

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

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Mary Ellen Rogers:

Well, specifically it was that she was waking a lot at night. She started waking four, five times at night, and this is a child who'd been sleeping through since she was 11 months old. So it was really unusual and she could never tell us why she was awake, and then I'd say she had a lot of emotional dysregulation. She was a very calm evened tempered child and then her moods just started to swing, didn't they?

Jackson Rogers:

Yeah. And I remember that she always had this little trick she played. She was an early riser and she'd always know when I had stumbled out of bed, and I'm sort of not a good waker. And she'd lay a trap, she'd jump out and ambush me and nearly get me every third day I'd forget that she does this, and she just stopped doing that. And then she stopped really even wanting to say good morning to me, she wanted Mary Ellen, she didn't want me.

John Dickson:

That's Mary Ellen and Jackson Rogers, friends of mine. They're talking about their five year old daughter, Amity.

Jackson Rogers:

But I just thought that she's not finding any joy with me. So I still didn't pick up that this was an illness, I just thought, "Oh, well, kids change and develop and this ebbs and flows and things will get back to normal."

Mary Ellen Rogers:

Well, months went past of this and her not thriving and we knew something was wrong, but it was very psychological. But then we noticed a few more physical things, she started tripping over for no reason. She started staring, she had staring spells and it all came to ahead in the space of one week. As we noticed these more physical issues, the preschool director took me aside and said, "She's really not herself and it's no longer a phase. A phase doesn't go for this long." And I went home that night and I wrote a list, I still remember the little scrap of paper. I was sitting on our couch and I said to Jackson, "We've got to write down everything that we think is different about her." So we made this list and it was an extraordinarily long list. And I looked at it and thought, "Oh my goodness, that is a lot of things that have changed about her."

John Dickson:

The day Mary Ellen was due to take Amity to her GP, Amity was having trouble walking. Mary Ellen described it as her legs just giving way beneath her, they ended up at hospital emergency and Amity had a CT scan.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

She went into the machine by herself and about 20 minutes later, that same ER doctor just gave me this look and he said, "We have to talk."

John Dickson:

Amity was diagnosed with DIPG, Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma, it's a brain tumour, a really bad brain tumor.

Jackson Rogers:

The words themselves just hung heavy. And the way that he was saying it and looking, it was not good. We just knew it was not good.

John Dickson:

Amity was five years old, she was bright, vivacious, caring and funny. But now this, a diagnosis and prognosis of every parent's worst nightmare. Jackson and Mary Ellen were people of faith, deep, long held faith, but nothing prepared them for this. So it's understandable that people without that kind of faith would take all this as evidence that an all good, all powerful God just can't exist.

Speaker 4:

You walk up to the pearly gates and you are confronted by God, what will Stephen Fry say to him, her, or it?

Stephen Fry:

I'll say bone cancer in children, what's that about? How dare you. How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault, it's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain? Because the God who created this universe, if it was created by God, is quite clearly a maniac, utter maniac.

John Dickson:

Whether bone cancer or brain cancer, comedian and author Stephen Fry speaks for many, how can a good God exist in a world of such pain? I think there are things to say in response to this, but there are no neat answers, it's debatable whether there are any intellectually satisfying answers for why this happens. This is the problem at the heart of what philosophers call theodicy, the attempt to justify God in the face of evil and suffering. It's a long philosophical and theological discussion, but there's a danger in it, in attempting to explain suffering, we can diminish people's experience of suffering. I was there during Amity's illness, and the last thing Jackson and Mary Ellen needed or wanted was a homily on, I don't

know, the three reasons God allows pain. Interestingly, the famous Oxford Don, C.S. Lewis found this for himself. He had written an intellectual book on suffering called *The Problem of Pain*.

John Dickson:

He brilliantly lays out some of the semi-cogent explanations of suffering from a Christian point of view. But even his own book and reflections, didn't prepare him for the decline and death of his wife, Joy. The book he wrote after she died was titled *A Grief Observed*. And he explained in it that while he wasn't in much danger of becoming an atheist, Joy's death did challenge his traditionally theodicy. He wrote, "The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like.'"

John Dickson:

So that's where we're heading today into the complex, stimulating, disturbing problem of pain. I'm John Dickson, this is *Undeceptions*. *Undeceptions* is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *Maelstrom: How Jesus Dismantles Patriarchy and Redefines Manhood* by Carolyn Custis James. Every episode of *Undeceptions*, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out. Let's start with some jargon Bethany, normal people don't use the word theodicy, but you philosopher theologians do so what on earth is a theodicy?

Bethany Sollereder:

Well, I define theodicy as just that whole branch of theology that tries to answer, how is God good in light of evil, so anything-

John Dickson:

That's Dr. Bethany Sollereder, a research fellow in science and religion at Campion Hall, University of Oxford. Bethany specializes in the problem of suffering from a theological philosophical perspective. She's also interested in animal suffering and evolution, and I spoke to her about that for a separate episode later in the year, one of her books is called *Why is There Suffering?* It's like no other book on the topic. It's a sort of choose your own adventure where you literally decide which order to read the chapters in, depending on where on the philosophical landscape you find yourself and want to go. Bethany has her convictions about God and pain, but interestingly and perhaps disconcertingly for some, she doesn't push one way or the other, it makes for a fascinating conversation.

Bethany Sollereder:

So anything to deal with the question of suffering, why there's suffering, why there's evil, the term was coined by Leibniz in 1710 for his book, *Theodicy*. And people have retrospectively applied that, whether rightly or not we can discuss, to earlier theological treaties on trying to deal with God's goodness in light of suffering.

John Dickson:

Well, that's what I wanted to ask because my Oxford Dictionary tells me that it really only popped into the English language in the 18th century, so is that when we started asking this question about the goodness of God in the face of suffering?

