

# Derick Bingham and Philip Yancey

In the Belfast Telegraph of 19 July 2003 local author and Pastor, **Derick Bingham**, recommended to those interested in some ‘Summer reading’ a book called *‘What’s So Amazing About Grace’* by **Philip Yancey**. In so doing **Derick Bingham** is yet again directing Christians to the writings of someone whose beliefs would, in the light of God’s Word, be more than ‘questionable’ to say the least. Set out herewith are a couple of reports and also a web site link that will give some alternative views on the writings and beliefs of **Philip Yancey**.

Cecil Andrews – 19 August 2003 – ‘Take Heed’ Ministries

## **What Is So Amazing About Grace? By Philip Yancey**

Without a doubt, Yancey is one of the most talented writers in Christian circles today. He is interesting, readable, thought provoking, and often chooses topics of real interest. This volume is typical Yancey. In the early chapters I thought I might be on to a good read that I could recommend to others. Yancey told some marvelous stories, pointed clearly to ways in which we Christians often live in “ungrace,” encouraged us to think through the issue of grace and make proper adjustments — much of this was good. But Yancey has a fundamental flaw that runs throughout all of his writings — he doesn’t always draw his thoughts and principles from Scripture. His sources are more likely to be great saints from the past (occasionally from the present), his own reasoning, and experience. He surely quotes C.S. Lewis as often as the Apostle Paul or Jesus. And while Lewis and others may offer helpful insights, their words are not authoritative. This serious flaw of not basing his concepts squarely upon the Scriptures eventually leads Yancey astray. Yancey does not know the difference between:

Tolerance and arrogance, between grace and license (a study of 1st Corinthians 5 would be helpful to him).

Between boldness and harshness. By Yancey’s definitions John the Baptist and Elijah would be men of “ungrace”, but God did not seem to think so.

Ministering to sinners and condoning sinful lifestyles. Certainly Jesus loved and spent time with prostitutes, but he did so to call them to repentance, not to accept their way of living. Yancey’s method of dealing with a homosexual, who is also a church leader, may seem like grace to

him, it may seem like what Jesus might do, but it is clearly out of sync with the teachings and examples of Scripture.

On the other hand I agree with many of Yancey's concepts. Along with some of his ideas about grace I also believe he is on target concerning the political focus of the church. "I wonder about the enormous energy being devoted these days to restoring morality to the United States. Are we concentrating more on the kingdom of this world than on the kingdom that is not of this world? The public image of the evangelical church today is practically defined by an emphasis on two issues that Jesus did not even mention" (p236). Yancey's book is worth reading, but only by those who have learned to filter all concepts through the grid of Scripture.

[http://www.svchapel.org/ThinkOnTheseThingsMinistries/bookreviews/book\\_reviews.html](http://www.svchapel.org/ThinkOnTheseThingsMinistries/bookreviews/book_reviews.html)

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## **Think on These Things**

***(Philippians 4:8)***

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### **The Pain, The Pain**

by Gary E. Gilley, Pastor-teacher at Southern View Chapel

"All of life runs unsettlingly close to the ditch," Joseph Stowell assures us in *The Upside of Down* (p. 17). But that does not mean we like such a life, much less, understand it. Even while we consistently and constantly remind our children that life isn't fair, down deep we somehow believe it should be. This concept is often reinforced by preachers and Christian authors who all but promise that if we honor God then surely God will honor us – and that in the form of tangible reward and blessing. So, it catches many of us by surprise when God doesn't seem to keep His end of the deal. If instead of my "borders being enlarged" God sees fit to take away my job, or shrink my bank account, or saddle me with a prolonged and painful illness, then our conclusion too often is that God has let me down and has some explaining to do. That this has become a common reaction when coming toe-to-toe with pain in our self-seeking age partially explains the success of Philip Yancey's 1988 book, *Disappointment with God*. Yancey hit a responsive cord when he courageously broached three questions: Is God unfair? Is God silent? And, Is God hidden?

Unfortunately, Yancey was long on questions and short on answers. Those who read his book most likely came away more disappointed with God than ever, or worse, with a distorted image of our Lord. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's first back up and honestly approach the dilemma facing us in this sinful world. We will then identify some of the erroneous attempts at explaining this problem. Finally, we will turn to the Scriptures for God's wisdom on the subject.

