

Metaphysics And Me (Part 5)

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- [0 : 00] So tonight we are going to turn back to Romans 8 and I'm going to read again from verse 28! Where we have the famous and amazing words.! And you might be thinking, what on earth is this about?
- This is a complicated sounding title and I guess in some ways it is. It's a complicated topic but I hope it's one that's been an encouragement to us. Because metaphysics is basically exploring the biggest questions of life.
- The questions of being, of ultimate reality, of ultimate truth. So we look at our lives, we're part of this thing called the universe.
- What is it? We're moving along this thing called time. Where does it come from? Where is it going? What is space?
- What is information? What is ultimate reality? What are we? And so metaphysics is looking at the questions that lie beyond physics. Questions that take us into the realm of philosophy.
- [1 : 23] Questions about absolutes and ultimates. And questions that are looking for answers to these biggest of questions. What is existence all about?
- What are we part of? What's going on? Where have we come from? Where are we going? And we've been thinking about metaphysics and me together.
- And one of the things that we've been saying is that both of these are topics that we find hard to understand. So metaphysics is big, complicated topics that we can't always get our heads around.
- Metaphysics is hard to understand. But we are also hard to understand. And sometimes it's ourselves that can cause us the biggest perplexity of all.
- As we've been going through this subject, we've been thinking about two big theological topics. Creation and providence. And so we spent three weeks thinking about creation.
- [2 : 18] Last time we started looking at providence. We're going to finish that up tonight. So to recap, just when we talk about providence, what are we talking about?
- Well, we looked at the very helpful answer that comes from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Shorter Catechism is just a collection of questions and answers that really help explain key theological terms and concepts.
- What are the works of providence? God's works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful, preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.
- So creation, if you like, is speaking about origins. God brought the world into being. He's the creator of everything else that exists. Providence then speaks of the continuation of that creation.
- God is sustaining and ordering all that he has made. And we said a couple of weeks ago when we started looking at providence that it's maybe a word and a topic that we don't think about very often.

[3 : 15] And yet it's arguably one of the most relevant topics in the whole Bible. Because it's dealing with every single thing that happens to you in every single moment of every single day of your life.

And basically, thinking about providence is coming down to one very simple, very complicated question. The question, why?

Why? As things happen in our lives, as we do things, as we experience things, we're always asking the question, why?

Why is this happening to me? And that means that providence, that topic, is really wrestling with the biggest questions of metaphysics.

Why do we exist? Why do things happen? And yet at the same time, it's actually dealing with the deepest pastoral needs of every single one of us. Because when something goes wrong in our lives, this is the question we find ourselves asking.

[4 : 29] Why does it have to be like this? And part of the reason why the why question is so important and so relevant is actually revealed to us in the passage that we read from in Romans 20.

When we read about creation in Genesis 1 and 2, we read about paradise. By the time you read about creation in Romans 8, you read about a creation that's been subjected to futility.

You read about a creation that's been subjected to futility. And that's exactly what we experience in our lives. The world that was created so beautiful and full of so much potential to be brilliant has been devastated by the impact of sin.

That's led to futility. There's so much that seems empty and pointless and unnecessary and wrong. And it's left the creation groaning. As individuals, we suffer.

And as we look around us, we see suffering. All of us feel the pain of a broken world. Why is it like that? Why is all this happening?

[5 : 42] Well, that's what I want us to think about tonight. And that makes this a hard sermon to do and a hard topic to think about because that why question is very difficult to answer.

But we'll give it a go. And we'll just roll up our sleeves and go for it. And when we hit five past seven, you can have the rest of the night off.

So we'll just spend a wee while mucking our way through this as best we can. It's a difficult question to answer because the connection between God and us, the connection between time and eternity, and the question between metaphysics and me is complicated.

How these things interact is complicated. And because it's complicated, people tend to gravitate towards the simplest explanations that they can find.

And we looked at this a wee bit last time that you can kind of think of a sort of spectrum where at one end, people just drift towards the idea of sort of fatalism.