Bethany Sollereder:

No, the question has been asked. We've got, I think like Lactantius points to Epicurus in 300 BC as setting out the basic question, if God is good and God is powerful, why in the world would there be suffering?

John Dickson:

Epicurus is the early 3rd century BC pagan philosopher who advocated that the gods aren't really interested in us, and so we're just left to find pleasure as an antidote to pain as we struggle along in this world. We have a bunch of his teachings, but much of it is lost. This particular Epicurean conundrum about God and suffering, is found in a much later work by the Christian philosopher Lactantius in the early 4th century AD.

John Dickson:

I really love Lactantius, I may have mentioned him once or twice. And in one of his works, he interacts with a whole bunch of ancient Greek philosophers. And along the way, he tells us of an argument of Epicurus, which he no doubt had in front of him, but which is now lost to us, which poses the dilemma, "If God is able to end suffering, but is unwilling, he must be unkind or disinterested. If he is willing, but unable, he is feeble. Either way, he isn't really worthy of the name God in the providential sense." Lactantius basically responds by asking, "How on earth do we know God's unwillingness to end all suffering, isn't due to some wise and good reason?" More about that later.

Bethany Sollereder:

I think what happened in the 18th century was that people began to be obsessed with the logical compatibility of that question, rather than how do we live well in light of suffering, or how does suffering transform our lives? Or even, should we trust God rather than Zeus or rather than some other God? So in the ancient world, this question was always in the context of polytheism, it was, should we trust Israel's God Yahweh or should we trust some other God? And so the question of suffering was bound up with those kind of decisions, not should we believe a God exists at all, that wasn't the primary question.

John Dickson:

Of course, these days people like Stephen Fry and many others are focused on that question. Pain and suffering disprove God's existence, but do they? Okay, but not all pain and suffering are necessarily bad or call into question God's goodness.

Bethany Sollereder:

No, I don't think that they do. In fact, I would argue that pain and suffering are actually gifts of God given so that we can live well in this world. And that sounds counterintuitive until you see people who don't

have the ability to feel pain. So I'm going to give two examples, the first, people are born with a congenital insensitivity to pain. So from birth, they don't know how to feel pain. And what happens is they don't live very long because they don't ever learn how to protect themselves. So if you or I run ourselves headlong into a wall, we think, "Oh man, that hurt. I'm never going to do that again." Whereas they will often feel quite an interesting set of vibrations through their head and think, "Wow, that was kind of fun. Let's do it again." And so they just damage themselves over and over again.

Bethany Sollereeder:

And so physical suffering keeps us safe, but actually emotional suffering also allows us to live in community. So the modern equivalent of not feeling the pain of the mind, social suffering, is psychopathy. It's somebody who cannot feel emotional pain due to social situations, and that is not a good way to live in this world, that's a really hard way to live. And God in healing somebody from that would be giving them back the ability to suffer, so I think that there are those types of suffering that are really good. And then there's another category where you are suffering because somebody chose to do evil to you, and I don't think that that's suffering that God intends.

John Dickson:

The common logical synergism goes like this, an all powerful God could end suffering. An all good God would end suffering, but since suffering exists, an all powerful, all good God does not exist. I put this to Bethany and she, well...

Bethany Sollereeder:

In all honesty John, as soon as somebody puts those three together, I am bored out of my mind and I just-

John Dickson:

I hate boring my special guests so I quickly moved on to the next question. The fact is, as a logical argument, this famous synergism doesn't quite have the force many people think. For a full scale analysis, you really should Google Logical Problem of Pain and add professor Alvin Plantinga, one of the leading philosophers of religion over the last 30 years. Maybe producer Kaley can put that in the show notes. But the basic line of thought is pretty simple. The existence of suffering could be used as evidence against God's existence only if we could first show that an all good, all powerful God couldn't have good reasons for allowing suffering to continue, but how could we know that? We ourselves from time to time allow some measure of pain in our lives for good reasons, whether the pain of a physical challenge, the pain of medical treatment or the pain we let our children experience when we give them certain freedoms.

John Dickson:

The fact that we allow some small measure of pain for the sake of some small good ends, at least means we can't rule out that God himself might have infinitely greater reasons, for the greater measure of pain that he allows in our world. The point is until we show that there could be no good purpose behind God

allowing suffering, this popular argument doesn't have logical force. As Lactantius replied to Epicurus, "How on earth do you know that the infinite God doesn't have good reasons for permitting evil and pain?" In fact, the whole thing can be turned around into a very different syllogism that is in fact more logically coherent. Think of this, an all God would only allow suffering for good reasons. An all powerful God could achieve those purposes, therefore if God exists, he must have a good and achievable rationale for suffering. Of course, I'm well aware that logic is hardly the point when faced with genuine pain, I get that.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

But it was the oncologist who said, "You've probably got nine months." And I remember saying to my sister who'd come to the hospital from Brisbane saying, "It's terminal cancer." And she said, "Is that the word the doctor used?" And I said, well... I think I must have said something like "Well, he said she's got nine months." And I just remember standing there with her and saying, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

Jackson Rogers:

I remember coming back the following night. So I stayed the first night in the hospital, Amity was asleep and then she woke up. The following night I came back and Mary Ellen's mom was there with the kids, and we hadn't yet told them all the details of the seriousness. And so we got to dinner time and we decided as usual we'd sing our grace, and we sang the Lord is good to me and so I thank the Lord. And I remember looking at my mother-in-law and I haven't been able to sing that song since, it's been a wrestle.