### **The Problem Defined**

While the so-called "problem of pain" has been a subject of concern and debate at least as far back as Job, nobody has rocked the boat quite like Rabbi Harold Kushner, at least on a popular level. Most Christians treat pain and suffering as if it were an ugly pet cat. We know it is there but we don't want the neighbors to know. So we keep it in the back bedroom, carefully out of sight, paying attention to it only when necessary; all the while hoping that someday it will just go away. Rabbi Kushner dared to open the bedroom door and expose to the world what we have been so careful to hide – that we have a quandary on our hands. In his 1981 book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Kushner defined this problem in a rather traditional manner, "The misfortunes of good people are not only a problem to the people who suffer and to their families, they are a problem to everyone who wants to believe in a just and fair and livable world. They inevitably raise questions about the goodness, the kindness, even the existence of God." Fair enough! Such questions should be faced squarely by the honest believer. Christian theologian D. A. Carson frames the issue this way, "If God is both omnipotent and perfectly good, how can He permit evil? If He is willing but not able to check the suffering, then He is not omnipotent. If He is able but unwilling, He is not perfectly good. The implication is that the very existence of evil calls into question the existence of God."

Pat answers and cliches had long silenced the heart-cries of the suffering, but Kushner dared to say what many were secretly thinking – that God cannot logically be both all-good and all-powerful. Either He lacks the capacity to care significantly about human suffering and evil, or He lacks the strength to do anything about these things. How can both be true? We have to face facts, Kushner said: the God of the Bible, the God who is all-knowing, all-good and all-powerful simply cannot exist. The proof is the existence of suffering and evil. While we recognize that Rabbi Kushner is a theist who makes no claim to be a Christian, his views have nevertheless had a wide impact on the Christian community, as we will see.

### **Attempts at a Solution**

The strain of holding in tension the tri-fold truths concerning God's goodness, power and knowledge has lately proven to be too much in many Christian circles. Following Rabbi Kushner's lead, a number of options have appeared, all having at least one thing in common — the diminishing of the power and glory of God. Let's take a sampling of some prevalent theories that undermine the biblical picture of God.

### **The Benevolent Weaking**

In the midst of the storm of his own personal tragedy (the death of his son), Kushner decided that the only way he could live with his pain and still believe in God was to choose between an omnipotent God and a kind God. He chose kind and came to the conclusion that God was simply unable to do anything that could have spared his son. The rabbi made this arbitrary choice, not on the basis of Scripture, but because it was the only option with which he felt he could live. He writes, "I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die." Kushner's book has sold well over a million copies; so many people are buying what he is selling.

### **It's Not God's Fault**

A handy, although superficial, maneuver to deal with pain and suffering is to blame it on someone else. Common scapegoats include the devil, mankind and even nebulous "life" itself. Let's start with Satan.

### **The devil made him do it**

All the way back to Zoroastrianism various sects have viewed the world as situated in a crossfire between two equally (or almost so) powerful enemies. God, who is all-good, is attempting to infiltrate, and ultimately dominate, the world system with righteousness and virtue. He would too, but the devil, the originator and propagator of evil, is just too much. He is constantly thwarting God's efforts as he pours out his wickedness on the earth. Some believe that God is lucky to keep up with the devil at all, and if this world's condition is any indication, He is losing ground fast, they believe. Others assure us that God will be the ultimate winner in this great war, but He is bound to lose some battles along the way.

This dualistic view of life has infiltrated the thinking and theology of some that down deep surely know better. Take Joseph Stowell's comments in his book *The Upside of Down*. "Pain and trouble," he writes, "are Satan's graffiti scrawled across the face of God's glory. They are Satan's way of

getting back at God, of staining God's reputation." Of course there are major biblical problems with viewing God as helplessly sitting back watching Satan taking pot-shots at His glory in the form of pain. One scriptural hurdle is II Corinthians 12:7-10, which clearly states that Paul's suffering was at the hand of God who used "a messenger of Satan" as His instrument. That is, God was responsible not only for Paul's pain but for the means that caused that pain. But Stowell misses the point and comments on this passage, "It thrills me to watch God turn Satan's best efforts to defeat us into usefulness for His glory. God can always use for glory what Satan intends for abuse." Stowell is committed to blaming Satan for our pain, even when using a biblical text that is saying just the opposite. In this way God gets off the hook, Satan is left holding the bag, and everybody is happy. The only problem is that this is not what Scripture teaches, and if it did, we would be serving a rather weak God who cannot seem to keep ol' Lucifer on his leash – at least not yet.

