

Dialogue Question IV:
Is God fair?

Man's Dilemma

In our previous dialogues, we have established the existence of a personal and transcendent being. Within our belief in God lies the assumption that He is good and that He is in control. In apparent contrast, another reality exists: Mankind, which has been created by this good God, experiences pain and suffering. Not only does mankind experience pain and suffering in his external circumstances (ie. Death, hunger, failed relationships) but also in internal discontent, which is manifested in a longing for greater intimacy, significance, and security.¹ There is an obvious dilemma here. If God is God (in control of everything) and God is good while mankind continues to suffer, how can these two realities co-exist?

Implications of God's Infinite Glory

To begin to unravel this dilemma, we will examine the nature of God. As the source of the universe, God is infinitely supreme in every facet of who He is. In other words, God's beauty is infinitely more beautiful than any other beauty; God's strength is infinitely stronger than any other strength, etc. A word to describe God's supremacy in everything is glory.

If God's glory is better than all else, then the best thing for mankind is to experience, enjoy, and reflect God's glory. Every other end to which mankind devotes itself pales in comparison. God's love is manifested to us in that He intends to give Himself and all His glory to mankind.

For this reason, God must not compromise His own glory one bit if He is to love mankind. After all, to love someone is to be committed to what is best for them. The God of the Bible is irrevocably resolved to that end. He says in Isaiah 48:11: *"For my own sake, for my own sake I do this. For how can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another."* (NIV)

Our Response to God's Glory

God provided Himself in all His glory for mankind to enjoy. He met all of our needs. Because of His work to create us and our environment and His provision of free access to Himself in all His glory we lived in a glorious state of contentment. So what was our response?

Genesis 3 recounts that the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, thinking they would derive more enjoyment from what God had forbidden than from God Himself, rebelled against God. They disobeyed, doing the one thing that God had explicitly ordered them not to do. But that rebellion, which the Bible calls "sin," is not something that just Adam and Eve are guilty of. Rather, Romans 3:23 makes it clear that *"all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."* We have all rebelled against God, looking not to Him but to countless other things for ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment when in reality only God can satisfy.

God speaks to our errant response in Jeremiah 2:13, *"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."* Our turning away from the infinite and perfect to seek satisfaction in limited sources brought about the existence of suffering and pain. According to Genesis 1:26-27, God made man "in [God's own] image," designing man with longings that can only be met in God Himself. The philosopher Blaise Pascal said that man's rebellion causes him to experience an "infinite abyss [that] can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself." Not only did this fall create a void in the internal condition of mankind, but in every area of external life as well (natural disasters, diseases, death).

God's Dilemma

When someone turns away from God in this manner, God cannot simply dismiss their sin. By doing so, He would compromise His just character and sovereign control. If He were to expose Himself and Heaven to such compromise by admitting sin, then Heaven would be no better than life here on earth—with the same pains, the same sorrows, the same suffering, the same confusion, and even the prevalence of evil.

¹ Without God there is no basis for classifying anything as suffering or bliss, pain or pleasure, and no explanation for the reality of an intrinsic human yearning for significance.

Modern society demonstrates this principle. For example, suppose someone goes to trial for multiple, pre-meditated, gruesome murders. A combination of witnesses and physical evidence leave no room for doubt that the defendant is guilty of each murder. The jury doesn't take long to hand down a unanimous guilty verdict on all counts. The jury also unanimously recommends the death penalty. But the judge has the final say on the sentence. He doesn't hand down the death penalty, nor does he hand down a life sentence. In fact, he doesn't give the offender any jail time. Not even a fine. He simply says that he loves the defendant and wants to show mercy. The defendant walks free.

There would be no doubt that that judge would be removed from the bench, scandalized, and investigated for corruption. The general public would lose respect for the judicial system. The things the judge would need to do to maintain his own honor, integrity, and respect are the same things he would need to do to act in the best interest of the public. His failure to do those things—namely to punish crime—is detrimental to their good. Our example allows a dangerous person to live unchecked among the people, sets a precedent that doesn't deter other would-be criminals, and prevents the maintenance of order and safety. Like the judge who must punish crime, God must punish sin.

