

**DO YOU THINK THAT LIFE IS FAIR?**

Text: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what  
belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”  
Matthew 20: 15

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Do you think that life is fair? Be careful here at the start with your answer because in Matthew 20, in the parable of the vineyard, our heavenly Father will confront you with the question printed as our text and put you in your place. When the landowner decided to pay all of the workers the same wage, some of those who had labored all day long and some who had just turned up an hour before quitting time, the ones who started early naturally grumbled to the owner that it was not fair. He replied: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" That is to say, this is our father's world, and what he decides to do with the time and passing of life, is up to him. We are allowed to ask about it, as Jeremiah did when he wanted to know, "Why do the ways of the wicked prosper, and God's own people reel with trouble?" But we also have to be prepared to listen to what he says. Do you think that life is fair?

Life does not seem to be all that fair when you ponder over what happens to some of God's children. Oh dear, "I cried because I had no shoes, then I met a man who had no feet!" Like the kind and loving Christian man and father who told me that he could take it if he had to, "But, Reverend could you tell me why? Why me?" It is a distraught grandmother weeping in my arms years ago and asking, "Why didn't God protect her, she was such a precious little girl?" It's a 17-year-old teen in a temporary tantrum telling me that she would never pray again, because God had refused to answer her prayers and heal her mother. "It just isn't fair!" she ended. It is me, I, as I grow older, watching friends and families stumble through the unexpected and unwelcome pains and weariness of life, asking: "Lord, does it have to be this way?" and, then adding quietly, "What do you have in mind for me?"

Do you think that life is fair: I am not sure how you would choose to answer it, but the first word which swaggers out to march on center stage is, "No! No, it is not fair!!" So, for our discussion, let us be bold and begin with the declaratory assertion that there is a huge abundance of circumstantial evidence to support the plaintiff's case: The Case against the heavens: Life is not fair.

One of the most troubling books I have read in recent months is a new one by the learned Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Professor Bart D. Ehrman is widely known, even revered by some, in New Testament circles. He was born into a Christian home. He got "born again" at a revival in his teens. He graduated from both Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College (Billy Graham's Alma Mater). His ministerial studies were at none other than Princeton Theological Seminary, where he eventually was awarded a Ph.D. in New Testament. He became pastor of the Princeton Baptist Church for a while; then he switched to academic theology and eventually made his way to Chapel Hill.

His new book, the 20<sup>th</sup>, is titled: God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Why We Suffer. It is a trip, I warn you. He tells the story of how he felt compelled recently to abandon the faith of his fathers and he became a non-believer. The reason was not some intellectual dispute about the naiveté of religion and the supremacy of science or philosophy. He said that what drove him away was the inability to accept that a loving and all-powerful God would permit so many of his own children to be tortured, suffer and die. Either God refuses to help them, or he can not intervene. For what loving father would not release his children from illness and pain and starvation and violence if he could?

Ehrman reviews recent human violence, including the Holocaust of Hitler where 6 million Jews were exterminated just for being Jewish, plus five million other non-Jews, including millions of children, and when you add in the civilians who lost their lives all across the globe: 50 million good and innocent people were killed. Add to that the horrors perpetrated by Stalin and Lenin, and the ethnic exterminations all over Africa and Asia and South America, and the blatant unfairness of current regimes and the subtle persecution of millions here, there and everywhere, and Ehrman concludes that he cannot fathom all that taking place when a loving heavenly father is in charge. Can you? If so, how?

In addition, and we must be moving on, he cites the innumerable personal incidents of abuse against women and children, and the onslaught of terminal illnesses in children and young families, and accidents which snuff out the lives of marvelous and wonderful people, many of them young and vibrant, and whatever the range of your personal faith, and mine, we at least could stop and listen to this lonely professor who feels he was betrayed by those who reassured him that if he continued to love the Lord, repented of his sins and tried to follow Jesus Christ, that life would turn out fine. It didn't!

He examines the issue through the Torah, the prophets, the Books of history, the Psalms, even the New Testament. He shows how the Bible has a dozen different, often conflicting answers. There is no single explanation in the Scriptures about why people suffer and what God intends to do about it. In the end, he finally rests his case in the book of Ecclesiastes where the author (one of my favorites too) concludes that all is vanity and striving, but without answers. We can try to dodge it, but in his opinion, the Bible does not answer the question. And when it does, there are a variety of answers, some in conflict. Some passages seem to sugar-coat it he says, but in the end, there is not enough there to trust and hang your life on. That is only one man's opinion, to be sure, hardly unique or unheard of, but I confess, I have sometimes wandered out that way myself.

