

CHAPTER 3



SEEING THE HAND OF GOD IN ALL THINGS: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO EVIL AND SUFFERING

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The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

One way or another, all of us face the challenge of coming to terms with the reality of evil and suffering. Those of us who believe in God confront the added burden of accounting for our belief in light of it. For centuries, the established way of doing this, especially for those theologically or philosophically inclined, has been to try to justify the ways of God or “to explain God’s goodness and power and reconcile these with the evident evil in the created world.”¹ Some are convinced this is a dead end. They choose to deal with evil and suffering differently. I have come to identify with

I have known Kent Brown for more than thirty years. We first met at Brigham Young University in the early 1970s, shortly after he joined the faculty. Over the years I kept track of him mainly through his writings, particularly on the Book of Mormon. Finally, in the mid-1990s, I had the good fortune of linking up with him when we both worked on the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* and later when he became associated with BYU’s Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. Kent is a friend and colleague and has been a genuine mentor to me. I am pleased to submit a paper to this collection in his honor. It is adapted from a chapter in a book I am writing entitled *The Hope That Is in Me: Thoughts on Being a Latter-day Saint in the Twenty-first Century*.

1. John Cobb Jr. and Truman G. Madsen, “Theodicy,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1473.

a version of this alternative approach, thanks, in part, to insights from two philosophers: James E. Faulconer and D. Z. Phillips.²

In this paper I reconstruct Faulconer's and Phillips's criticisms of the traditional approach to the problem of evil. I then summarize how they confront the challenge in different ways (by rethinking what it means to do theology in one case and by putting forward an alternative view of religious beliefs in the other). Faulconer questions the entire intellectual approach to the issue (what he calls the "problem of theodicy"). He argues that the best way to deal with evil and suffering is by practical, concrete means. Phillips argues that those who use their religious beliefs as a means of trying to explain how things are, fare poorly when it comes to confronting evil and suffering compared to those who understand such beliefs as a distinctive form of response to a world in which such negative

2. It is heartening to discover how others—fellow Latter-day Saints and those of other faiths—in the course of thinking through matters of interest to them, can be of genuine help in coming to see things one prizes in a new light. James E. Faulconer addresses the problem of evil in his article, "Rethinking Theology: The Shadow of the Apocalypse," in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2010), 109–36. Faulconer is a longtime friend and colleague. He is professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University and is writing some important things dealing with two broad topics: modernity (and its next-of-kin postmodernity) and theology. D. Z. Phillips's insights on the problem of evil are spelled out in the context of his thoughts about religious beliefs. See his chapter, "Believing in God," in *Introducing Philosophy: The Challenge of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 143–65. Phillips, the well-known Welsh philosopher of religion, died in 2006. He wrote over twenty books, most of them on the philosophy of religion and ethics. Raimond Gaita, in an obituary that appeared in the *Guardian*, 21 August 2006, points out that because Phillips resisted so relentlessly the desire that philosophy should underwrite theories of religious belief, or even the beliefs themselves, he was often accused of irrationalism or what others came to refer to as "Wittgensteinian fideism." According to Gaita, Phillips "never denied that sincerely religious people believe in the reality of their God," but he "did deny that philosophers understand clearly enough what it means to believe such things." I think Gaita gets Phillips right on this score. As we shall see, Phillips is a critic of conventional accounts of what it means to believe in God and urges his fellow philosophers and the rest of us to think about the subject differently. I have been reading Phillips for a long while now. The way he deals with this issue is one of the things that drew me to him in the first place, that and the fact that I had an opportunity, years ago, to take a seminar from him when he was a visiting professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I find in him something rare—a rigorous philosopher who tries hard to understand what it means for others to adhere to religious beliefs.

things happen. Finally, with their help, I describe how I approach evil and suffering. By emphasizing the things I choose to do in living my life in covenant with God (more so than my beliefs about him and a host of other subjects)—that is, by appreciating what it means to be solely dependent upon him, by worshipping him with full intent, by striving day in and day out to relate with him and others in a manner that I hope is acceptable, and then by responding to the world from this vantage point—I find I am able to see his hand in all things and thus can better grapple with the negative aspects of life.