John Dickson:

The Lord is good to me and so I thank the Lord, hard words when you're losing a child. At the time of Amity's diagnosis, Jackson and Mary Ellen had a Christian faith, we were all at church together. Their question was less the logical one, does God exist? And was more of the moral or theological one, what on earth is God doing and what does he intend to do about it? It's a very ancient question among Christian thinkers. I want to wind back now, do a little bit of ancient and medieval history of Christian thought. Who were the ancient and medieval Christian thinkers that did confront theodicy and what do you make of their projects?

Bethany Sollereider:

Yeah. In one way or another, I think just about anyone. If you're looking at the church fathers, you're looking at Irenaeus, you're looking at Augustine, you're looking the medieval figures, Aquinas, Bonaventure, all these people come to mind, and of course they all dealt to some degree with this question of suffering. But it's interesting that you call it a project because of course that's exactly what they would not have called it. So what they are doing is as Kenneth Surin points out is they are responding to the lived problem of evil in a pastoral way. And so you see that in their questions, they're not trying to take apart the sceptical arguments from atheists for the vast majority of the time. What they're trying to do is say, "How can we know and love God?"

John Dickson:

In a world of suffering.

Bethany Sollereeder:

Yeah.

John Dickson:

I had to ask a little more about Thomas Aquinas, of course. One of them who comes sort of vaguely close to more of a philosophical project is Thomas Aquinas, you mentioned him. And I want to do a few things I'm fascinated by him. First, tell us something about what he's trying to do philosophically speaking, just stand back, what is Thomas doing?

Bethany Sollereeder:

Well, he's a really interesting character because of course, if we're thinking about what he's ultimately doing, which is to try and know and love God better. He begins in his five ways by saying, "Of course, the nature of God cannot be known. So we cannot know what God is, all we can do is know what God is not." And so I think-

John Dickson:

Bethany is talking here about Aquinas's five ways to demonstrate the existence of God. We talk quite a bit about those in episode 57, Jesus Philosopher. I spoke to Angus Brooke who specializes in Aquinas. So go back and look for that one, or just go to the show notes where there's a link.

Bethany Sollereeder:

And so I think from the very beginning he has this, what we call a via negativa. He has a negative approach to saying, let's get rid of the distractions. Let's get rid of the things that are not God, so that what we see at the end is God. And when it comes to the problem of suffering and I'm not an Aquinas scholar, I should say. So I'm thinking how he's been interpreted by people like Herbert McCabe, there are two sorts of different kinds of evil. There's evil that is suffered, evil that happens to you. So say a rock falls off of a cliff and falls on you, that's not moral evil in a problematic way. And he would say that the reason that happens is because of conflicting goods that come from what God has created.

Bethany Sollereeder:

So God created gravity, God created rocks to have a particular firmness, more firmness than the human body, so that they can create a crust to the earth that we can walk on. But at the same time, when those things try and inhabit the same physical space, the one that is softer aka my body is going to not do so well in that encounter. So there's a conflict of two good things happening there. And then he's also going to say there's sin, there is moral evil, and he's going to say that is not anything at all, that that is a lack of that created goodness.

Bethany Sollereder:

And so one of the examples I use in my book is it's like God can create light for example, but God doesn't actually create darkness. Darkness is the lack of light, and so if I cup my hands into a little ball, like I'm hiding off in my hands and I peek into that, I see darkness. Now I haven't created that darkness, I didn't set a little darkness fire or anything like that, all I did was I blocked out light. And so that's the way in Aquinas's view that evil emerges into the world, because we can create little pockets of darkness in ourselves and in our lives and in our worlds, by blocking out the creative, the good love of God that otherwise permeates creation.

John Dickson:

Where evil comes from is probably a question for another episode. Actually, we've had quite a few people write into the show and ask that one. Bethany is more interested in exploring the various ways we cope with evil, how we come to terms with suffering and Bethany lays out the alternatives in a really compelling way. She's more generous to some of the views than I would be, but that's part of her charm and the importance of her book. The fact is different people find different paths compelling, and so Bethany strives to explain what it is people are looking for when they're drawn to one explanation over another. You're a great believer in teasing out the options around suffering and seeing what benefit or otherwise the different options might offer. So can I throw a few options at you and you tell me what might be helpful and unhelpful about them, it's a kind of quick fire Friday. Okay.

Bethany Sollereder:

All right. I'm ready. It's Monday morning, but sure.

John Dickson:

First option, God doesn't end suffering because he kind of can't, he's given the universe and us a lot of freedom and even he doesn't know how it's all going to pan out.

Bethany Sollereder:

Great. So I actually really like this one, even though at first it sounds a little bit scary and there's usually two camps in this sort of view, one is called process theism and the other is called open theism. And the process theists are the ones who say, actually God cannot stop suffering. Open theists say God does not for other reasons, particularly because the nature of love requires true freedom on the behalf of the beloved. And so if God stopped freedom, that would also stop our ability to encounter one another, to love one another, to grow as people and as agents in the world. And the idea that even God doesn't know how it will pan out is articulated differently between those two.

Bethany Sollereder:

So the process theists would say we actually don't know if God will win or not, this is the profound depth of divine love is that God began this creation and will continue to woo it towards completion, but the risk is such that God doesn't know. Open theism says, "Oh, God will definitely win. God will one day step in and abolish evil." But the way that that pans out will be in response to and in partnership with how we've

created the world. And so what an open theist would say is that God doesn't absolutely work out what the future will look like, but is more like a jazz musician working with others to create beautiful harmonies out of even are discordant acts.

