

Christian Doctrine

by Shirley C. Guthrie

Chapter Eight

“What Are We Doing Here?” & “Why Doesn’t God Do Something About It?”

The Doctrine of Creation · The Doctrine of Providence and the Problem of Evil

Introduction

This session takes two of Guthrie’s chapters together, because the questions they ask belong together. The first — “What are we doing here?” — is the question of creation: whose world is this, and why are we in it? The second — “Why doesn’t God do something about it?” — is the question of providence and evil: if this is God’s good world, why is it so full of suffering, and where is God in the middle of it?

Guthrie will not let us answer either question on its own. The doctrine of creation tells us this is a good world that belongs to a good God. The doctrine of providence makes us reckon honestly with how badly that good world has gone wrong — and with the God who has not abandoned it. Held together, they keep us from two opposite mistakes: a faith too naive to face evil, and a despair too quick to forget whose world this still is.

PART ONE

What Are We Doing Here?

The Doctrine of Creation

Not a Theory About How the World Began

The first thing Guthrie wants to clear away is a misunderstanding that has caused the church endless trouble. The doctrine of creation is not a rival scientific account of how or when the universe came to be. It is not in competition with geology or biology, and it never was meant to be. Scripture and science are answering different questions — science asks how the world works and how it came to be as it is; faith confesses whose world it is and why it exists at all. Guthrie is firm that these are not alternate truths fighting for the same ground, but different kinds of truth that need not collide.

The doctrine of creation is not a rival theory about how or when the world began. It is a confession about whose world this is, and why it is here at all. Faith and science are not answering the same question, so they need not compete.

A God-Centered World, Not a Human-Centered One

Guthrie also resists reading the creation story as if it were chiefly about us. The Bible does not open with creation to satisfy our curiosity about origins, and it does not place human beings at the center as the point of the whole enterprise. Creation is a doctrine about God first — the free, generous Creator who makes a world he did not need and calls it into being out of sheer goodness. Notice, too, that Israel did not reason its way back to a Creator from the outside; it first came to know God as the One who rescued them, and only then confessed that this same God made all things. Creation, for Guthrie, belongs with the promises of God — it is the opening act of the same story that runs through covenant and redemption.

The Bible does not begin with creation in order to satisfy our curiosity about origins. It confesses the Creator in order to tell us whose we are. This is not first a human-centered world, but a God-centered one.

Good — but Not God

The heart of the chapter is a short phrase that does an enormous amount of work: the creation is good, but it is not God. Guthrie shows how that single confession guards us against two opposite errors at once.

Because the world is good, we are not to despise it, escape it, or treat the physical and material as beneath us. Bodies matter; the earth matters; ordinary creaturely life is not a problem to be transcended but a gift to be received and tended. This is where Guthrie's revised edition leans into our responsibility as caretakers of a creation we did not make and do not own. And because the world is good, we need not live in fear of it, as though hostile powers or blind fate ran the universe.

But because the world is good and not God, we are also kept from the opposite error: worshiping it. Nothing in creation — not nature, not money, not nation, not any good gift — is to be given the trust and devotion that belong to God alone. To forget that the world is good is to fall into contempt for it. To forget that it is not God is to fall into idolatry. The doctrine of creation steers us between both.

The world is good, so we are not to despise it, escape it, or fear it. But the world is not God, so we are not to worship it. To forget the first is contempt; to forget the second is idolatry.

PART TWO

Why Doesn't God Do Something About It?

The Doctrine of Providence and the Problem of Evil

Taking Evil Seriously

Providence flows directly out of creation: the God who made the world also sustains and cares for it. But that is exactly what raises the hardest question in the whole book. If God is genuinely sovereign and genuinely good, why is the world so full of disease, cruelty, and grief? Guthrie refuses to soften the force of the question. He will not let Christian faith answer evil with positive thinking, or pretend the evil is not really evil, or suggest that there is so little of it that the good simply outweighs it. Faith, he insists, looks evil full in the face.