The Traditional Approach to Evil and Suffering

There are all kinds of obstacles to belief in God. For many, the most pronounced is the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Some who once believed have lost their faith as a result of encountering it. Others see the massive death and destruction caused by natural disasters and the mayhem and devastation resulting from the actions of individuals or groups directed toward others and cannot find it within them to believe.

For a long while now, theologians and philosophers have wrestled with what has come to be called the problem of evil. It can be stated quite simply. Believers are said to adhere to four propositions: God is all-loving, he is all-powerful, he is all-knowing, and evil exists. The problem is, as Faulconer points out, if God is all of these things, then the existence of evil is inexplicable since “God *could* create a world without evil—he has the power and the knowledge to do so—and he *would* create it, for his love would require that he do so. . . . Therefore, the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of evil. For many, the suppressed conclusion is that it is irrational to believe in God if one recognizes the existence of evil, as most people do.”³

3. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 125.

The way out of this intellectual dilemma, for many, is to employ a class of arguments—known as “theodicies”—meant to explain or justify God in the face of evil either by qualifying the various divine attributes or by interpreting evil and suffering in alternative ways.⁴ According to Faulconer, theologians and philosophers use such arguments to achieve various ends. Some, for instance, deny the reality of evil. Others note that the problem itself is flawed since it requires that God do what is logically contradictory. Some question the quantity of suffering in the world and conclude that, despite appearances to the contrary, this is the “best of all possible worlds” (which merely denies evil by other means). Still others search for a solution by qualifying, in one way or another, God’s power or goodness.

For Faulconer, the problem is not with these arguments per se. Rather, it is with the whole enterprise of approaching God and evil in this fashion, what he calls the “problem of theodicy.”⁵ What we need to do, he argues, is not turn our back on the problem but to see it in a new light—as one “that makes things more difficult.”⁶ If we see the problem of theodicy as “a philosophical goad, a spur, an itch that will not go away,”⁷ we will discover a number of things:

4. Some Latter-day Saint thinkers rely on theodicies. Truman G. Madsen’s well-written essay “Evil and Suffering,” in his book *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 53–61, is a good example. Madsen dismisses many prevailing views of evil, puts forth his own definition of it, and argues that a correct understanding of God, of our own eternal nature, and of decisions we made in our premortal life, coupled with an acknowledgment of the ultimate sacrifice that the Savior has made in our behalf, can resolve the matter. I am certain his argument carries weight, especially among fellow Latter-day Saints for whom religious beliefs function as hypotheses and who thus rely on explanations such as this. There was a time when I tried to come to terms with negative things this way, in particular, by relying on Madsen’s article. But no more. I understand such things differently now and approach God differently.

5. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 124. That is, he approaches the issue in a fundamentally different way than, say, the authors of the article cited in note 1 above. Cobb and Madsen identify a handful of these arguments, briefly describe them, and say how Latter-day thinking on related matters alters or strengthens them. But they never call into question this particular approach to evil and suffering.

6. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 129.

7. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 132.

For one, that dealing with God and evil is not, as Falconer puts it, purely a theoretical problem.

In the end, it *is* a problem for action, and philosophical speculation has little place among the actions required when we respond concretely to suffering and evil. At the second coming not only will every knee bow and every tongue confess, but also the lame and the halt will be cured. Confession and cure show themselves in the type and shadow of our concrete responses to suffering rather than in rational speculation. They show themselves in the confession we make and the succor we offer in a world remade by our encounter with God.⁸