John Dickson:

He better be a maestro or it's going to be a rotten tune. One of the most important advocates of open theism is Clark H. Pinnock. His basic argument is that human freedom is real only if the future is basically open. If it's open, it must be open even to God, God is of course powerful Pinnock said, but part of his love is to leave things open ended, he himself is a participant in our choices. Now, some people find this comforting that's Bethany Sollereder point. People find some level of peace knowing that God is not responsible for the things going wrong, it's all just the freedom of creation, and God himself is watching with patience and love through it all. God is part of the unfolding story, and even he doesn't quite know how it's going to end.

John Dickson:

It'll be fair to say that most Christian thinkers from Irenaeus to Aquinas and beyond, view open theism as a departure from the Bible's portrait of God, a God who knows and commands the future, and I'm not a fan of open theism myself. For one thing although it might let God off the hook for suffering, it doesn't give the sufferer much hope that God can and will bring everything back to a glorious resolution, which is a big part of what the Bible says to the sufferer. Still open theism is an important theory, and we're going to put a link in the show notes for some explanatory articles along with some critiques. Okay, next theory. God is at war, the devil and his armies are the ones wreaking havoc, and God's sometimes wins, sometimes doesn't and that explains suffering.

Bethany Sollereder:

Yeah. So I think that that really is quite a simple way to approach it, it just says, "Okay, God doesn't want this suffering, but God has an opponent in Satan." And this is particularly useful if you realize that suffering and death have been aspects of creation for 4 billion years since life began. So if you only had death as a result of sin, then you wouldn't expect it in the paleontological record, you'd expect it to come in, however many thousand years ago that modern humans have been around. Whereas we see that dinosaurs ate each other and have cancer and all these things, and so the God is at war allows us to deal with that chronological problem. But I think that it hands too much of creation over to Satan that would be my take on it's demerits-

John Dickson:

So the God at war theory would say that suffering wasn't part of God's plan, it's the result of God's enemy instead. And the ancient fallen angels as Bethany writes in her book could have been around mucking things up and disrupting God's harmonious creation all through its development. Next theory. What about Deism? What would you say is strong and weak about the idea that we shouldn't really waste our time blaming God, because God just wound up the universe 13.8 billion years ago or whatever, and he isn't involved in how things play out.

Bethany Sollereder:

Yeah. Well, I think what that does is that it allows people to say, let's not look for supernatural explanations, let's just get on with solving the problem of suffering as we see it. God gave us a good world, God gave us reason to deal with things and we can get on with it. I think that the problems with that is for me, I would really have questions about the goodness of that God. And I think I would have questions about our actual ability to deal with some of the problems we're faced with. If the problem is death, no matter how technologically advanced we are, that's not a problem we're going to solve. And part of the problem is this way that suffering is both deeply disturbing and necessary.

Bethany Sollereder:

So if God is ever going to create a new creation that doesn't involve pain and suffering, it's going to need to be a world built on totally different foundations. And that is just not this world, and that's not something we can technologically create ever, because we'd need a different law of physics. So I still need God to come in and take creation back down and rebuild it entirely for the promises in the Bible to be good.

John Dickson:

And then of course, there's atheism. Richard Dawkins an evolutionary biologist and outspoken atheist wrote in his book *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian Way of Life*, these words, thanks director Mark.

Mark Hadley:

"In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the proper use should expect, if there is at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."

John Dickson:

Atheism there's no rhyme or reason in the universe, the chaos of the world is exactly what you'd expect because there's no grand mind behind it all. Are you able to describe what you think is attractive and unattractive about that?

Bethany Sollereder:

Yeah. I think, again, it just cuts through all of the philosophical debate and says, "Nope, this is it." And I think that it has more confidence in human potential than most of the other ones. So it really says, "Look, the world is what we make it, meaning is what we make it, so let's get to work. Let's stop your, 'Oh, it's good for you to suffer because you can drawn near to God or whatever.' No we're going to stop suffering it's a clear vision."

Bethany Sollereder:

I think it is sometimes closer to the God of the Bible that I know than some of the purportedly Christian options I know. So I think even if one doesn't stop at atheism, I think if you've been taught that God hates

you and is sitting over you waiting to punish you for evil, I'm going to say atheism looks really attractive next to that. And might actually be a really good palette cleanser, for you to be able to listen in a new way to the goodness of the gospel.

John Dickson:

Yeah. There's loads of kinds of gods that don't exist, about which we should be atheist.

Bethany Sollereder:

Yeah.

John Dickson:

Okay. I like that. Atheism is a really good palette cleanser. I admit that I occasionally run a thought experiment, where I myself become an atheist. I will literally be walking along at the beach or a crowded city street and convince myself there's no God, and that everything is just accidental. I don't stay there long, but it is really clarifying. It helps me think through where I would possibly find meaning if there's no transcendence, if there is at bottom, no design, no purpose. And it helps me ponder how on earth I would try to establish an ethical framework if there's no evil and no good. And how I would view the world, if I thought there was nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. I'm not recommending this as a habit dear listener. But my thought experiments always leave me pretty grateful that I find God utterly compelling. And that brings us to the last option, it's all a mystery. It's all a great mystery, God is God, we're not, we just have to find solace in the mystery.

Bethany Sollereder:

Well, I think that that ultimately is where any honest inquirer ends up. So at some point you have to be able to say, "We just don't know enough, our limited human minds cannot figure this out." And so I think when you talk to people who've suffered deep tragedies and traumas, they often talk about this as the point where they felt most peace, the point where they finally said, "Okay, I'm not in control. God, I don't understand what's going on, but I trust you and I will walk through this with you by my side and it will be okay. And I cannot explain how it will be okay or why, but I will trust." And that's really, really good, that's a great inner transformation of the soul.