So where does that leave us? Nietzsche once warned us that if you stare into an abyss too long, the abyss will begin to stare back. I am taking that risk with you right now. But, whatever resting point you can find for yourself to stop and ponder, I encourage you to go there. Some of you will sit there disgusted and dismiss him as a thoughtless atheist; others will try to show him how misled he is; still others will jump on his band wagon and embrace him for exposing the cheapened grace of the Christian Church. Whatever, still the question lingers: Do you think that life is fair? Wow, I am exhausted already and we are not half way to the answer.

Let's shift the focus for a minute. One day, back when I was doing my Ph.D. work in Scotland, we slipped down to Edinburgh, to take in The Open, as the British call it, which was being held that year at the famous Muirfield Golf Course, from which Jack Nicklaus borrowed the name for his Muirfield Village in Dublin, Ohio. Jack was back then still a rising young star (I think it was 1968) and he was being interviewed by a reporter from the BBC. The Course had been beefed up mercilessly, especially to challenge the increasing number of strong young American golfers, who, thanks to Arnold Palmer, were coming back to play the The British Open. Principal among them was Nicklaus.

The already infamous rough of the links was allowed to grow up to the proverbial American corn, "Knee High by the Fourth of July." Even with TV cameras filming its flight, the ball could still get lost in the whin and gorse bushes, the stubbled grass and the heather. Well the reporter asked Jack Nicklaus following his first round, "Mr. Nicklaus, do you think our Muirfield course is fair?" Jack hesitated for a second or two, and replied "I don't think golf was ever intended to be fair. It is intended to be a challenge, to bring out your best." So it is: even if it normally brings out our worst. Golf was not intended to be "fair"; it was intended to be a challenge. But, do you think the same thing is true about life itself?

The Bible knows about that part of it, as it knows all about everything else as well. In Gideon's time God had promised his people a land flowing with milk and honey, but that didn't work out either: wherever they tried to enter and claim the Land, somebody was waiting to kill them. They had to fight their way to get it. In the Book of Judges it goes round and round. In Chapter 6 we come to the story of Gideon. This time it was the Midianites who were stealing the sheep and cattle of God's chosen people, marauders ran off with their wives and children and burnt down their fields of grain. Imagine the heartbreak at having planted and tilled and coaxed the crops; then when the full grain appeared, the harvest was senselessly torched.

Greatly impoverished and dying of starvation, disconsolate and down, the children of Israel called upon the name of the Lord. Then, as always when His people cry out, God decided to rescue them. This time He came down and called upon Gideon. The Bible says, “An angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak tree at Ophrah,” a little section of the earth which belonged to Joash, a good and godly man. Gideon was his youngest son. Wouldn't it be nice to find an angel sitting under an oak tree in your own back yard? (It could be that one is already there, waiting for you.) Anyway, the angel said to Gideon: “The Lord is with you, mighty man of valor, God's favor is upon you. You have been chosen to save your people.” “Who me? You've got to be kidding!”

Gideon was shocked when the angel spoke to him. He asked “Pray, sir, if the Lord's favor is upon us, why has all this befallen us?” If God is good, why are we suffering so? I don't understand. But the angel had not come to argue: “I'll tell you more later,” he said, “but like I said, God has chosen you to deliver your people. To go and defeat the Midianites.” Gideon's question was not answered, so he shifted ground. “I can't do it.” he said, “I'm from the smallest tribe in all of Israel; and I'm the youngest of my family. And, I am not a fighter. You better get someone else.” Then the angel said, “Hush, Gideon, not to worry, the Lord will be with you.” God and one are a majority. Just do it! You will prevail.

Now Gideon was a great believer, but he was not convinced by the chatter of angels. He wanted proof. Many fall into that category. He decided to put God to the test, as we are allowed to do. That night he approached God directly: “Pardon me, Lord,” Gideon said, “but I need some proof before I go off to try to kill the Midianites. Let's do this: I will lay a fleece (a sheepskin) on the threshing floor tonight. If, come morning, you arrange it so that there will be dew on the fleece alone, and no dew on the ground around it, I will accept my orders from the angel as a sign from you.” God agreed.