Furthermore, we will realize that the problem challenges our faith, even as it points out the need for it. Every call, Falconer maintains, invites a response on our part, and, in so doing, disturbs our status quo. In this sense, the problem calls us, challenges our faith, and invites us to respond. It invites us to live in the world and to see it differently—as a world that is “awaiting the second coming” even if it has been “figured by the presence of Christ.”⁹ Falconer acknowledges (as does Phillips) that some lose their faith in the face of evil and suffering (Phillips calls these “limiting cases”). But most of us, Falconer observes, continue to believe even as we struggle intellectually with such things. We struggle *because* we believe, *because* we have faith. And, importantly, we find the need to confront evil to be a real one, rather than merely an intellectual one, and this further evidences that we have faith. Thus,

by continuing to be a problem—by the fact that we seem unable to find any solution to the problem of theodicy that does not merely shift it some place else where it reappears in

8. Falconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 131, last emphasis added.

9. Falconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 133.

a new and slightly different guise—the problem of theodicy shows us the necessity of trust as well as the limits of reason. *The problem of evil and suffering is intractable to our powers of reason. As believers we find ourselves foolish before it. Ultimately the only thing to which it is tractable is moral and faithful response: action.*¹⁰

Also, according to Faulconer, if we deal with the problem as merely a theological or philosophical one (what earlier he referred to as a theoretical problem), rather than a religious one (that is, as a practical problem), we will find that we are attempting to rationally represent God in such a way that he allows the evil we encounter to continue. We create a god in our own image, an idol, and then, on the basis of this, try to solve the problem. That is, we try to make it go away. We pretend that the enemy of God is either unreal or not really an enemy.¹¹ We try, Faulconer says, “to integrate evil into our understanding, to make sense of it and make it part of the wholeness of our existence. It is evil to do so precisely because evil *cannot* be made sense of, cannot be justified. *It is evil to explain evil, to tame it, no longer to be horrified by it. If evil ceases to be horrible, but instead makes sense, then we cease to struggle with it.*”¹²

For Faulconer, once we come to live in the world differently and thus come to see it differently (what he means by living within the “shadow of the apocalypse,” the subtitle of his article), we come to understand that this demands of us a practical, concrete struggle with evil, not just abstract thought about it (which may be relevant but is never enough).

Our horror in response to transcendent evil is one with our eschatological hope for the good of the kingdom that is to come, and that hope makes no sense apart from the fight

10. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 133, emphasis added.

11. See Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 129.

12. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 134, last emphasis added.

against evil. Only if the problem of theodicy is genuinely a problem—only if all solutions ultimately fail in this world without the Apocalypse, the Revelation of Jesus Christ—can we continue to know that evil is genuinely evil.¹³

Faulconer makes the following observation about the problem of theodicy (one that echoes one of Phillips's key insights, as we shall see):

Sometimes we treat scripture and revelation as if they were simplified scientific explanations of things, or poetic philosophizing, but I think that is a mistake, and sometimes a serious one. For it assumes that the rationality characteristic of science is the measure of all discourse. *Though religious discourse may offer us explanations, its purpose is not explanatory, but soteriological: It is concerned, not with telling us how the world and the things in the world are (at least not in the way that science and philosophy do), but with telling us about God's power to save and how we can be saved. . . .* Given its purposes, revelation ignores the problem of theodicy—which, since theodicy is a philosophical/theological problem rather than a religious one, is not the same as ignoring the problem we face in reconciling the evil we encounter with our faith in God.

That religion ignores the problem is deeply suggestive. Of course revelation is not blind to suffering. Christian revelation often reminds us that we must be deeply concerned with suffering, especially with the suffering of others and with our own spiritual suffering. God wills neither, and he offers answers to both. *But Christian concern is with the proper, Christ-like response to that suffering, not with explaining its logical compatibility with God's existence.* One can even imagine a Christian arguing that, as a speculative

13. Faulconer, "Rethinking Theology," 134.

rather than a practical problem, the problem of theodicy distracts us from the existential problem.¹⁴