Bethany Sollereder:

On the harder side, I think that saying it's a mystery can often be a cop-out for doing hard work in both understanding the world we live in, and in understanding and in relieving suffering, for example. So if doctors didn't work really hard trying to figure out why they're suffering, there's a whole lot of suffering, they'd never have gotten around to preventing. If engineers didn't work out ways to get fresh water to people and build sewers, we would have diptheria, all these cholera things running through our system, that would cause a whole lot more suffering. And the only reason it didn't was because people said, "Here's this suffering, let's figure out why it's happening and how we can prevent it."

John Dickson:

And right there is one of the biggest criticisms of theodicy. We can spend too much time trying to explain it and not enough time seeking to eradicate it. And as every listener will know because none of us is untouched by suffering, when you are actually suffering you don't want someone to tell you why it's happening exactly, you want someone to make it stop. Try explaining why God doesn't end suffering to a five year old.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

She just didn't understand how God would not be able to save her if God is this creator of everything, how could he possibly not see the good in saving her? And that was a really difficult thing to discuss with her. And so I could see ourselves as a family just pulling away from the God stuff with the children, because it just seemed so hard. So I think we probably read fewer Bible stories wouldn't you say, probably prayed a little bit less actually as a family, bizarrely. Because I think I really struggle with this idea that we would pray fervently every night for the most pressing issue in our family, which was that Amity is unwell, and yet I knew that she was going to see that prayer was going to go unanswered. So it was a really tricky terrain to navigate and look how Amity managed it, she went through I suppose the normal reactions. She was furious, she said very clearly, Jesus isn't magical and God's not real, so she went through anger, disbelief.

Jackson Rogers:

I remember she had a special name for God.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

Yes.

Jackson Rogers:

Which you can repeat.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

God is a poo in imperfect language of a five year old. I think the most hilarious one though and she really meant it. She said when I get to heaven I'm going to kick Jesus in the face, which might sound appalling. But we all felt, "Yeah, fine do it and he'll take it." But then I felt I saw her come round to a weird sort of acceptance and you could say, well, she was just saying that to calm me down and to say what I wanted her to say. But she did start saying in her very last month, when words were still able to form, she'd say things like, "Well, I suppose Jesus will look after me." It became not so much, "Why doesn't God answer my prayers? Why doesn't he save me?" It became more, "Well, I guess I'm going to heaven and I'll be looked after." And so her sentence about kicking Jesus in the face when she gets there, sort of captures the anger, but at the same time rooted in belief, I think the belief remained intact.

John Dickson:

God is a poo and I'm going to kick Jesus in the face, it's confronting, but there's a Psalm or two about that in the Bible. One striking thing about the Bible's whole approach to suffering is that it fully endorses our right to doubt, to plead and complain to God himself. The book of Psalms songs of prayer and praise that God has given to us to say to him, and roughly 30 of the 150 Psalms are classified as Psalms of complaint or lament. Here's Psalm 10, "Why Lord do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble." Or Psalm 13, "How long Lord will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I soul with my thoughts? And day after day have sorrow in my heart." Or Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? So far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest."

John Dickson:

If I were a Hindu saying this sort of thing would be a sign of my ignorance, that everything happens as a result of karma, the balancing of the universe. And if I were a Buddhist, this would be proof that I was not enlightened, that I was too attached to the things of this world. And if I were a Muslim, it would border on blasphemy since in Islam, everything that happens is the finger of Allah decreed in god's eternal book. And of course, if I were an atheist, it's all utterly meaningless, there's no rhyme or reason and there's no one to put this question to.

John Dickson:

And I reckon many church folk would feel uncomfortable uttering these words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Many feel the only faithful response is in Psalm 23, the more famous one, "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing, he makes me lie down in green pastures," and all that beautiful stuff. But the presence of Psalm 22 immediately before Psalm 23 reminds us that sometimes the plea, "My God why," is just as much an expression of faith as the affirmation, "The Lord is my shepherd." The God of the Bible asks us to approach him with our doubts and fears and frustrations, because it's in this mode of personal engagement that we are in a position to hear something of God's reply. More after the break.

John Dickson:

This episode of Undeceptions is sponsored by Zondervan's new book Maelstrom by Carolyn Custis James. This is a ground-breaking book when Carolyn wrote the first edition of Maelstrom back in 2015, it was well before its time, it was published before the Me Too movement, and before the term toxic masculinity really took hold in the vernacular. Recent history says Carolyn has put an exclamation mark on the relevance and urgency of what she called the Maelstrom. That's a rather appropriate word play on the legendary and deadly whirlpools in the open sea that pull hapless fishing boats, crew, and cargo down into its watery depths. We'll be talking to Carolyn for a much longer chat later in the year, which I'm really looking forward to. But in the meantime you can find Maelstrom on Amazon, of course, or just go to zondervan.com for more information.

John Dickson:

15 year old Zawadi stopped going to school when a deformity in her lower limbs, progressed to a point where she just couldn't make the long journey on foot. Zawadi's mother sold part of the family farm in rural Tanzania to get help from traditional healers, but Zawadi continued to deteriorate. When a medical worker from the Karagwe Program saw Zawadi, she was sent to a local hospital for treatment and began receiving physiotherapy. Now Zawadi can walk with crutches and she's started leather work classes, learning to make school shoes, which will provide ongoing employment. The Karagwe Disability Program supported by Anglican Aid offers assistance for people in rural Tanzania, living with a disability. Services like this are all too rare, but for people like Zawadi they are life changing. You can help Anglican Aid support more people like Zawadi by going to anglicanaid.org.au, that's anglicanaid.org.au. Thank you for supporting this organization I trust.

