywhere there is power and force, but man must patiently study and discover for himself how to apply them to his purposes. Very slowly has he learned the secrets of the world in which he is placed. God might have revealed the whole to him at the outset, but He wished him to find it out for himself, and as each source of power was discovered he must learn how to harness it aright that it may do his bidding and relieve him of toil. Go to Niagara Falls and take your stand on the ledge of rock called Observation Point and watch the rush of water descending from the heights. What power is there to light our cities, to bear our burdens, to illuminate our habitations! Yet for countless ages it has been running to waste because man did not know how to harness it aright. Stand on the seashore and see the power in the incoming tide. Quietly and resistlessly wave succeeds wave, breaking impotently on the rocks, yet there is power there that might be turned to account. The little streamlet that turns the wheel of the millage mill, grinding the corn and wheat for the whole world, is feeble beside the billows of the sea. This, too, man may yet learn to harness that it may work for him. The secret is with the Lord. Man must plan and contrive and design before he can master it. So long as he sits at ease and makes no effort it is useless to him. He should not God have given man this knowledge at the beginning? Because he wished him to develop his intellect. He wished to teach him that there was a reward for his labor. By the sweat of his brow he must gain his bread.

Ah, my friends, this problem that perplexes us, this distressing question of why God permits us to struggle along in poverty and hardship, finds its solution in the Bible. It was not in vindictiveness or for His own sake that He cursed the ground. The sentence was beneficial and remedial. "Cursed is the ground for thy sake." God is allowing the thorns and the thistles to grow wild instead of the wheat and the barley. Why? By the bayonet thrusts of those thorns God is driving us closer and closer to himself. By putting us in the treadmill of unceasing daily toil God is teaching us to turn our eyes away from temptation. He is also teaching us to turn them toward himself. Work serves a useful purpose. Our toil and difficulty and sorrow are intended to draw us nearer to himself. When trust in God and love of him have filled the hearts of men, when the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea, then poverty will have fulfilled its mission and will be eliminated from this weary world, for then, says Isaiah, "Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree, and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." Oh, sinner, thank God to-day that He makes your callous hand stick to the plow of daily toil in order that your feet shall follow the narrow and straight groove of virtue and truth and purity and gospel consecration and right.

God could easily take out of this world all physical ailments. If he would, He could change the invalid chairs of the homes, the operating tables of the hospitals, the medicine bottles of the drug stores, the ear trumpets of the deaf, the ambulance wagons and the anaesthetics and the splints and the bandages of a military surgeon's outfit, and make them as unsuitable and antiquated articles for modern use as the chopsticks of the Chinese would be for the short-legged Eskimo of the Arctic. He could at a mere word straighten the crooked limbs and loosen the dumb lips and strengthen the weak lungs. God did it in the past; He can do it now. God is the same yesterday, to-day and forevermore." But God does not take all sickness out of this world because He does not wish physical pain and suffering to cease to perform their spiritual mission in the world.

Yes, my brother, blessings can come and do come from physical pain in two ways. First, in the influence of sickness upon those who are sick. You can read this truth in the looks of those who have been near to death's door. When Dante used to walk through the streets of the city of his adoption, the passerby would stop and look at him and in awe say, "There goes a man who has been in hell." When we see Christian men and women who have lain under the shadow of death in a sickroom we know they have had experiences which have influenced them even as much as those who have been near to death's door. We also know that their experiences of suffering have molded their lives for good. "Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me!" cried blind Bartimeus in his physical weakness to the passing Christ. "Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me!" we have cried to Christ in our physical torture. Do you not see any blessing in pain, any spiritual mission in physical suffering in your past life?

Blessed is the sick bed for the invalid. Blessed is its influence upon those who come in touch also with the sanctified sufferer. Wendell Phillips would not have been as brave and as true a man as he was had his life not been inspired by the bravery of that sick wife who always kept saying to him: "Oh, Wendell, oh! God has a mission for you. While you are out battling in his name I will be here praying and waiting for you." Could any one read the eulogy Robert J. Burdette wrote about his dear wife and not realize that the life of the man whom he for years carried around in his arms had a mighty mission in molding and developing her husband's life for spiritual good? By the letters my mother wrote me from her sick room and by the letters you have received from a sick wife or a sick daughter or a sick mother who was at that time in the shadow of death you know that some of God's mightiest agents for the salvation of the world are to be found among those of feeble cheeks, thin hands and fevered brows. Oh, my friends, God will never take out of this world the spiritual mission of physical pain and suffering until, through those sufferings, the multitudes have been brought to confess Christ at the foot of the cross.


Easy would it be for God to make the right might and to melt the iron heel of tyranny in the hot fires of his indignation and righteous wrath. Easy would it be for God to come forth with his great legions of angels and ride down the hillsides of heaven upon the white charger of victory. Easy would it be for God to destroy his puny adversaries, as they are trying to destroy his kingdom on earth. How do I know this? In the first chapter of Proverbs it is read that when the time shall draw near for God to bear his right and come to the defense of his children by the overthrow of his enemies God shall say: "I also will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when your fear cometh." God will easily overthrow his adversaries when the right time comes. But now even sin has its mission. It is the agent against sin can develop us, even as a youth can be developed in his struggles against the trials of the world.

Easy would it be for God to make death an impossibility. When Christ stood by the bier of "the only son of his mother, and she a widow," he was able to make a silent corpse arise! "Young man, say unto thee, arise!" When Christ went to the tomb of dead Lazarus he said to Mary and Martha: "Thy brother is not dead. He is only asleep." Christ looked upon death then in the same way you and I would stand over the crib in which slumbers one of our little children. We know that we can bend over the crib and kiss our little one and say: "Wake, baby. Papa is here and ever after in the hope of once more clasping her in his arms. Ask that husband whose wife passed from his ken and whose days of loneliness drove him for comfort to him whose love brightens every sorrow. It is at a fearful cost that some men learn the lesson of faith, but once learned they bless even the loss that may mean our heavenly gain. The agonies of death may yet be swallowed up in victories that shall never die.

In this I find a message of consolation. Our gifts, our sorrows, our sacrifices, all the pain and sadness and weariness we bear, are not lost. They are entrusted to Christ, who uses them all in his ministry of love. The Divine Father accepts the offerings and transforms them into a treasury of gems, an eternal palace, in which we shall live forever with our Lord. There we shall find our loved ones whom we lost; there our heartaches and tears take on the form of brilliant crowns, whose glory shall never fade, and in the terrible black wings of death we recognize the white winged angel of eternal life.

But though I have been talking about the things it would be easy for God to do I cannot close without uttering one word in reference to one of "God's impossibles." It is easy for us to be saved if we will be saved in God's way. He has given

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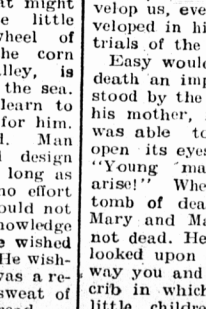
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