

## Questioning God

Romans 9:14

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

I would like to talk about questioning God. It will be in connection with the verse we are studying today, Romans 9:14: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!" Prince Charles of Great Britain will succeed to the throne, certainly when his mother dies, and perhaps even before that. That is the normal rule of succession--which the authority of the father or the mother passes to the eldest son. That is what, of course, we would have expected in the case of Esau. We would have expected that the third patriarch after Abraham and Isaac would be Esau, the elder son. In fact, God chose the younger son Jacob to become the third patriarch or leader of the nation of Israel. That is why Paul puts this question, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" He voices the kind of attitude that many of us have voiced at times, when we have questioned God about something that has happened in our life or something that has happened in someone else's life.

There is a legitimate questioning of God that I believe Jesus encourages us to do, but the spirit of this question, "Is there any injustice on God's part?" is an illegitimate questioning of God. For any of us who claim to believe that God is the father of Jesus, the spirit of this question is illegitimately questioning God. It is really the attitude of a practical atheist who makes himself equal with God and says, "Look here now, do you think that what you did was fair? Do you think that it was right of you to choose the younger son here and to give him the authority that the elder son should have had?" You notice that underneath that question is an underlying assumption that there is an absolute standard other than God's own nature by which we can judge whether his actions are good or bad, righteous or unrighteous, fair or unfair. That is what underlies that question. You are saying to him, "Now do you think it is fair?" assuming that there is some absolute standard of fairness--that both he and we can go to and which we can examine his action.

I would point out to you that if you have that attitude, then that standard of fairness is your God. That absolute is your God, not God's own nature. So if you say that you believe that God is the father of Jesus, you can never take the attitude of this questioner without yourself ceasing to believe that God is the ultimate, absolute authority at whom the buck stops and against whom all fairness and unfairness is judged. So if we ever take the attitude in this question, we are really saying that we do not treat and trust God as the Absolute in the universe. Therefore, we are really philosophical agnostics.

Or, we are saying our judgment of what is right and wrong is just as good as his and we ought to use our judgment to question his; and therefore, we are really practical atheists. We are declaring that we don't really believe that he is God, but that there is some other standard of fairness or goodness or righteousness that we can use to judge him against. I would encourage all of us to be very careful and cautious of the attitude underlying the questions about babies dying of cancer or famine in Ethiopia or the problem of suffering. Be very careful that you are not asking the question from the point of view of a practical atheist who is really questioning God's whole nature.

Is there some kind of questioning that we can do? Obviously there is. Look at John 3; you can see that Jesus does expect us to want to understand. John 3:6: "That which is born of the flesh is

flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can this be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?'" Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand that, and Jesus wants us to understand why His Father does things. It is important to see that. There is a proud, rebellious attitude to God that takes the whole position of "Why did you do this?" or "What right did you have to do that?", and that is alien to a child of God. But there is a right questioning that a loving child does to his father when he says, "Father, I trust you, I believe you are God, but I ask you to explain this to me."

In other words, we do not believe in God because we have thoroughly delved into every corner of his mind and compared it with every other possible standard of right and wrong, and then concluded that he is right. That is not the way we came to believe in God. We came to believe in God because we looked at the universe, its existence, its order and design, at our own personalities and the existence of our conscience. We examined carefully the actions of God in the history of the Israelites and we looked at the life and death of Jesus, and we concluded that this is reasonable evidence to believe that the Creator of the whole universe is in fact the Father of Jesus. We began to treat God in faith as our Father and we found that he began to respond to us in love. Therefore, we concluded that he is God. That is why we believe in him. So we can come to him and say, "Lord, we believe you are God and we believe that what you do is right and fair and just, but could you explain to us why this is so or why that is so?" That is why Jesus said to us, "I didn't call you servants. I call you friends, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing, but I want you to know what I'm doing. I want you to understand." [John 15:15] There is another verse in the Old Testament that runs, "God made known His works to the children of Israel, but his ways to Moses." God wants us to understand, loved ones.