David Zeigler:

So DIPG the long name for that is Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma, it's actually the most aggressive, most difficult to treat cancer to affect anyone, children or adults. It's an absolutely devastating disease, and it's one of the only cancers for which there is actually absolutely no effective therapy. As an oncologist-

John Dickson:

That's associate professor David Zeigler and oncologist at the Children's Cancer Institute here in Sydney. We heard before the break that Amity Rogers was just five years old when she was diagnosed with DIPG, a terminal brain tumor. Her parents, Mary Ellen and Jackson, both people of Christian faith were thrown into months of despair, as they watched their little girl get weaker and weaker.

David Zeigler:

As an oncologist, the worst most difficult conversation we can have with parents is to tell them, "Your child has DIPG, they aren't curable, we have no treatments, we know that your child is going to die."

Mary Ellen Rogers:

I think the thing about DIPG, that doctors know so well, which is why they turn pale when you mention that your child died of DIPG, because they call it the worst of the worst, is that most children get locked-in syndrome. And so that's to say that cognitively they're actually fine, that the tumour's in the brain stem, so they're not really affected in their thinking area. But they're trapped because once the brain stem, which is where the messages come from your thinking part of your brain through to your body, once that brain stem is so clogged with tumor cells, your body, you can't do anything. So she slowly lost herself chunk by chunk, we had her able to squeeze our finger and then that went, she couldn't squeeze our fingers. We had her able to flash open her eyes, but then she couldn't open her eyes. So for the last three weeks, I'd say a clear three weeks, she had full locked-in syndrome, could not do anything.

John Dickson:

This is the point where philosophizing about suffering just feels wrong. And Bethany Sollereeder feels that deeply. You've written a whole book on the problem of suffering, your own doctorate at Exeter University

treated this. But some would say it's really indulgent to philosophers about all this stuff, because there's a real suffering world out there, and in a way philosophizing silences the cries of the truly pained.

Bethany Sollereder:

Yeah. No, I hear that and I absolutely agree with that, which is I think why I've tried to write this new book that I hope will actually be helpful to people. Because one of the things that really frustrated me, was that every book you opened on the question of evil started with a disclaimer, "This is not meant for anybody who is suffering, this really isn't that kind of book." And I thought, "Well, what is the point of this then? I don't get it, why are we doing this?" Now having said that the privilege I had, and it probably was indulgent of spending three years reading through all of these different views was actually I think spiritually beneficial to me. So I sort of say, I did two PhDs, one of the head and one of the heart, and looking through all of these options helped me figure out what I did think.

Bethany Sollereder:

And it has helped bring me into a place where I feel like I have a better grasp, not a full grasp, but a better of grasp of when to say here's a problem we can and should solve, here is suffering that actually is good in its own way and so we shouldn't try and just stop it, and here is suffering that we can't understand, and we have to trust God with. And I think that figuring out those three different things, it's like the old Serenity Prayer, God, grant the power to change the things that I can, the patience to endure the things I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference. I really do think that the time I got to spend helped me figure out where I think those boundaries lie, and therefore has helped me decide how to spend my life and my time in trying to serve God.

John Dickson:

There are probably three types of questions we ask when confronted by the evil and suffering of the world. There's a question about the past, why did God allow it? There's one about the future, what will he do about it? And there's a question for the present, where is God in our pain. Put another way we want explanation, we want restoration and we want to find consolation. The Bible is shy on specific explanation. There is broad explanation on human evil, the Bible sort of says that God has created humans with the capacity to refuse his ways. And while we use that capacity with harmful consequences, God considers that a greater good than if he had made us without that capacity. On natural suffering the Bible says basically that the human rejection of the creator brought a measure of decay to the creation, a reverberation of our estrangement from God. The creation itself experiences a degree of independence from the creator that somehow mirrors the independence humanity has demanded from God, at least that's how I read what's going on in Genesis chapter three.

John Dickson:

But beyond this, the Bible doesn't explain why any particular tragedy occurs, the Bible is shy as I say about straightforward explanations of our suffering. And it's not that there weren't tidy options available in ancient times, the writers of the Bible were well aware that, for example, many Egyptians, Greeks and Romans viewed suffering as divine payback for God's punishing, and the Bible doesn't take that option.

And then there were the naturalists, like the Epicureans who said the gods weren't really involved, everything is just random atoms and obviously the Bible doesn't teach that either. And there are even quite a few Greeks and Romans who believed in something pretty close to reincarnation and karma, so Pythagoras was one, but so was the great Plotinus. Slaves, the poor, murder victims said Plotinus are all getting what they deserve for their deeds from a previous cycle of life.

John Dickson:

Now, these are all tidy explanations. The Bible could have taken any one of them, but rejects them all. And in one biblical book, apparently all about suffering the book of Job, there are lots of questions, lots of proposals and no answers. Check out the book it's really long, but basically job suffers the loss of his family and the loss of his property and goods and fame and social status. And he cries out to God why, he says, "Here I am, I'm righteous. Why have you done this?" And loads of people, his friends and wise ones come to him to give him an explanation, and all the explanations turn out to be wrong. There is just the final appearance of God to Job at the end, which fills him with awe and wonder.

John Dickson:

And there's also the final restoration of Job's fortunes, God's presence and restoration, but no explanation, it's almost like the Bible deliberately shuns explanation. This is exactly what some great philosopher theologians of our day have said. People like Jürgen Moltmann and his most celebrated student Professor Miroslav Volf of Yale, a guest on our show last year. Volf argues that neither Job, nor the apostle Paul in the new Testament were interested in theodicy, in defending God in the face of suffering. Here's Volf in a lecture at Biola University in 2019.

Miroslav Volf:

In all justification of God in the face of suffering. Most of us think that we can detect at least a whiff of a putrid odour of attempts to justify suffering itself. The long speeches of Job's friends are a case in point, the others are all about showing that in some ways suffering is appropriate. The absence of theodicy in Paul echoes one of the main points of the book of Job, namely that the silence of non-understanding honours great suffering in a way that explanatory and justificatory speech cannot. And that it is intellectually and morally more honest, fitting the scope of any possible knowledge we could have about both God and the world. God's response to suffering was liberation, not an explanation.