### **Who me?**

But Satan doesn't get all the credit. Some evil and suffering is the result of human choices. Surely this is true, as much suffering in our world can be traced directly to the sinfulness of its human inhabitants. But where is God during such times? In attempting to explain the meaning of Romans 8:28 Stowell states, "We must take caution, however, against slipping into an irresponsible fatalism that sees God as both the source and the processor of pain. Within the 'all things' of Romans 8:28 is the reality of human choices and consequences." Sounds great! Once again God is exonerated of all suffering. He is neither source nor processor of pain, says Stowell. But God's Word doesn't buy it. As Joseph looked back on the misery that he had endured at the hands of his brothers he focused not on the freewill sin of his brothers but upon the perfect plan of God. He tells them, You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive (Genesis 50:20). God, after all the dust is settled, is not just standing by watching evil people have their way, He is in absolute control.

### **You call this living?**

Philip Yancey's extremely popular book, Disappointment with God, ironically is packaged with a little yellow sticker that reads, "100% Money Back Guarantee. If for any reason you are dissatisfied with this book, return it postpaid... for a complete refund." It has not gone unnoticed that a book on disappointment with God promises not to disappoint – and if it does you can get your money back. If God came with a warranty perhaps He would fare better with today's "seekers."

Nevertheless, Yancey comes up with an interesting way of handling our problem. Pain and suffering can be laid on the doorstep of the devil, or of people, to be sure. But the real culprit seems to be life itself. Toward the end of the book he quotes favorably a friend who has learned to handle tragedy by separating life from God. "I learned, first through my wife's illness and then especially through the accident, not to confuse God with life. I'm no stoic. I am as upset about what happened to me as anyone could be. I feel free to curse the unfairness of life and to vent all my grief and anger. But I believe God feels the same way about that accident – grieved and angry. I don't blame him for what happened.... I have learned to see beyond the physical reality in this world to the spiritual reality. We tend to think, 'Life should be fair because God is fair.' But God is not life." Yancey admits being a bit bothered with this strict separation of 'physical reality' and 'spiritual reality' but intrigued nevertheless.

According to Yancey's borrowed theory God is at odds with life. He, personally, is fair and more than willing to do great things for us, but life (whatever that is) keeps getting in the way. Not only is "God not life," God can't even control life. He is left, along with us, wringing His hands in "grief and anger" at what life has done to His people. If only there was something He could do, but He lacks the power. But it is worse than that, concludes Yancey, "No one is exempt from tragedy or disappointment – God himself was not exempt." How can we expect God to help us, He can't even help Himself. Yancey's basis for such a statement is the Cross. Just think, he recommends, of the tragedy and disappointment that God faced at the Cross. How absurd!!! Without minimizing in any way the pain of the Cross, surely God never viewed it as a tragedy or a disappointment. God had foreordained long before the world was ever created that His Son would die on the cross (Acts 2:16). The Cross is God's power unto salvation for all mankind (I Corinthians 1:18; Romans 1:16,17). Certainly God was saddened at the Cross, as He is with all sin. But He is never disappointed, and views nothing as a tragedy. Yancey's God is far too human; no wonder he is disappointed.

### **Open the door, insert the God of your choice**

Of course all of this leads us to the important question of what kind of God is at the mercy of Satan, or people or life in general? If we choose, with the good rabbi, to believe in a God who is all-loving and all-merciful, if for no other reason than we cannot bear the thought that He is not, that leaves us with a God of one of two deficiencies. Either He is inadequate in power or He is lacking in knowledge. Either He does not have the strength to pull off what His kind heart would love to do, or He has insufficient "know-

how.” But, the reader might ask, do any Christian leaders who claim to be evangelical believe in such an insipid God? Unfortunately yes.