I remember my mom said to me, "Ernest, don't think too hard. It will do you harm. If you think too much you will begin to grow insecure." I don't know how many of you had loved ones who loved you and wanted to protect you and thought we were going off the deep end in thinking too much. You can always think as much as you want, but it is the attitude that counts. Are you coming to God with an attitude of "Why would you let a thing like this happen?", as if you yourself are so much wiser and so much more loving than God is, that you wouldn't dream of letting the things happen that he lets happen? It is a whole assumption of God-likeness and self-righteousness that is hideous and rebellious. But there is an attitude whereby a child comes to a father and says, "Lord, this is not going to establish my belief in you any more than it exists at the present, but will you explain to me why you have me in this job I'm in?" Many of us have agreed that God establishes our vocation for us. He sets our job for us. He made us in a certain way so that we could do a specific job on this earth that no one else can do, and we believe that.

"But Lord, why have you got me in this present job? Why have you put me in this present vocation?"

The first reason is probably the best and most real one, but it is just the first one. Look at Romans 9:11: "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call." Don't go to sleep on me; we are going deeper into it than this--but you are in your present job because God called you to it. That is the basic answer. The God who sends the swallows south in winter, the God who arranged the boiling point of water exactly right, the God who set the planets in their orbits, the God who arranged the distance between the sun and the earth so that it is exactly right for us and for life here on earth, the God who has carefully designed blood so that it can carry over 65-70

substances without becoming sludge, the God who has planned everything with such care--that God put you in the job you are in at this moment. You are there because of his call and because you are part of his plan and his design.

Now you are not there because of your works. God didn't call Jacob because of his works, because actually Jacob was a miserable liar. God didn't put you in the job you are in because of your works or your efforts. In some ways, some of you are fitter for a far better job than you have, and some of you actually aren't fit for the job you are in. God has put you there quite apart from your works, because God is determined to rescue each one of us from the whole merit system of works that society has set up. Do you see that? Society has set up a whole merit system of works so that if you can do certain things well, they promote you and give you more money. You keep going like that until eventually you lose all joy in the works; you lose all joy in the abilities and the aptitudes that you had because you have been prostituting them in order to get further promotion and more money. So God is determined to rescue us from that merit system of works.

That is why he simply puts you and me in the vocation and in the jobs that he wants us in. Irrespective, at times, of our abilities. Sometimes he takes our abilities into consideration, often beyond our abilities, often not as great as our abilities. But he is determined that we will begin to use our abilities and exercise our personality not for the sake of the shekels, not for the sake of the cheap gain of the promotion. He is determined that we will enjoy the abilities that he has given us and that we will do our jobs well for his sake, as unto him and not for the sake of the promotion that we will get or the extra money that we will earn. The first reason that all of us are in the jobs that we are in at this moment is because it is God's personal will for us. It is good to think that you are doing what you are doing Monday through Friday because the Creator of the universe has placed you there.

There is another reason and you find it in Romans 8:28: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." You think you are there so you can paint the house in two days where it used to take you five. You think you are there so you can type five hundred words a minute. You think you are there so that you will learn to do cash flows perfectly and hit it right on the button every time. That is not why you are there at all. God has you in that job for a deeper purpose than for you to simply become a skilled carpenter, a skilled finance man, or a skilled doctor. God is working all things together for good in your life. He has you in your present position because he can conform you more easily to the image of his Son in that present job. That is why you are there. God is after something far deeper in you than just some temporal skill that will be of no further use after the world ends. There are countless other jobs where you could earn far more money; there are countless other jobs where you could actually have more professional personal satisfaction or more friends or success. God has carefully planned the job that you are in at the moment because there he can begin to work on you inside.

Often the effects of that job on your personality that you think are least important are the most important. So loved ones, be careful especially of the things in your job that are frustrating or the things in your environment that seem so limiting. God is usually more interested in your responses than in your typing skills. He is usually more interested in your reactions to the job that he has put you in than in the skill that you will develop, even though he wants you to do that well for his glory.

It is important to see that God has gone to a lot of trouble to arrange the little trials in your life that keep you increasingly dependent on him. God sometimes has a dreadful time with those of us who are so competent; He has had a dreadful time arranging enough little trials, letting Satan send whatever hard experiences he wants to at us, so that we can increasingly depend on Him in our hearts.

So when you think of your job, don't think of it as something just connected with building houses. Do you realize how quickly your present company will shrivel up? Do you realize how quickly your work, the papers you are typing, the houses you are building, the houses you are wiring, the lights you are putting in, the children you are teaching, the bodies that you are fixing up physically—do you realize for a moment how fast those will all disappear into dust? God hasn't put you in that job to bring about the temporal results that you are managing to bring about. The Father is after the image of His Son in you.