Like Faulconer, Phillips thinks the trouble lies with the problem itself. But unlike Faulconer, he thinks it ought to be rejected out of hand since it leaves the believer adhering to a senseless position. As he puts it, “If we reflect on the reality of evil, we shall come to see that belief in God [viewed from this traditional perspective] is empty.”¹⁵

According to Phillips, the obstacle facing those who deal with the problem of evil in the usual manner is that the arguments relied on are problematic and invariably fail since, one way or another, they either falsify the reality of evil, wrongly attempt to justify it, demean the suffering of others, or a combination of all three.¹⁶ What is more, this line of reasoning amounts to claiming that, judged by normal standards of human decency, God is found wanting.¹⁷

But the real culprit in all of this, for Phillips, is a particular understanding of religious beliefs and the fact that it contributes to the presumption that we can somehow explain the ways of God.

14. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 129–30, emphasis added.

15. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 152.

16. On pp. 152–56 in his book *Introducing Philosophy*, Phillips faults a number of these arguments, ranging from those that claim that evil and suffering are somehow instrumental toward achieving a higher good, to those that contend that evil and suffering are needed so that we can develop as free individuals, or that the amount of suffering in the world may only be a matter of our viewing it from our finite, limited perspective, or that without the suffering of others, there would be no opportunity for us to develop our own moral responsibility, or, finally, that the greater good that will come from the evil and suffering in the world will only be achieved in heaven.

17. Phillips warns against pushing the analogy between God and man too far. “If we judge God by the standards of moral decency, God must stand condemned. God does not intervene in circumstances in which any half-decent human being would, and uses human beings as means to a further end in ways which are clearly immoral. On the other hand, if we say that it is a mistake to judge God by human standards, that God is somehow beyond the reach of moral criticism then, again, the consequences for religion are dire. There is a place beyond morality, beyond the ordinary language of decency and indecency, where God might be located, but it is the place reserved for the monstrous and the horrific. So the choice [following this traditional line of reasoning] is either to find God guilty by our moral standards, or to find him too monstrous to be worthy of ordinary condemnation” (Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 155–56).

He arrives at his conclusion this way: Before pointing out flaws in a number of theodicies, he looks at traditional arguments used to prove the existence of God, borrowing a page from most standard textbooks in the philosophy of religion, ones that convey a sense of how moderns tend to think and talk about God. He notes that those who put forth such arguments are, in effect, testing hypotheses.¹⁸ But the trouble is, there seems to be no way of checking such claims and if this is the case,

what sense does it make to speak of hypotheses at all in this connection? The position is not that we must remain agnostic about any hypothesis proposed. The point is that since *anything* can be proposed, the whole enterprise is shown to be a senseless aping of those contexts in which hypotheses are properly advanced and in which there are resources for their proper consideration.¹⁹

Then he offers this important observation,

From the suggestion that to believe in God is to advance a hypothesis about the existence of something, to the efforts to express this hypothesis in the argument from design and the cosmological argument, and finally to the efforts to confront the problem of evil, by advancing hypotheses which would justify the presence of evil, one common assumption runs through all the arguments—that religion offers us an *explanation* of human life.²⁰

18. I suspect that most Christians (including most fellow Latter-day Saints) may think of religious beliefs this way. This may account, in part, for why most think of being religious as adhering to a set of beliefs, more so than paying attention to what they are required to do. On this view, being religious is primarily a cognitive activity, a matter of the mind, more so than a practical concern, a matter of the heart. In other words, religion, for many, is on a par with science. For a long while this was how I viewed such beliefs, how they functioned in my life, and thus how I tried to come to terms with negative things.

19. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 150.

20. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 156.