[6 : 50] Where they think, well, you know, why do things happen? Well, this is just the way it's going to be. And there's actually nothing we can do about it.

Things are going to be the way they are. And that fatalism is either because that's the way God's doing it or because this is the way the universe has aligned it or whatever it may be. There's this idea that it's like, well, we're kind of stuck in this machine.

And that's the way it's going. At the other extreme, you have, I won't write it all out because I'll never fit it in with my terrible handwriting. But that's short for the indeterminate libertarianism.

Or another way you could push that a wee bit further is almost like the whole concept of just chance. And so at that side, the fatalism side, you know, you've got no choice in anything and everything's just set in stone for all of time.

At the other end, for some, there's like, well, actually, no, we are independent. We can make all our choices. Nothing's fixed. And even beyond that is the idea, well, actually, everything's just chaos and it's just chance.

[8 : 00] And so there's no escaping that. Now, both of these views are kind of in opposite directions, but they're doing the same thing. They're trying to simplify what's going on.

And what we've been trying to say is that in the middle of that is actually a much, much, much more complex story. And that complexity of how we interact between us and God is what Reformed theology tries to explain through the language of first causes and second causes.

So I'm going to read a little bit from the Westminster Confession of Faith. This was written at the same time as the catechism that we quoted a minute ago. Again, it's trying to summarize key biblical truths. This is from the chapter of Providence.

And so it says, so although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly. Yet by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely or contingently.

Now, don't worry if you're reading that thinking, I don't understand what half of those words mean. And the key thing is that it's setting out this, if you like, group, what we called last time a nexus, whereby you've got God as first cause, who then establishes second causes, of which we are part.

[9 : 24] And it's through that network, first cause and second cause, that God's purposes are worked out. And so this is kind of summing up a lot of what we've been trying to learn and think about over the last five weeks.

Way, way back at the start, I drew this picture, which is what we call the creator-creation distinction. And that's a fundamental aspect of the biblical worldview.

God is creator, everything else is creation distinct from him. And we're saying that God as creator is the first cause of everything.

He's the primary cause, everything finds its ultimate explanation in him. But in order to accomplish his purposes, he establishes what we call second causes. Now, I can't write the word causes in there because it won't fit, but imagine the word causes is in there.

And these relate together in a way that I cannot fully explain, but in a way that is not as simplistic as fatalism. It's not just that God controls you all and you have no freedom.

[10 : 34] But it's also not as simplistic as indeterminate chance or libertarianism, where you can actually do whatever you want. It's actually a complex interaction between these two things.

God is sovereign. He's in ultimate control. Sorry, I missed out a letter. God is sovereign. God is all-powerful or omnipotent, as we would say.

God is holy and good and gracious. All of that applies to his activity as the first cause.

And we are a mix of things. We're finite. We're not infinite. We're free in many important ways, but not quite in the same way that God is free. We're responsible. We're sinful.

And so we're not at God's level. We're in different categories. But all of these things are woven together in God's sovereignty in order to make things happen.

[11 : 39] Now, the key thing I'm trying to highlight is that all of this truth about God and all of this truth about us and all the connections between God as first cause and us as second cause, I can't fully explain it all.

I can't. But we have to hold it together in a healthy tension. And the reason we have to hold it together is that this explanation makes more sense than any of the alternatives.

Because I know that I'm not a robot. I make real choices. And I carry real responsibility. I'm not just a robot being controlled by God in heaven that I can't do anything.

I know that is true. But I also know that I am not a God. And I can't control everything in the way that I want it to be. So there's things that are in my control.

There are things that are outside my control. I don't believe that you and I are cogs in a machine, that we just have no choice as to what's going to happen next. And nor do I believe that we are slaves to chance, whereby actually everything is just utterly unpredictable.

[12 : 48] And the minute we step outside what the Bible is revealing to us, we're moving in the direction of these alternatives, which either leave us as robots or as people pretending to be gods.