There is another reason in Acts 18:1-4, and it refers to Paul and his movements. "After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them; and because he as of the same trade he stayed with them, and they worked, for by trade they were tentmakers. And he argued in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks." Tent making was Paul's secular vocation the way some of us are business people, typists, teachers, doctors, or carpenters. But tent making did not dictate his life. He did not make his moves throughout the world in relationship to his tent making. He did not look in the Athens Daily and see "Ten Tentmakers wanted for the Roman army." He did not make his moves according to whether IBM had set up a tent making work in Rome or in Jerusalem. He moved only according to the needs of God's own ministry. The tent making was just a method that Paul had of earning money so that he could feed himself and clothe himself while he did the primary job that he was put on the earth to do, and that was to express the love and the life of Jesus in the body of God's church.

Paul made his moves according to the needs that God had for him in different churches. It is good for us to see that. Whatever you do, whether you are a policeman, a teacher, a lawyer or a doctor, that is the expression of God's preserving grace through you and that is important. It is his preserving grace that keeps the planets in their orbits, that keeps the sun and the earth at the right distance from each other. It is his preserving grace that keeps the whole world through law, through courts and police forces and through all kinds of civil agencies, keeps society from falling apart. So expressing the preserving grace of God in our ordinary jobs is important. But you see that he does that only so that his redeeming grace can get to work introducing people to himself and getting people to receive the Spirit of His Son. In other words, there is no point in keeping the whole place from chaos unless people begin to receive his life into them. That is the primary purpose that all of us have here on earth, to express the redeeming grace of God to others.

I'd encourage you to see that God has you in your present job not so that somebody in that office will have a typist, not so that somebody in that school will have a teacher, but so that you will be able to take part in the spiritual ministry that God has for you in this particular area. I would certainly encourage you to follow on in the principle that God has shown us here in this body. The whole principle of the businesses that we run is based on the plan that we will use our secular vocations and jobs to get into countries where people do not know God and there live as ordinary people, seeing our primary job as expressing his love and his life to others, even though part of that depends on us doing our actual secular jobs well and in a way that no one can question. I think you need to look at your job and your vocation and see that God has you there because he can get you to take part in the spiritual ministry that he has for you in that particular area.

When you move, it is really important that you do not move just at the beck and call (with due respect to IBM and all the other corporations) of your secular job. It is vital that you put Jesus' ministry first. He will show you how to work both together. So, those are legitimate questions. "Lord, why did you put me in this job?" is a legitimate question. There are some that are illegitimate such as "Lord, why did you give me this nose?" or "Why did you give me these legs" or "Why did you give me this mind?" or "Lord, why did you give me this hair?" That whole attitude that feels that we got a raw deal when the bodies were being given out just brings continual unrest to us. We deify it and dignify it by saying, "I just have a bit of a poor self-image. That is my problem." We know fine well that we don't have a poor self-image; we feel resentment that he gave us this face or mind. Why couldn't he have given us Jimmy Carter's face, or Jimmy Carter's teeth? We have a resentful attitude to God and we expect the rest of the world to commiserate with us on the bad deal we got and the poor equipment that we have. We are doing our best with it, but it is hard!

It is important to see where that equipment came from. Job 31:15: "Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" It was your dear Father who gave you the nose and the hair and the hands. It was your dear God working within the limitations of other generations. It was he that gave you your chin, your mind and your memory that you have. He did it in love. Genesis says that God looked at everything that he had made and said, "Behold, it is very good." God looks at what He has given you and says, "It is very good. I have put my best thought and my greatest love into that face. I have put all my intelligence and ability into that chin and ear and mind." Your dear God feels that he has done you proud because he has planned you carefully for the purpose that he has for you to fulfill here on this earth. All the equipment that he has given you is exactly right for what God wants you to do.

Really, what you should just do is repent of that sin of ingratitude. You should repent right now and say, "Lord, I am sorry for looking down not only on myself, but for looking down on your creation, for looking down on one of your beautiful ideas that you gave to me. I repent of that, Lord, and I accept that in your mind and in your view I am exactly right for the purpose that you have given me to fulfill." Do you know that's what determines that a Barbra Streisand nose results in a beautiful swan instead of an ugly duckling?