And, you guessed it, early the next morning he picked up the fleece and squeezed it. There was enough water to fill a huge bowl. But the ground around it was all dry. He asked God for an unusual sign and he got it. “O.K. Gideon, ready to go?”

“No. Not yet...” Gideon said, “I am sorry Lord, to offend you further, but I am going to ask you to do it again. Only tonight let the fleece remain dry, and let the dew be on the ground. The next morning (You knew it!) there was not a drop of water on the fleece but the ground was soaked. Gideon had his sign. We still refer to a request for some sign or guidance from above as “Putting out the fleece.” Gideon wasn't sure what to do.

It is Job saying, “Cursed be the day when I was born.” It's the prophet saying, “I can't stand it here with these people picking on me.” It's a brave young wife years ago who whispered through her tears, “I cannot understand. I have my boys to raise.” It's David's pathetic lament, “Absalom, my son, would God that I had died instead of you.” It's the tired old woman I used to know pining, “I'd ready to go. Why must I linger on?” It's a proud man with years to live and work, who was stooped and anxious when he was told to shuffle on because the company has been sold. “Take your nameplate with you, John.” It is Jesus on the cross, asking, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Life is not fair.

I have always been amazed how so many of us skirt right around this issue. Deep down we know that it is there, but we keep it at bay, drive it out of our minds, lest it destroy our equanimity. We are afraid to go out on that thin ice and we silence questions with, “You need only to believe.” But, for many, it is the most perplexing question of them all and they want an honest answer. We promise our young people and ourselves that our prayers will be answered. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you shall find.” “Trust God, and everything will turn out right.”

But, wait a minute. It doesn't turn out that way. Not always, anyway, not even often. Why this emptiness? Why these illnesses? Why the hurt of broken families? Why the loneliness? Why do children die? If God is good, as the little girl said, then why does it hurt so much? And our title question returns again: "Do You Think That Life Is Fair?"

We cannot answer it in one short sermon, maybe not in ninety nine long sermons in a row. It takes a lifetime to sort it all out. The answer will always be incomplete. Some are satisfied with "We live by faith and not by sight." But some are not! The Bible promises that what is hidden will one day be made known. That is helpful, so long as you can maintain your sanity meanwhile.

Perhaps there isn't an answer. Karl Barth, the eminent theologian, wrote, "The moment you think you understand God's will and way, is the moment you have missed it. All great truths end in paradox." In other words, the uncertainty could be proof that God is there. "My ways are not your ways," saith the Lord, "my thoughts are higher than your thoughts." That's the way it is supposed to be. We yearn for simple answers and pine for a steady anchor to hold on to. But it is a deep and weighty topic. I caution you not to look for simple answers. Maybe life was not intended to be fair. I also caution you to listen to those who disagree.

Yet we still need somewhere to hang our theological hats and something more to hang onto to calm our midnight fears. I do not think it is fair to rest the Christian argument on blind acceptance. I think we have to be honest about what we know and don't know. If we try to crucify the intellect of those who ask important questions, nothing at all is gained by raising the tempo of our answer and shouting louder that those who disagree with us are heretics and infidels. We need to trust the Lord, but we need to be prepared to reach for honest answers. Paul writes in I Thessalonians that we are to "Test everything, but hold fast to what is true." (I Thessalonians 5:21) Test everything. And, always be prepared to give reason for the faith that is within us.

Robert Frost reminded us that while we do not know it all; we do know "enough to go ahead with." So for a couple of moments, let us go ahead with what we know. What are the things we know for sure?

1. For one thing, we know that this mortal, human life is fragile: it hangs on the thread of a single heartbeat. It was not made to last forever. "The days of our years are three score and ten; and if by reason of strength they be four score, they are soon cut off and we fly away." (Psalm 90) Job said that his days clicked by quicker than a weaver's shuttle.

I keep a version of the world clock on the favorite spots of my computer. The one I use is from Peter Russell's The Spirit of Now. I click it on almost every day and marvel for a minute or two, as I watch the numbers of what is happening around the world spinning on and on. Do you know what I am referring to? Let me tell you: The World Clock is a computer-wonder which keeps a running count on most all the things that happen. There is a little counter on the screen and the growing population counter changes right before your eyes. When I was writing this sermon there were 6,699,486,575 human beings on the earth; but by the time I was finished a couple of thousand more were added.