And if we go in either of those directions, and this is the key point. If we go in either of those directions that make us a cog in a fatalistic machine, or if we go in the direction of making us just free and random and outside any structures, then the answer to the question, why do rubbish things happen to me, is simply tough.

It's the way it is. That's where fatalism takes you, tough. It's the way it is. And that's where indeterminate libertarianism and chance takes you, tough.

It's the way it is. Do you believe that's the answer to the why question? I don't think any of us do. And so if these extremes are wrong, that complex, complex web must be right.

And so as we're trying to answer the why question, part of the answer is that what's happening to you and to me is part of this causal structure between God's sovereignty and our created responsibility and all the connections that he's established between himself and the creation.

[14 : 32] Now, I'm not answering every question. I absolutely know that. But we need to move in this direction to try and understand more of what God is seeking to accomplish in connection with the world that he has made.

Now, in order to do that, we need to make sure that our view of God is accurate. Because if we move in the fatalistic direction or if we move in the kind of random chance libertarian direction, all of that's because our view of God is wrong.

We tend to think of God as either this sort of controlling, sort of manipulator, or instead of God as this sort of like hands-off, well, I'm not in total control either.

And neither of those extremes are correct. And again, I'm already running out of time and I've barely even got going. But here, you've got two chapters from the Westminster Confession.

I'm not going to read through them all because they're very, very dense. But I'm just going to say this. It says in the chapter on Providence, chapter 5, that God upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all things.

[15 : 40] Okay, you can see that there, okay? As we think about God upholding, directing, disposing, and governing all creatures, we have to remember what this God is like.

And that is summarized for us in this chapter here. And we see that as this passage from chapter 2 tries to summarize the teaching of God, it's telling us that He is most loving, most gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abounding in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, the rewarder of those that diligently seek Him, and most just and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, who by no means clear the guilty.

In other words, He is thoroughly and eternally good. And so whatever is involved in these connections, the God who is sovereign over it all, is good.

In other words, He is not an impersonal fatalist who's made you to be robots. And He's not an capricious chance-ist who's got no interest in order and justice and truth.

No. He is the God whose character is impeccable. And His works of providence are tied to that character as He unfolds His purposes across the ages of history.

[17 : 13] Now, you're going to be devastated to know that that was just the introduction. But we're going to go as fast as we can and we're going to look at three things.

Providence and the sovereignty of God. Providence and the personal God. Providence and the purposes of God. So first of all, this one.

Oh, sorry, wrong pen. I want the red one back. There we go. The doctrine of providence is pressing us to think about what we could call the metaphysical absolute of reality.

What I mean by that is the thing, the God, the whatever, that's in charge of everything. That everything actually comes back to. The metaphysical absolute of reality.

And this is where we see the inseparable connection between creation and providence. God, the creator, upon which all existence depends, is also the sustainer upon which all existence depends.

[18 : 15] And so providence is constantly and continually a demonstration of God's sovereign control over His creation. And that sovereignty applies in numerous ways.

It applies in terms of potency, in terms of God's power. He's the absolute source of all other power, and He remains in total control all the time. His sovereignty also applies in terms of morality.

God is the absolute source of all ethical categories, all moral frameworks. In other words, He defines what's right or wrong forever. And God's sovereignty also applies in terms of destiny, because the works of creation and the works of providence are all going that way.

They're all heading towards the purpose that God has foreordained. It's His purposes that matter, and the destiny of all creatures is in His hands.

He's sovereign. Scripture highlights that again and again and again. We read this at the very start. The Lord reigns, Psalm 93. The Lord sits as king forever, Psalm 29. I am the Lord.

[19 : 20] There's no gods before me, nor shall there be any after me. I am the Lord. Besides me, there is no saviour, Isaiah 43. Again and again and again, Scripture tells us that God is king, God is sovereign.

As first cause, He's the source of all power. He's the source of all morality. He's the source of all ends to which we are moving. So when we speak of sovereignty, of providence, we are asserting the sovereignty of God.