It is the attitude of the possessor. Your attitude to what God has lovingly given you determines how you will be in this world. I would encourage you to stop at this very moment any further comparison of yourself with anybody else, because God didn't look at all the others and then think, "I'll vary her slightly this way" or "I'll vary him slightly that way." He looked at you alone, a unique creation, different from everybody else, and he made you without any reference to anybody else. That is the way he expects you to receive the gifts that he has given you. Don't compare them with other people, but look at God and say, "Lord, thank you that this is what you have planned for me to do."

The last illegitimate question that I would just touch on briefly, is that many of you may say, "I accept what you say, that I ought not to question God about my vocation; I can see why he has put me here. I can see that I certainly ought not to question him about my personality and my physical and mental characteristics and I can see it will turn out right. But it is my present circumstances that I question. I have no doubt that he is going to lead me to the right job that he has for me. I have no doubt that he can do something with this nose or this hair, but it is my present circumstances. I question him about these. Don't you think this is an interim stage and he hasn't caught up with me yet?"

I'd point to Ephesians 1:11: "In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will." Look at those words. Every detail of your life at this moment is God's permissive will for you. Maybe not his ideal will, but his permissive will. God is able to stop anything that he does not want. Every detail at this present time is God's permissive will for you. He is at this moment working all things according to the counsel of his will. Every detail, even the worst circumstance that you can think of at this moment, is God's permissive will for you. He knows about it and he isn't sweating and jumping out of his throne. He is at rest and peace because he knows how this is going to work into his plan. He already has it organized. So, every circumstance of your life at this moment is God's permissive will. That is why there is a verse in Thessalonians that says you should "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. [I Thessalonians 5:18]

I wonder, are you at rest with your life at present? Are you at peace with the circumstances of your life? Or do you find that there is a kind of underlying strain all the time? Do you ever waken in the morning and find a frown on your face? Do you ever experience a kind of vague strain because you wish things were different, or at least not as they are? Loved ones, that is questioning your God. It will bring you endless disease, strain and discontent, because it will hold God up in the whole development of his plan for your life. Do not accept fate or any other idea that things are governed by some impersonal force that has no love for you, but accept that the present circumstances of your life, every detail of them in regard to your job, in regard to your own character, in regard to every detail of your living situation, is God's permissive will. He has permitted this and knows about it. He wants you to trust him about it and not squirm and strain and try to change it, but to let him take you the next step.

Then he is free at last to indicate clearly to you what is the next step, but only if we come into peace. I tell you, it is eternal life when you stop questioning God and stop taking the whole thing into your own hands. What can you do about it anyway? When did you last make yourself grow an extra inch? We can do so little. The truth is that God alone can change it according to his plan, if we will accept that it is all from him and he is working in it to bring about his will for us.

I pray that somebody here this morning will get out of strain. That strain is killing.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, thank you that you have appointed us to the job that we are in. Thank you, Lord, that you carefully have planned it for us. All our questioning of whether it is right for us or not is beside the point. We know so little about what we need and we know so little about where we fit into your overall plan that we gladly accept this job as your will for us. We thank you Lord that you have us in it to make us like Jesus. So we look forward to the experiences and even the difficulties we will have this week because we know you will be watching our responses -- watching to see if we are willing to take our place with you on the cross.

We thank you Lord that you have us here not just to build houses, not just to type memos but you have us here in the ministry of your Son's life in this graphical location. Thank you, Father, for the faces we have. Thank you that it is a unique face. Thank you that it isn't like everyone else's. Thank you for showing us that fashion changes every decade and beauty changes in everybody's eyes. One time it's fat and another time it is thin -- another time it is moustaches and another time it is not. Lord, you have shown us that beauty is so temporary in the world's eyes. But what you have given us is beauty, that in your eyes we are very good. This face and this body are just right for

us and the function you have for us here on earth and to set forth the beauty of your Son Jesus.

We thank you Lord for every present circumstance. We would give thanks in all circumstances because we know you are working them all according to the counsel of your will. So Father we would rest in faith that you are our God and you are in control and we would refuse to question you except to understand for your glory.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus , the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each of us throughout this week. Amen.