Philip Yancey speaks of God as One who takes risks. In the case of Job, for example, God was trying a little experiment. He was making a “wager” (Yancey’s word) with the devil that Job would stay the course no matter what he had to suffer. God personally did not know if He was right and so He took a chance. As a matter of fact this wager went so far, Yancey believes, that, “God ‘risks’ the future of the human experiment on a person’s response.” The human experiment?! Is the human race an experiment with God – one in which He is uncertain about the outcome; a wager perhaps between God and the devil?

Joseph Stowell follows the same line of reasoning when he writes, “God runs a phenomenal risk when He entrusts His work and reputation to us.... We are risks to Him.... Is it any wonder that God seeks to reduce the risk of His work through us?” What could Yancey and Stowell mean? Do they believe that God is truly taking a gamble on how the world will turn out? Is God in danger of losing His investment in His children? If God is at risk to lose anything, then He is vulnerable; and if God is vulnerable, He is not the omnipotent One of the Bible.

What Yancey and Stowell have hinted at, another group of theologians has developed into a system. The system which is growing in popularity is known as “open theism.” Open theism, in short, is the view that God is bound by time just as we are. As a result God, who we are assured knows all things that are knowable, does not know the future because the future has not yet happened, and thus is unknowable, even to the Lord. God is extremely resourceful and can make excellent guesses about the future, but He can neither infallibly determine nor predict the future. In other words, He simply does not know how things are going to turn out. In Disappointment with God the author’s thesis is that God’s highest goal is for His creatures to love Him freely. He has therefore chosen to limit His own power in order that we might be able to exercise freewill in choosing to either love or reject God. Gregory A. Boyd, professor at Bethel College, explains it this way, “Is my God all-powerful? I want to answer yes and no.... I believe God is all-powerful in the sense that God originally possessed all power. Before Creation, God was the only being who existed, and thus had all the power there was. He could do anything, and nothing opposed Him. But with the creation of free creatures, I maintain, God necessarily surrendered a degree of His power. Or perhaps it is better to say God delegated some of His power. Our freedom is a little piece of ‘controlling power’ lent us by God. In order to allow creatures to be free,

then, God voluntarily gives us a portion of His power, and thereby surrenders His opportunity to ‘always get His way.’”

The “open” God is indeed a God at risk. He not only cannot determine the future; He doesn’t even know the future. He has given His creatures freewill and delegated to them some of His power so that if they choose they can actually frustrate His will. This view has been developed largely in response to the issues that we are discussing, those of evil, suffering, and pain. If God is truly omnipotent and omniscient we have a hard time explaining how He can be a God of love and allow for these kinds of problems. The open theist, much like Kushner, has chosen to retain the love of God but at the expense of the power and knowledge of God. When faced with suffering we can be certain of God’s concern and sympathy. He is suffering right along with us – and wishes He could do more, but simply cannot. In this system God is not in any way responsible for evil or pain – so that problem is solved; but we are left with an anemic God pacing heaven’s floors as He hopelessly watches our plight on earth. D. A. Carson summarizes it this way, “To abandon belief in the omnipotence of God may ‘solve’ the problem of evil, but the cost is enormous: the resulting God is incapable of helping us. He may be able to give us quite a bit of sympathy, and even groan along with us; but He clearly cannot help us – not now, not in the future. There is no point praying to such a God and asking for help. He is already doing the best He can, poor chap, but He has reached the end of His resources.”

In an attempt to shelter God and His reputation from any responsibility, directly or indirectly, for suffering or pain, some have made Him into something less than God. We want to discuss in detail the open theology behind this rush toward a diminished God, but first we must make the biblical case for the omnipotent, omniscient and yet loving God, even in the teeth of tragedy and evil. This will be the subject of our next paper.

<http://www.svchapel.org/ThinkOnTheseThingsMinistries/publications/html/pain1.html>

- Philip Yancey
- General Teachings/Activities
- Available by following this link
- <https://truthwithsnares.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/biblical-discernment-ministries-offline-2020.pdf>



[Please note that I (Cecil Andrews) would not necessarily endorse all the exposes on this last web site but many of them are helpful]