So, when we ask the why is this happening to me question, the answer is not that God isn't in control.

And so, that's the first part of the answer that we need to build. It's not that God isn't in control. Then we've got providence and the personal God.

Because when we say that God is the metaphysical absolute of reality, and we say that He's therefore sovereign over all things, we also must emphasize that He is personal. And that's a key aspect of the biblical worldview, that the absolute of reality is not impersonal.

[20 : 25] So many other worldviews think that the absolute of reality is impersonal, that it's just nothing, or it's just a blob of matter, or of energy, or of potential, or it's a force, or it's a one, not a something, but it's just a kind of thing.

That's not the biblical worldview. The biblical worldview is that above all that exists is a personal absolute.

That's so important for us to remember, a personal absolute. Now, this is so important, and this was kind of hit me when I heard a quote in a lecture.

I was listening to a guy called Ed Clowney. He's passed away now. He was a theologian in America. If you Google and listen to Ed Clowney, his lectures are so, so helpful, he said something that really struck me.

He said, you are always dealing personally with God. You're always dealing personally with God. You think, well, why is that so important?

[21 : 31] Well, it's so important because when we talk about providence, when we talk about first and second causes, when we're talking about freedom and concurrence and causality and all this kind of stuff that I'm trying and failing to explain, the danger is that we start to think that our dealings with God are mechanical.

And it's a special danger for us in the era that we live in because post-enlightenment, the default of the Western mind is to think mechanically. It's been the age of scientific discovery, technological advancement, and we're all conditioned to think mechanically.

And so we think in those terms as we think of God. It becomes the lens through which we look at God. So when I say first cause, I'm sure many of you thought, well, okay, God's the first cause and it's like a domino that just gets set off.

That's not what we mean when we say that God is first cause, but that's how we think because we think mechanically. When we say God is first cause, we mean he's primary cause. He is the super cause.

He is the one who reigns over everything else. He's not just the first in a long line of things that he sets off. We can also think very mechanistically mechanistically, we can think mechanistically in terms of our walk and our experience as Christians.

[22 : 47] And that mechanistic thinking often leads to legalistic thinking. Because legalistic thinking and mechanistic thinking are actually very, very similar. Maybe they're even two sides of the same coin.

So something rubbish happens in your life. You think, oh, that's because I didn't do that. That's because I didn't read my Bible enough. I didn't pray enough. And I did X, Y, and Z, and therefore rubbish thing A happened in my life.

That's mechanistic thinking. That's legalistic thinking. And we do the other thing the other way around. Good things happen and we think, well, God favors me. So the sun shines on your wedding day.

You think, oh, God likes me. Or it rains on your wedding day. You think he doesn't. That's mechanistic, legalistic thinking. And so yes, in God's providence, he works through the mechanisms of the organic, systematic creation that he's made.

That's absolutely true. But in his relationship with you and me, his mode of operation is not mechanical. His mode of operation is personal.

[23 : 56] And that's crucial to recognize because it immediately makes his providential dealings with us much more complicated than we realize. So why did you eat your breakfast this morning?

You can give a mechanistic answer to that very easy. You can think, well, I was hungry and I really like a bacon and egg roll and it was made for me and put on the table and so I was going to eat it.

You can give mechanistic answers to questions like that. Why do you love your children today? Or your wife or your husband or your parents or your friends why do you love them?

You can't answer that mechanically. It's far more complicated. And that's because personal providential interactions are not mechanical.

They are relational and that immediately elevates our understanding of providence to a far richer, a far more complex level. And that makes explaining things more difficult.

[25 : 01] But the key point is that providence is never ever impersonal. The sovereign personal God is relentlessly interested in you, in your life, in your circumstances, in your needs, your opportunities and your destiny.

When Jesus says that even the hairs of your head are numbered, he's not saying that to tell you how good God is at counting. He's saying that to tell you how much God cares about you.