But how is the common, law-abiding, church-attending, hard-working person anything like the serial killer in our example? Everyone would say that nobody's perfect, but would anyone say that all people are as bad as a serial killer? Though many would say that their sins are insignificant, the reality is that God considers all sin against Him to be infinitely significant.

In light of an immeasurable and glorious God, how then should we view our sin? All sin is a turning away from the infinite, perfect God who satisfies us to seek satisfaction in things that don't even compare. This is more than just highly offensive, for a breach in something infinite and perfect has consequences of infinite magnitude. Every sin infinitely offends God, because each sinful act, no matter how trivial in our eyes, is disobedience against Him. In that regard, all sin is the same in God's eyes.

An Orientation Shift

Now that we have answered our dilemma, we see that the only way God could be both loving and just is to punish sin, which we are all guilty of.

With this understanding, a much more profound question is how a just God could allow anyone to escape eternal punishment. If we are all sinful and our sin has infinite consequences, then why would God choose to bless anyone with freedom from those consequences? And what if on top of that freedom, He chose to bless some beyond measure, to give them eternal life in relationship with Him? What if He made all of this—what we could never hope to earn—available as a free gift to anyone who would respond to the offer?

In our next dialogue, we will discuss the reality of this free gift and how God can remain completely just in the offer of mercy and grace through the person of Jesus Christ.

Dialogue Questions:

- 1) Based on your personal experience, do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Living in relative freedom from [evil, pain, and suffering] cannot satisfy deeper longings within?" Explain.
- 2) Do you believe the statement: "A breach in something infinite and perfect has consequences of an infinite magnitude"? Explain.
- 3) Are the sins of the common man the same as murder in God's eyes? How?
- 4) Is God just in issuing eternal punishment for sin? Is He loving?

The Gospel of John

Chapter 10

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. ⁷Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. ¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." ¹⁹At these words the Jews were again divided. ²⁰Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" ²¹But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" ²²Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, ²⁶but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one." ³¹Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, ³²but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" ³³"We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." ³⁴Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? ³⁵If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came--and the Scripture cannot be broken-- ³⁶what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? ³⁷Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. ³⁸But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." ³⁹Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp. ⁴⁰Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed ⁴¹and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true." ⁴²And in that place many believed in Jesus.

1. What does Jesus mean when He said, "I am the gate for the sheep"? (10:7)

Chapter 11

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. ⁷Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. ¹⁰It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light." ¹¹After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he

sleeps, he will get better." ¹³Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." ²⁸And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." ⁴⁵Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." ⁴⁹Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." ⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵²and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³So from that day on they plotted to take his life. ⁵⁴Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. ⁵⁵When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. ⁵⁶They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?" ⁵⁷But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

2. What did Jesus mean when He said, "I am the resurrection"? (11:25)

3. What does Christ's being the resurrection mean for those who believe? (11:26)

Chapter 12

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." ⁶He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." ⁹Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests ¹¹made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹²for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. ¹³The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹⁴They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" ¹⁵Jesus found

a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, ¹⁵"Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." ¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. ¹⁷Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" ²⁰Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." ²²Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. ²³Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. ²⁷"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. ³⁰Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³²But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." ³³He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. ³⁴The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?" ³⁵Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. ³⁶Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them. ³⁷Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. ³⁸This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" ³⁹For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: ⁴⁰"He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn--and I would heal them." ⁴¹Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him. ⁴²Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved praise from men more than praise from God. ⁴⁴Then Jesus cried out, "When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. ⁴⁵When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. ⁴⁶I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. ⁴⁷"As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. ⁴⁸There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. ⁴⁹For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. ⁵⁰I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say."

4. What is the one condition Jesus gives for finding life? What does He mean by this? (12:25-26)

5. What does Jesus say is true of the person who serves Him? (12:26)

-- Scripture taken from the New International Version of the Holy Bible --