John Dickson:

I emailed Miroslav a follow up question to all this, and he kindly replied with this dense but clarifying answer, "The intellectual question concerning the problem of evil is not the most important question, the most important is the overcoming of evil. For me, the two overcoming of evil and understanding how evil in the world does not undermine God's goodness are related, but irreducible. So I hope that in the end, one, God will make all things well. And that two, we will understand how the suffering of history does not defeat the claim that God is good. The idea is that we cannot judge the significance of any event until all its consequences are clear, and we can in principle not know that until the end of history. Only after the day of judgment, will we know as distinct from hope that suffering is not a defeater of God's

goodness." I admit I find this compelling, God offers not so much an explanation, which might in fact trivialize our present suffering, but a restoration, an actual overcoming of evil in the climax of the story. Bethany Sollereder agrees and she added something important.

Bethany Sollereder:

I find it very compelling and we sometimes think, well, an event happens and it has a meaning. If you can't see the meaning of event, you're just not looking hard enough, but I'm actually not sure if that's true. So there's a great, it's actually from the Dallas tradition, but it's a story of the wise farmer. There's a wise farmer living in a village and his horse, which is the only source of his livelihood runs away. And all the village people go, "Oh no, this is the worst thing that could have happened." He goes, "Well, I don't know, too early to tell." And so about three days later, the horse comes back at the head of a whole herd of horses that it's found out in the wild and has brought back to it's home.

Bethany Sollereder:

So now the farmer is rich beyond any means and everyone's going, "Oh wow, you're right. The horse running away was the best thing that could have happened, this is so great." He says, "Well, I don't know yet, it's too early to judge." And then his only son is training one of the wild horses and it severely breaks his leg, he's just going to be unable to walk for life. And all the people say, "Oh yeah, this was a terrible curse," and on and on. And then it turns out the army breaks out in war and all the other young men who could still walk, have to go off to war where they all die. So actually the meaning of that first event, the horse running away keeps shifting from being seen as a blessing and a curse because it does other later events reflect back on what that event meant.

Bethany Sollereder:

And its meaning is not actually fixed at the time it happened, and I think that we've all had moments where we thought I wish that hadn't happened at the same time, given what happened later, I'm glad it did because it made me who I am and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else or anyone else. And I think that God somehow create the story of this life in such a way that we will all say, "Wow, God, what a wonderful work you've done." And that's what redemption is, it's not just making up for the bad things, it's not compensation, it's recreation in a new form that is so compelling, that it's better than what we could imagine.

John Dickson:

Wynton Marsalis is arguably the greatest living trumpeter, he somehow combines the precision of his classical training and the free flowing inspiration of jazz, that's the track After You've Gone on his album Standards and Ballots. The Atlantic Monthly recounted a remarkable story of musical discord and resolution that involved Marsalis. He was apparently playing incognito in a tiny jazz bar in New York City, one sleepy evening in August. In the fourth song, Marsalis stepped forward and played a haunting ballad that had the room spellbound. At the climax of the tune, someone's mobile phone went off.

John Dickson:

The Atlantic says blaring a rapid sing song melody of electronic bleeps, people started giggling apparently and returned to their drinks and conversation. Marsalis stood motionless behind the microphone, eyebrows arched, and the Atlantic journalist who happened to be there witnessing this scribbled on his notepad, "Magic ruined." A few moments later Marsalis started to play again, this time the mobile phone tune he'd just heard people laughed appreciatively and turned their attention back to him, then he repeated it we're told and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him, in a few minutes he resolved the improvisation which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo, and ended up exactly where he had left off. The journalist remarked the ovation was tremendous.

John Dickson:

A musical resolution, like the conclusion of the best stories, isn't a bad image of what Miroslav Volf and Bethany Sollereeder are saying. When we're in the discord, it just feels like discord and explanations fail to comfort. But if the Christian melody, the Christian story is true, there's more to come, there's a resolution ahead. God intends to take all the discord and the sadness and somehow, I don't know how, somehow weave it back into his eternal melody. And if I can push the analogy just a step further, the resurrection of Jesus within history is like the first notes of the resolution.

John Dickson:

The resurrection tells us where we're headed, what kind of story this is, it's not a story of magic ruined, it's one of virtuosity resolution, one that will end in an ovation. It's a story that doesn't just resolve the tension, it's one that is all the greater for having passed through the discord to the resolution. And for those enduring suffering, what are the resources that you might call upon from scripture?

Bethany Sollereeder:

I think the narratives of the cross continue to be the place where I go the most, walking with Jesus as he walks through tremendous and innocent suffering is where I find a home. I also find a home in the Psalms, in the prayers of God's people articulating not only the joys, but also the despair and the hurt and the pain of life. And you hear that question, "God where are you?" Over and over again.

John Dickson:

Can't you see? Don't you hear? I mean it's very risky, it's far more risky than the average Christian today.

Bethany Sollereeder:

Yeah. Because God can take our questioning. God's going to be just fine, even if we're angry, even if we hate God for a while, God's going to be fine, so it's better to that than to pretend that you're okay with everything when you're not.