Christian faith does not deal with evil by positive thinking. It refuses to pretend the evil is not really evil, or that there is so little of it that the good outweighs it. Faith looks evil full in the face.

Guthrie names the two easy escapes from the problem and rejects both. We could decide that God is not really all-powerful, or that God is not really good. Each solves the puzzle on paper. Neither is faithful. Christian faith will not surrender either the sovereignty or the love of God, even when holding them together is painful.

We could resolve the problem easily by deciding that God is not really powerful, or that God is not really good. Both are logical. Neither is faithful. Faith refuses to surrender either the sovereignty or the love of God.

The Dark Side of Creation and the Powers of Darkness

Guthrie works with the classic distinction between two kinds of evil. There is the “dark side of creation” — the natural evil of earthquakes, disease, and death, the threatening chaos that seems woven into the world itself. And there are the “powers of darkness” — moral and spiritual evil, the active forces that enslave human beings and turn them against God and one another. He does not offer a tidy explanation that accounts for all of it. He takes both seriously as genuine threats to God’s good purposes, not as illusions or as secretly-good things in disguise.

The Light That Shines in the Darkness

Here is Guthrie’s decisive move. The Christian answer to evil is finally not an explanation but a person. To the cry “Why doesn’t God do something about it?” the gospel responds that God has done something, is doing something, and will do something — and his name is Jesus Christ. The cross is God doing something about evil: not standing safely outside it, but entering it, bearing it, and breaking its power from the inside. The pattern of Christian hope runs from Good Friday through the silence of Holy Saturday to the morning of Easter — the memory of what God has already done grounding our hope for what God will yet do.

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What Providence Does — and Doesn’t — Promise

Guthrie is careful about what the doctrine of providence actually pledges. It does not promise that faith will spare us from suffering; Christians are not insulated from the world’s pain. What it promises is harder and better: that the self-giving God is present and at work in the very middle of our suffering, that we are not alone in it, and that evil will not have the last word. And Guthrie adds a pointed note — God’s presence in our suffering most often takes the form of human ministry. Which means we are sometimes the ones who receive God’s care through others, and sometimes the hands by which God does something about someone else’s suffering.

Providence does not promise that faith will spare us from suffering. It promises something better and harder to believe: that the self-giving God is

| *present and at work in the middle of our suffering, and will not be defeated by it.*

So the two questions of this session arrive at one answer. What are we doing here? We are creatures in a good world that belongs to God. Why doesn't God do something about it? Because he has — in Christ — and because he calls us to live, even now, as people who know the light has already begun to shine in the darkness.

Christian Doctrine — Chapter Eight

Discussion Questions

Read through these questions before Wednesday if you can. There are no right answers to perform here — just honest thinking about whose world this is and where God is in it. Write down your initial thoughts and bring them with you.

On Creation

1. Guthrie says the doctrine of creation is not a rival to science — they answer different questions. Has the “faith vs. science” framing ever been a stumbling block for you or someone you love? How does Guthrie’s distinction change the conversation?
2. “Good but not God” guards against two opposite errors: contempt for the world and worship of it. Which of those two do you think our culture struggles with more? Which do you struggle with more?

On Providence and Evil

3. Guthrie refuses to answer evil with positive thinking or to pretend it isn't really evil. Why do you think Christians are so tempted to explain suffering away? Have you ever been on the receiving end of an explanation that did more harm than good?
4. Faith, Guthrie says, will surrender neither God's power nor God's goodness, even when holding them together is painful. Which of the two is harder for you to hold onto when you're suffering — that God is able, or that God is good?
5. Guthrie says the answer to evil is finally not an explanation but a person — that the cross is God doing something about evil. Does that satisfy the question “why?” for you? Why or why not?

On Daily Life

6. Providence doesn't promise we'll be spared suffering — it promises God is present and at work in the middle of it, often through other people. When have you experienced God's care arriving through a person?
7. If God's presence in suffering often takes the form of human ministry, where is San Pedro being called to be that presence for someone right now? Where are you personally being called to be the hands by which God does something about another person's pain?