For Phillips, the question is, why do those who think this way also think that trying to explain something will always make things better? According to our authority, the greatest divide in the philosophy of religion, one not always recognized, “is not between those who give religious explanations and those who give secular explanations of the contingencies of human life. *The divide is between those who think it makes sense to look for explanations in these contexts, and those who do not.*”²¹

Phillips sees the issue this way:

Faced by the vicissitudes of life, the blind forces of nature, unpredictable visitations of disease and death, the fickleness of human beings and the interventions of bad luck, people have asked, “Why is this happening to us?” It is important to note that this question is asked *after* what we normally call explanations have been answered.²²

In other words, those who ask such questions, under such circumstances, are not asking for further explanations. Rather, their doing so is a plea on their part to make sense of things in a different way. Some never find such a way. But others of us do. The same vicissitudes of life, the same limitations of time and space, the same encounters with the forces of nature, the same confrontations with the horrendous acts of others that cause some to despair of ever finding any meaning in such things are experienced by others of us as full of meaning. How is this possible? Phillips’s answer (coupled with Faulconer’s insistence that there is an important distinction between dealing with God and evil theoretically or intellectually and dealing with them in terms of how one comes to live one’s life in covenant with God) amounts to a distinctively different approach to evil and suffering.²³ It is the one that I follow. In the balance of

21. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 156.

22. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 157.

23. It rests, in large part, on an alternative, less common view of religious beliefs that he puts forward, one that sees such beliefs not as a means of explaining how

this paper I will spell out what I mean by this, first by agreeing with Faulconer's contention that our concrete responses to evil and suffering, rather than our rational speculations about it, are what is required of us and then by saying how, in following Phillips's lead, I have come to realize that believing in God in the face of evil and suffering makes sense—provided I respond to or view the world in a particular way.

A Different Approach to Evil and Suffering

In the course of arguing that the only kind of theology worthy of our consideration is one that reveals God, one that enables us to hear his call and respond properly by living in the world differently (what he calls “apocalyptic theology”),²⁴ Faulconer deals with some issues in a manner that has contributed to my particular approach to evil and suffering.²⁵ For instance, he notes that those who think

things are but as *forms of response* or *modes of acceptance* of a world in which evil and suffering happen and are only too real. Like I said, I have come to identify with something like this view of religious beliefs. For me, such beliefs are better understood as part of, or better still, as a consequence of the way I strive to live my life in covenant with God. Living my life this way, rather than trying to reconcile my beliefs about God and evil, is what enables me to deal with the challenge of evil and suffering.

24. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 117.

25. According to Faulconer, any theology worthy of the name, must be a type, a figure, or a shadow of the apocalypse. If, in the last analysis, it remains merely a matter of learning—of acquiring this, that, or another fact—then it is really more about us than God. As he puts it, if the Good News and God's kingdom are invisible in a theology, then it cannot really be talk about God. “What we say may concern itself with his effects in this world or with our ideas and understanding of him. It may be about our doctrines, our understanding of his revelation. . . . [It] *may be about many things, but it is not about him if it does not reveal him, and it does not reveal him if it does not announce the nearness of his kingdom*” (Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 113, emphasis added). What is more, we need to appreciate that such an announcement comes to us as a call. If we hear it and if we respond properly, we experience, here and now, the kingdom of God. “Thus, the revelation of the reign of God is not only something far away in time, something to be awaited, but something here and now” (Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 110). When we become part of the kingdom of God his rule over us begins. Such an experience, importantly, “*does not so much refer to the end of the world, though it also refers to that, as it refers to the moment when the nearness of the kingdom of God is revealed to the believer and the believer's life is oriented by that kingdom rather than by the world. . . . If we see the world through religious eyes, we see the imprint of God's work in everything*” (Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 110, emphasis added).

about theology along traditional lines—as that which organizes and examines a set of beliefs—may not fully grasp his notion of theology since they see only one basic kind, the kind that defines religion as adhering to a belief or set of beliefs. Of course, as he points out, religion entails beliefs, but it cannot be reduced to them. And in a religious tradition like our own where priesthood is essential and ordinances are required, beliefs are not sufficient to define religion. In an important sense they may not even come first.²⁶

Also, Faulconer observes that scriptures teach that

The Lord commands ancient Israel, “Ye shall be holy [“set apart,” “consecrated”]: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Similarly, during his ministry in Israel, he commands, “Be ye therefore perfect [or “whole”], even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), and he repeats that command when he comes to the Nephites (3 Nephi 12:48).²⁷