John Dickson:

And this brings us back to Psalm 22 and the cry of the sufferer, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If you open up Mark's gospel, it turns out that these are also Jesus words on the cross. He chose this ancient poem for his final moments, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's not a cry of self doubt on the part of Jesus, it's a deliberate identification with the suffering poet of Psalm 22. And so with anyone who has ever felt like crying out, why God, there on the cross, God in Christ enters our pain. He gets his hands dirty and even bloody. He experiences betrayal, injustice, agony, and even a final breath. Now, if that's true, God understands our pain not just because he's all knowing, but because he's experienced it firsthand. I know that's not an explanation, but many find it a comfort or at least a sign that whatever is the meaning of suffering, it has to be consistent with the God who himself suffered in this world alongside us, with us, for us.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

So that night she slipped into a coma in her bed, in her bedroom with her brothers, with Jackson lying on the floor next to her. And so the very final day was us in a way going about what we'd all done for weeks and weeks and weeks just, 'Oh, well, one kid's got to go out. Well, let him go out.'" And yet we knew it was last day, her breathing had changed so radically. And I think what that did was the stress of realizing it's today, when we'd been living with how many weeks, maybe six weeks of going, "Is it today? Is it today? Is it tomorrow?" And then that actual day came and we knew it was that day, we just all fell apart.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

We'd been coping so miraculously, and then I think the stress just became intolerable. But we were there with her, beside her, but there was friction and stress, and it wasn't as if it was this beautiful bedside vigil. The boys were off watching a documentary because they'd fled the room, the baby needed a breastfeed, and Jackson and I were sort of a bit at each other and the nurses wouldn't leave, "Why wouldn't they leave?"

Jackson Rogers:

Yeah.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

It wasn't a beautiful farewell.

John Dickson:

I remember at the time Jackson and Mary Ellen telling me this about Amity's last day, about how much they hated the moment. Not just because they were finally confronted with what they had dreaded for months watching Amity take her last breaths on their couch. But also because it didn't seem at all spiritual or profound, it wasn't a beautiful slipping away. They described it as disorganized and agitated even, it's yet another thing from this time that haunts them.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

I think we probably felt we didn't make her feel our love for her enough on that last day, that's probably what really eats us up.

Jackson Rogers:

I think so.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

And we can't make it up to her, well, not yet, so that is a pain that we just endure.

John Dickson:

Amity died on the 11th of January, 2018. She was six years old. It's been almost four and a half years and Jackson and Mary Ellen couldn't tell you honestly, what part of the story they feel they're in. The grief is palpable, the future looks dark in many ways.

Jackson Rogers:

Even after diagnosis and before she died, physically, the anticipatory grief that I had, or the grief of knowing what was coming was quite hard to bear, it was a thing in my life and you had to push through it, it was fine, we could do it, but it was physical. After she died it was really physical, I felt ill. I think from memory Mary Ellen, you had a headache for eight months or something, it was just really... So it's not that anymore, but for me it's pretty unresolved, it's not really getting better, it's getting less immediate. I try and make sense of it, make sense of it's maybe not the right word. It's not making sense of it, it's making something meaningful come out of it.

John Dickson:

But meaning and explanation are hard to come by, sometimes the words, "Why have you forsaken me," from Psalm 22 and the lips of Jesus seem the only right sentiment.

Jackson Rogers:

There are days when I'm able to be thankful that there's a God who suffered, and so that God knows what Amity went through, that God's with me. And then there are days when I just think that doesn't make sense, that this all just doesn't make sense. It's amazing to me how often I feel like my emotions are still what Amity was experiencing, the anger, the you are not real, I'm sort of the same.

John Dickson:

God is a poo.

Jackson Rogers:

Yeah. God is a poo.

John Dickson:

We have a lot of listeners who are a bit sceptical about the Christian faith, or at least aren't sure you know what to make of Christianity, so I want to ask you to close. I want to ask you a question on their behalf, what is most compelling for you about the Christian faith? And I want you to answer this both intellectually, what is most compelling and experientially, what is most compelling?

Bethany Sollereeder:

I think that answer is one and the same, it's the incarnation. It's that God not only loved the world enough to create it, but to join us in this wonderful, this ambiguous, this joy filled and pain filled existence. And went through the same things that we go through of love and hunger and growth and joy and innocent suffering, and then in the resurrection says, but that's actually not the full story either.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

It's a mysterious thing isn't it about the gospels, the Bible that God really offers you're mentioning that aspect of empathy, that God really is a God who knows suffering. And I think when you're a bereaved parent, you are looking for empathy. You just want people who get it and I do feel like God gets it. And that doesn't explain things, but I suppose bizarrely, I don't need the explanation. I don't know why I don't really need it, maybe it's because I know it's not coming.

Mary Ellen Rogers:

I'm just accepting I don't know why God didn't save Amity or save all the kids who are dying of cancer, all the suffering, I don't know why he doesn't stop it. But it's that sort of he does know what we need and he's provided it, which is he is weeping with us. So if you think of Jesus' responses in the gospels, Jesus is so often feeling sorrow isn't he, sorrow and weeping as well, weeping alongside people. And that is actually hugely comforting, so I just live with that. I guess that I know I can cry out to God, and I feel like he'll know exactly what I'm trying to say.

John Dickson:

If Amity's story touched you, why not think about making a contribution to a reputable child cancer charity? We'll put a link in the show notes to a few different ones from around the world. I'm thinking there'll be plenty of questions about this episode, it's a really hard topic, so feel free to send them in, you can use the show notes for that or just go to undeceptions.com. Actually next episode is Q&A, and we've got a ton of questions to deal with. What's the point of a sermon anyway someone asks, and how have they changed through history? How would Dickson spend \$10 million in the quest for historical evidence for the Bible?

John Dickson:

There's another question about being woke, another about tattoos and a really tough one about abortion and a few others. See ya. Undeceptions is hosted by me John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark Hadley, editing by Richard Hamwi, social media by Sophie Hawkshaw and admin by Lyndie Leviston. Special thanks to our series sponsor Zondervan for making this Undeception possible.



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