And all of that is reminding us that God's interest in us is personal. His desire towards us is to be in a relationship. And all of that ties in with the great thread that holds the whole Bible together, what we would call covenant theology, his desire to be in a relationship with us as his covenant people.

It's all the language of relationship. I will be your God. You will be my people. You see it again and again and again all the way through the Bible. That's how God interacts with us.

It's in terms not of mechanism, in terms of relationship. So when we ask the question, why is this rubbish thing happening to me? The answer is not that God's mechanical.

[26 : 17] And you've done three bad things that added up to one, three little bad things that all add up to one big bad thing that you deserve. It's not mechanical. So we're answering the why question, why does rubbish things happen to me?

It's not that God isn't in control. And it's not that God is mechanical. So what's the answer? Well, this is where we come to the third part.

Providence and the purpose of God. And again, I'm not going to give you, I'm not going to give you a perfect, complete, comprehensive answer to the why question, but I hope I can move you in the right direction.

And the right direction to move in is to see that the sovereign personal God has a purpose towards which everything is moving.

Now, there's loads that we can say about this. There's also so much that we can't fully explain. The key thing I just want to highlight is that the stuff in your life, the stuff that happens in your life this week, that happened last week, that happened ten years ago, that will happen in ten years' time, none of it is outside God's purposes.

[27 : 34] And God's purposes are always holy and wise and good. And I want to just unpack that under three headings.

Revelation, salvation, and eschatology. I'll explain what I mean by them as we whiz through it. So, first of all, revelation.

God uses the stuff that happens to you to reveal himself to you. And that can work in two directions. It works to tell you what God is like and it works to confirm to you what God is not like.

So, providentially, there have been and there are and there will be many brilliant things in your life. How many of them are outside God's providence? None of them.

And all of them are pointing you to the God who is so good and so generous and so wise. And it's reminding us that at the heart of the biblical worldview is the fact that good is real.

[28 : 36] Good stuff is real. And you might think, well, that's obvious, but it's actually a massive philosophical conundrum. Is good real? Many people struggle with the problem of evil.

Why do bad things happen? That is a problem. But just as big a problem is the question, well, is good real? Is good actually real? Because the key point is this, many, many unbiblical worldviews will say, well, actually, ultimately, no.

Because ultimately, if we just come from nothing or from a blob or whatever and we're heading to just annihilation, good's not metaphysically real.

It's just socially constructed. The Bible says, I don't agree with that. The Bible says, good is metaphysically real. And which one does your heart agree with?

We know, we know that good is real and we need a metaphysic that agrees with that. And so, the good things in your life are telling us that there's a good God and good is real and good comes from Him.

[29 : 45] At the same time, Promesions is speaking to you by confirming what God is not like. Romans told us that creation's groaning. The news headlines this week are telling you exactly the same thing and this is where God's revelation in Scripture is so important to hold hand in hand alongside providence because if you and I look at all the horrendous things that are happening in the world around us, all the suffering that gets caused by people's behavior, if you look at all the things in your life that have gone wrong and you compare it to God's Word, you'll discover that it's all patterns of behavior where God has said, don't do that.

Don't do that. And that ethical framework that the Bible gives us which stands in contrast to the awful behavior that you are the victim and victim of in your life is confirming to you, it's confirming to you what God is not like.

He is not like the person who manipulates you. He's not like the person who's your friend one minute and your enemy the next. He's not like the person that you thought you could trust and then they let you down.

He's not like the person who's trying to get, trying to use people to get into a position of power and influence. He's not like that. He is never like that. And so God's using the stuff that happens in your life and my life, good and bad, to reveal himself to us.

We've got to be listening. God's providence is also speaking to us about God's purposes for salvation. So God's purposes are directed towards accomplishing the salvation of his people.

[31 : 29] Now there's loads that we could say here. We're talking about providence. Everything that God does for salvation, what we call redemptive history, all of that is within the scope of God's providence. It culminates in the coming of Jesus in his death and resurrection.