This means, according to our guide, that “to be in Israel, ancient or modern, is not only to hold a set of beliefs, but to make and keep covenants with God. It is to enter into a formal relation with him in which we imitate him.” For Latter-day Saints at least, *“covenant rather than belief is the heart of religion. It is probably true that no covenants fail to entail beliefs, but the important point is that religious beliefs do not matter if they are not intimately bound up with covenants.”*²⁸

What is more, Faulconer insists that any theology, worthy of the name,

must go beyond learning to the gospel, to the *revelation* of Christ. It must be not only about beliefs; it must also be testimony. *For Latter-day Saints, apocalyptic theology must go beyond learning and even testimony to being part of covenant*

26. See Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 122.

27. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 123, brackets in original.

28. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 123.

*life, for we cannot reveal God by re-presenting him in an idol of some sort, but he reveals himself in our covenant life.*²⁹

His observation that “we cannot reveal God by re-presenting him in an idol of some sort, but he reveals himself in our covenant life” is crucial, for me at least, because it is true. In striving to do all that is required of me to live my life in covenant with God, that is, in living my life differently and thus responding to or viewing the world differently, I have discovered that it is by this means (not by dwelling on my beliefs about him or by trying to reconcile them in various ways) that he makes himself known to me. It is by this means that I am able to see his hand in all things. It is by this means that I struggle to come to terms with the negative things in life in ways that are both meaningful and lasting.

To give a full account of what is entailed in my doing this would be involved, owing to a number of factors and influences; it would also go beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, it begins with my living a covenantal life with God, and it ends, importantly, with my being convinced that my religious beliefs do not function for me as hypotheses. That is, I have quit asking for explanations when faced with all manner of things that happen to me and to others. Instead, I have learned, in Phillips’s words, to respond to or accept this fallen world as one in which such negative things are inevitable.

Like virtually everyone else, I experience the world, most of the time, as admittedly peaceful and beautiful, even majestic. But, on occasion, as we all know, it can be a frightening and dreadful place, where the forces of nature combine in a flurry of violence and destruction, disease and death. Likewise, I find myself, most of the time, surrounded by evidence of human goodness—everything from ongoing efforts to improve all aspects of the human condition, to seemingly endless acts of kindness and charity shown to

29. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 123, most emphasis added.

me and my loved ones. Yet, as we are reminded all too often, the world can also be a place where humans are capable of treating others in the worst possible ways by committing unspeakable acts of horror, cruelty, and mayhem.

But there is more to it than this. In experiencing the world this way I am keenly aware that there is something deeper (as Phillips puts it) in my encounter with it, both in the sense that I try to respond to it as a whole, as it were, and in such a way as to evidence a form of patience on my part, and also in the sense that I experience something more (what Faulconer calls “the nearness of the kingdom of God”).³⁰ Living my life in covenant with God (with all that this implies) means that I struggle to respond to or view the world from this perspective, *not the other way around*. Consequently, I not only experience a mixed world but also a new one that is coming into being and thus can see “the imprint of God’s work in everything”³¹—his hand, if you will, in what is both beautiful and ugly in nature as well as kind and cruel in the actions of others. Others view the world the same way. Some have a gifted way of expressing it. David B. Hart, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, puts it this way:

The Christian vision of the world, however, is not some rational deduction from empirical experience, but is a moral and spiritual aptitude—or, rather, a moral and spiritual labor [that is, a conviction on the part of the individual that living his life in terms of God and the things of God is what he ought to do]. The Christian eye sees (or should see) a deeper truth in the world than mere “nature,” and it is a truth that gives rise not to optimism but to joy.³²

30. See note 25 above; Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 109.

31. Faulconer, “Rethinking Theology,” 110.

32. David B. Hart, *Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 58.

He quotes religious authorities in his own tradition to further illustrate this point and then, in his own eloquent way, makes this observation,