Up through September 19, 2008, 41,170,550 human beings had died this year around the globe, over 80,000 on last Friday alone. There had also been 33.3 million abortions in that same period. So far there have been 629,497 suicides in 2008, 858,040 traffic deaths, 2.2 million died of AIDS, 1.7 million of starvation, and 5.2 million died of cancer.

“Never morning wore to evening,” Robert Browning wrote, “but that some heart did break.” It is not designed to go on and on forever. It is intended to be a gift for a while, then it returns to the Lord. For Browning added next,

I hold it true, what’re befall,  
I feel it when I sorry most;  
‘Tis better to have loved and lost;  
Than never to have loved at all.

Now all of this is heavy, I know, heavier for some than others. It was not my intention to make you uncomfortable or to make you regret that you came to worship. Most who have gone through personal tragedy also carried out some warm and wonderful feeling about how much others cared, about how heroic the most ordinary person became in the face of immediate adversity. One friend told me that the thing which helped her most was to find one solitary positive thing to think about each passing day. “Some days it was nearly impossible, but I made it.”

So first, whisper to yourself that human life is fragile, it hangs on a single heartbeat. Most of us, as Clarence Darrow used to say, will spend our last breath trying to grasp another. But the real question is not why life breaks down, nor why illness and accidents take our breath and hopes away; the real question of why are we here at all, why we are alive. The ultimate in wonder is why we live, the gift of human life and love and peace.

2. Second, once the unfairness is over and relative normalcy returns, some gain confidence and can even become a little smug about how resilient and resolute they were. Human beings are capable of the most extraordinary powers, and, when you feel them conquering, it makes you feel proud and competent. Broderick Crawford phrased it: “Once in a while you have to do something that scares the daylights out of you, or you will turn into jelly.” And he didn’t say daylights. “Once in a while you have to do something which scares the devil out of you, or you turn into jelly.” Once in a while you and I should pause to marvel that the wonder of it all is life.

That is to say that once you have struggled and survived, you will be a stronger person for it. “Whatever does not kill you, strengthens you.” (Nietzsche) It will. You will find resources of love and life and you can depend upon the Lord for all of your days. We love the sunshiny days along the beach, or cool autumn days in the mountains; but we learn about ourselves when night falls and the dark winds of the storm come rushing in. And you will be more sensitive and open to the struggles of others around you. Schweitzer once wrote about “the fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain.” If you have been there, you can reach out with confidence to try to help some others. Christ can use you to help others find their way up the long and windy road.

3. And third, while the memory and the fears will never disappear, they will recede in proportion to the way you surrender them to the love and power of the living Christ, who endured the shame and death of the cross, so that each of us can live, in this life and the life to come.

Once it was not here, the earth, I mean. One day, for sure, it will not be here again. Only God in Christ endures forever. Not the earth; it is whirling around space at astronomical speed. And...when that day comes, when it is no longer here, I mean...listen to me friends, whenever it comes, it could be tomorrow, (“You know not what a day may bring forth.”) or ten million years from now for all of us, when the earth will finally end, if God calls you home tonight, or if you are here until Christ returns, either way you can lie down in peace forevermore. Jesus said, “I go and prepare a place for you, and if I go, I will come again and receive you unto myself. Whither you go and the way you know; for I am the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14)

In our New Testament Lesson for the day in Matthew 20, we read the familiar story of the parable of the vineyard. The owner hired some laborers early in the morning, and they worked faithfully all the day long. Round about noon and 3pm he hired some more. At the 11<sup>th</sup> hour he found some who were not at work. Asking them why, they replied, “No one has hired us yet.” Go to work in my vineyard.

When the long day was over each of the laborers, whenever they had started, received the same pay for the day, one denarius. Naturally the ones who worked all day were angry and they grumbled to the owner. “These have worked only one hour and you pay them the same as us. That isn’t fair!”

And the owner answered, “I have done no wrong to you. You agreed to work for a day’s pay. If I give it to the others, what is that to you?” Then he added, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” It all belongs to God. How he parcels it out is up to him.

You see, Jesus Christ has already been there. He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief. He was tempted and tried in all the ways we are; but he survived and showed us how to conquer them. They nailed him to a cross when he was barely 33 years old. That sounds, and is, awful! But, God worked it all together for good. From that agonizing morning: our eternal salvation arose. An old friend of mine once told me, in the middle of a host of trouble: “Until they do to you what they did to Jesus, you have no reason to complain.” And so, God will work it for you for good. Hang on. Don’t give up the ship! Christ will see you through. For now and for evermore. Amen.