Now God is building his church and in his providence he is reaching every single person that he's come to rescue and take home. And within that, and the fascinating thing that we need to unpack a little bit is that within that, within our salvation and our restoration and our healing, God is able even to use sin and suffering and difficult times to accomplish his purposes.

God can use something awful to accomplish something good. In fact, the whole of Christianity rests on that principle because the greatest example of that is the cross.

where something awful accomplished something utterly amazing. And we experience that as believers. The Westminster Confession of Faith again captures biblical teaching very well.

It says, the most wise, righteous, and gracious God does oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own heart, to chastise them for their former sins or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts that they may be humbled and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin and for sundry other just and holy ends.

[33 : 12] Now the language of that is old fashioned but it's basically saying sometimes God will allow us to walk through a difficult season and he will use it to help us grow.

In these processes God is always good and his purposes are always good but good doesn't always mean easy and sometimes it might not feel very good at all and that takes us to our very last point.

God's purposes in providence are related to eschatology. God in his providence is moving everything towards an eschatological resolution and Paul constantly kept that in view.

You see that in verse 18 of Romans 8 where the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the eschatological resolution the glory that will be revealed to us at the end times and this is what he is meaning when he talks in verse 28 to say that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose and that working of things together for good at the moment is messy and complicated and sometimes is not going to feel good at all it's only going to be fully settled when Jesus returns.

In other words verse 28 is a not yet verse but this this verse and this truth and the eschatological resolution that God is going to bring is where our hearts need to rest in terms of the question why in terms of that question why we have to rest in the fact that in the end when Jesus takes us into his kingdom we will see that God has kept the promise of verse 28 now how that works out every time I don't know and sometimes it's very hard to hold on to this truth and sometimes Romans 8 28 will slip through your fingers and you will struggle to believe it's true but never ever forget this

[35 : 53] Romans 8 28 will never slip through God's fingers and his promise to work all things together for your good is a metaphysical certainty that he will never let go of one day we will be able to see that he's kept his promises all along part of the tension with providence and with the why question is because we are always always more bothered about right now God is always always more bothered about then about the last day when he'll take us home on that day all sin will be judged and all wrongs will be put right and on that day all God's people will be restored so why does rubbish stuff happen to you and to me

I can't give you every answer I can't unpack everything about that question but we can hold on to the answer that the sovereign personal God always has a purpose and he is working things together for good for those who love him and I do think that that gives us that leads us just a little bit deeper into what God wants you and I to experience because one of the interesting things about Romans 8 at the end is that you have these stunning promises from God 31 to 39 but have you ever noticed that all the beauty of these verses arises from brokenness you can't be a conqueror without a struggle and you can't feel total safety without being exposed to danger and you can't experience help without being weak and you cannot be comforted without feeling pain pain and you cannot know the depth of the promise of verse 39 which says nothing will be able to separate you from the love of

God in Christ Jesus you cannot know the depth of it unless you've experienced moments when you thought has God really got me is this really going to be okay and it's those moments of struggle and those moments of weakness that become the canvas on which the beauty of God's promises is set before us in all their glory this does not explain everything and it actually tells us that we're not going to get an explanation for everything and that actually makes perfect sense because you must never forget that metaphysics is always bigger than me and that raises one crucial crucial point all of this metaphysics stuff that we've been doing is raising massive questions that we can't fully answer but I hope it's bringing us a little bit closer to understand more about

God and his purposes but ultimately we'll never be able to answer everything but let me ask the question what is this telling us overall well let me ask you this what is the default posture of the gospel like what what in other words the whole gospel what's God wanting you to do what's the default posture of the gospel trust trust the default posture of the gospel is trust and at the heart of the bible's metaphysics is a God that is so big you will never be able to get your head round every detail of how and why he does what he does but he is also the God that you can trust forever and that's part of what makes that's part of what makes knowing God through his son our Lord Jesus so amazing

I'm going to leave you with a quote from B.B. Warfield a theologian who lived a hundred years ago speaking about providence he said a firm faith in the universal providence of God is the solution of all earthly troubles Amen