To see the world as it should be seen, and so to see the true glory of God reflected in it, requires the cultivation of charity, of an eye rendered limpid by love. . . . But what the Christian should see, then, is not simply one reality: neither the elaborate, benign, elegantly calibrated machine of the deists, smoothly and efficiently accomplishing whatever goods a beneficent God and the intractable potentialities of finitude can produce between them; nor a sacred or divine commerce between life and death; nor certainly “nature” in the modern, mechanistic acceptance of that word. Rather, the Christian should see two realities at once, one world (as it were) within another: one the world as we all know it, in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish; and the other the world in its first and ultimate truth, not simply “nature” but “creation,” an endless sea of glory, radiant with the beauty of God in every part, innocent of all violence. To see in this way is to rejoice and mourn at once, to regard the world as a mirror of infinite beauty, but as glimpsed through the veil of death; it is to see creation in chains, but beautiful as in the beginning of days.³³

The everyday world that I encounter is indeed one “in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish,” but, more importantly, it also reveals a new world that is being born, one that is “radiant with the beauty of God in every part.”

In talking this way about the world, in saying things like, “I see the hand of God in all things”—that is, in describing my particular approach to evil and suffering—I do not want to be misunderstood.

33. Hart, *Doors of the Sea*, 60-61.

When I say that I can see God even in the sometimes violent and destructive acts of nature, I mean that such occurrences dramatically manifest the power and force of creation itself and, hence, reveal something of the Creator. When I come across accounts of individuals committing dreadful and inexcusable acts against others and I speak of seeing God in such things, I do not mean to suggest that he is behind such outbursts of evil or the accompanying suffering that results. On the contrary. For me, all such negative things can and ought to be traced back to their ultimate source, the evil one.³⁴ When I say that I see God in such things, I am trying to convey the idea that in living my life the way I do, I view the whole world as symbolically ordered for me by God and the things of God, with all that this entails.³⁵

In ordering my life this way I do not take a quietistic or indifferent approach to instances of evil and suffering. Just the opposite. When faced with natural calamities, I join with others in doing what I can to help those caught up in such disasters. When confronted with instances of human evil, I thwart them as best I can (ever mindful that whatever I do rarely seems to be enough). In this vale of tears, no matter what we do to fight against it or try to lessen

34. To the extent I am able to come to terms with the massive amount of evil and suffering in this world, especially that inflicted by humans on other innocent humans, it is only by tracking such things back to God's enemy. At the same time, for me at least, all that is good and true and beautiful comes ultimately from God. I am aware of the range of concerns that some have when these cardinal qualities are raised. Is something good, true, or beautiful because it comes from God or is it such in and of itself and therefore God endorses it? Dealing with such issues is interesting, even challenging, but for me, at the end of the day, beside the point. What God has come to mean to me is not so much the result of such theological reasoning as it is a consequence of my trying to live my life in terms of him and things associated with him and my trying to grasp the portrait of him that is revealed in the scriptures and in the teachings of latter-day prophets. For me, God is the source of everything good, true, and beautiful. In other words, I agree with the teachings of Mormon, as recorded by his son (see Moroni 7:12-19).

35. Again, I do not want to be misunderstood. When I talk this way, I do not have in mind some kind of woolly, pantheistic notion of God. Rather, God, for me at least, really is distinct from his creation and yet is visible within it. This is the way the scriptures speak of God and the world, and I try to do the same.

its effect, there will always be more evil (and what, more times than not, seems like needless suffering) to contend with. Nevertheless, my course is clear. I must always do whatever I can to minimize and lessen such terrible things in my life and in the lives of those I come in contact with, in most instances by joining with others in this common cause, often by using various means provided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

