

# Putting God on Trial

Matthew 12:22-32

sermon digest

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Bart Ehrman has become an enigma: a respected, published scholar of early Christian documents, including the New Testament, who has given up his belief in the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Chair of the Religious Studies Department at UNC, Bart Ehrman was being interviewed on NPR last week about his new book to be released in March, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. Ehrman publicly acknowledged that he has given up on Christianity and, in fact, the God of the Bible. He tells of being in church and reciting the Apostles' Creed. He realized that the only statement that he could believe was, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." To Ehrman, the last straw for the Bible comes down to the ancient issue of human suffering. He told of his born-again experience as a teen and studies at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College in pursuit of a Christian academic career. The deeper he delved into the study of the Bible, the more unanswered questions emerged. Then, he moved on to doctoral studies at Princeton Theological Seminary and worked with the famous New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger. Metzger encouraged Bart's academic curiosity, but his academic journey was like peeling away the layers of an onion. When asked about the irony of an agnostic teaching religion, he noted that in a state university his personal faith is irrelevant.

Ehrman's new book locates the crisis of faith in the age-old problem of Job—unjust, unexplained human suffering. Job, you will recall, is also the primary resource in Harold Kushner's bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In "J.B." Archibald MacLeish has Nickles, the Satan figure, define the problem: "If God is God He is not good, If God is good He is not God." How can a loving, all-powerful God permit the continuation of horrible evil and unjust suffering in our world? For philosophers, the question has come down to defining God. God is willing but not able; God is able but not willing; or God is able and willing but for some unknown reason is not ready. The ancient question is the fork in the road where we decide whether or not to go on in faith. William Willimon cites an episode of "All in the Family" in which Archie Bunker is engaged in a fierce battle with his agnostic son-in-law, Michael "the meathead." Michael challenged, "If there's a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?" Archie replied, "I'll tell you why! . . . Edith, would you get in here and help me? I'm having to defend God all by myself here." Like most profound questions of life, we laugh to keep from crying. Willimon's sermon "A Waiting Church" is not about answers but about the Lenten call to enduring to the end as we hang in limbo with the questions.

**Questions are allowed here.** The question puts God on trial, so our problem with understanding God becomes *God's Problem* to solve to our satisfaction. In *A History of God* (p. 176) Karen Armstrong cites a story from the Jewish Holocaust in which a group of Jews in Auschwitz decided to put God on trial. They charged God with cruelty and betrayal and, like Job, found no consolation in the stock answers to the problem of evil and suffering especially in the midst of their current obscenity. Finding no justification for God's silence before human suffering, no extenuating circumstances, they reached a verdict: God is guilty as charged and deserving of death. A Rabbi pronounced the verdict, then, announced that the trial was over, that it was time for the evening prayer.

Our story is found in the three Synoptic Gospels. Jesus heals a man who was blind, deaf, and mute. Consistent with the age, the cause is demon possession, so the cure is exorcism. The Pharisees, however, are off to the side mumbling about Jesus being in cahoots with Beelzebul, the chief of demons, and Jesus responds with the simple kind of logic that we expect to uncover in our search for the existence of God. Why would Satan want to cast out Satan? Finally, Jesus condemns what has been labeled as "the unforgivable sin." God forgives all blasphemy even against the Son of Man, but not against the Holy Spirit. The evangelist J. Harold Smith came to our church when I was in high school and offered his interpretation of this passage. Smith was a terrorist, who caused gullible people to doubt themselves and God's eternal love. John Bunyan agonized in fear over having in his youth committed a sin beyond the reach of grace.

What is the problem here? However we may differ with the ancient culture that attributes human suffering to demons, Jesus was committed to healing, to releasing the prisoner, to restoring the senses. The Pharisees could not distinguish the act of God from the power of evil. Attributing evil to God is not the answer, although that is exactly what early Old Testament theology seems to imply. In fact, I agree with Ehrman that most of the biblical "answers" and most of the philosophical responses to the problem of evil fall short of satisfying my need to know. However, the best questions are found *in the Bible*. Job is only one outlet for our human frustration with the Almighty. Psalms of lament open the soul to the persistent struggle with God's silence and inactivity before unfair suffering and loss: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" the Psalmist cries, but even the cry is a statement of faith that God is here, listening, and perhaps caring about our struggle. The cry of Jesus from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" is still a cry to God.

A few months after the death of my young wife, struggling to recover my life, I continued to serve my church, enrolled my children in the seminary nursery school, and got back into my studies. The nights were the hardest.

About nine one evening as I sat staring at the walls, someone rang the doorbell. To my surprise, Swan Hayworth was standing at the door and asked to come in. He was professor of pastoral care at the seminary and had been leading a conference with Army chaplains down the road in Fort Knox. He decided that this student needed some pastoral care. In our conversation he offered advice, "Larry, read the Psalms. You have a right to question God. Let your prayers reflect the honest, challenging questions of the Psalms." He was right. Lightening does not strike because we raise our puny questions of God's justice. Although there is some satisfaction in asking, I found that my questions do not guarantee answers. With all of the biblical theodicies (justification of God) that offer various, sometimes contradictory answers, the Bible leaves us to live in the limbo of unanswered questions. As Paul wrote so eloquently in the hymn to love ( 1 Cor. 13),"we know only in part" (9) "For now, we see in a mirror, dimly."(12)

**The questions come back to us.** Bart Ehrman raised his questions to God, the same questions that most of us, that every serious student of the Bible, have asked. I do not condemn his unbelief any more than I believe that God condemns my agnostic moments in life. I do not claim to hold secrets of faith that this biblical scholar does not already know. We are reading the same documents with most of the same critical tools, and I yield to his genius. However, I feel somewhat compelled to defend my decision of faith in the face of our common darkness. I am sympathetic with anyone who comes through the simplistic logic and demanding certainty of fundamentalism. God does not fit our simple logic or conform to our demands for proof. Until we can turn loose of our expectation of absolute certainty, we are bound to be disappointed. But I have to ask, how is it that, walking the same path asking the same questions, some walk by faith, while others give up on God for lack of clear insight into the meaning of life?

Mother Teresa is under examination by the Devil's Advocate in the process of Catholic sainthood. *Time* (Aug 23, 2007) revealed a struggle of faith in this saintly woman: "in a letter to a spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael van der Peet, that is only now being made public, she wrote with weary familiarity of a different Christ, an absent one. 'Jesus has a very special love for you,' she assured Van der Peet. '[But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, — Listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me — that I let Him have [a] free hand.'"

Jesus made no attempt to explain the source or logic of demons, but he did two things in the face of evil. He acted to bring about healing, and he refused to tolerate the confusion of the source of evil in God. The questions come back to us. We ask with closed fist raised to the heavens, "what is God doing about the evil of this world?" The God of the Bible answers through human agents. The question comes back to me: What am I doing about the evil of this world? God is most apparent, not in biblical arguments, but in human acts of love and grace all around us. Mother Teresa never overcame her struggle questioning God, but she found that casting out the demons she could see was more important than her answers. How about you?