What is more, I take the approach I do to evil and suffering, in large part, precisely because the message of the Good News is true. That is, Heavenly Father, nearly two thousand years ago, acting through the Savior, began to do what he always promised he would do: deal with the sins of the world and restore justice and order to all of creation by beginning the process of bringing about a new earth and new heavens. As a result, the victory over evil, suffering, and death has been won. At that time, he set in place the means by which all those who respond to his call can be brought into a new and everlasting covenantal relationship with him and the Savior—something he has again restored to the earth in our day. The Spirit's influence in the hearts of those of us who hear and respond to God's call is such that we declare the Savior to be Lord over all, we accept him and this glorious message of redemption, we join the community of his covenant people, and we live this new way of life our entire lives in the hope of what is coming and because this is what is required of us. Despite the fact that all of us, like those who came before us and will follow after us, must endure the persistence of sin and evil, suffering and death in this life, some of us are better able to do this than others precisely because of the assurance we have of what has already been accomplished on our behalf by the Father and the Son. Furthermore, we are confident of what they will yet accomplish when the Savior is sent again to vanquish all this for good, subject all things unto himself, and make "all things new."

At the same time, I acknowledge that what the scriptures and the latter-day prophets say about our dealings with certain kinds of

suffering, certain kinds of evil, even death itself, is true: if properly discerned, understood, and approached, even these things can be turned to our good. Such is the grandeur of the plan of the Father we are in the midst of experiencing. In any event, I try never to minimize the reality or starkness of such evils or the grief and suffering they cause others and myself as a result. Indeed, I like to think it is precisely because of the way I try to relate properly with God and others and thus how I have come to view the world, that I take the position I do on the need to come to terms with these negative realities—in this particular way.³⁶

For me at least, the difference between someone like myself and others (those who fail to find any meaning in their encounters with such negative things or those who do but only by using their religious beliefs as hypotheses, as a means of trying to explain them) lies in how I experience and interpret my dependence on God, how I have come to trust in him.³⁷

36. As with virtually everyone else (but, unfortunately, not all), life is precious to me. I cling to it with all of my might and do all I can (relying on prayer and priesthood blessings, as well as medical science) to aid others and myself whenever it is threatened. At the same time, were I to find myself in a life-or-death situation my trust in God is such that if he spares my life then (in the words of William Clayton's hymn) "All is well. All is well." I will continue on my journey toward him. But if not, "Happy day! All is well." I will continue on my journey, but on the other side. One of the more provocative observations in what was rather (in my opinion) a disappointing four-hour documentary entitled "The Mormons" (aired on PBS, 30 April and 1 May 2007) was made by the literary critic Harold Bloom (who speaks with some authority, having written a book on the tradition, *The American Religion* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992]). Bloom asks, "What is the essence of religion?" And then he answers his own question: "Sigmund Freud said it was the longing for the father. Others have called it the desire for the mother or for transcendence. I fear deeply that all these are idealizations, and I offer the rather melancholy suggestion that they would all vanish from us if we did not know that we must die. Religion rises inevitably from our apprehension of our own death. To give meaning to meaninglessness is the endless quest of all religion. When death becomes the center of our consciousness then religion authentically begins. Of all religions that I know, the one that most vehemently and persuasively defies and denies the reality of death is the original Mormonism of the prophet, seer and revelator, Joseph Smith."

37. My dependence on God is not an obstacle to my sense of self or to my moral agency, as commonly argued. On the contrary. I interpret key scriptures as teaching that in the premortal realm one of our first inklings of identity was our rather

Phillips is helpful in thinking through what is required of me in responding to instances of natural evil. He asks us to contemplate a believer who finds himself caught in a small boat at sea in a storm. When this poor fellow says things like, “my life is in the hands of God,” Phillips urges us to take him to mean that in the midst of all that he faces, the believer is not only struck by his dependence on God, but also by a sense of the majesty of God. This is part of what he means when he says that some believers respond to the world in a deeper way. For Phillips,

The believer is the creature in the hands of the Creator; his life, whether he is going to live or die, is in God’s hands. Not that externally related to this storm is a God who decides to send it *in order* to test the believer’s faith, or *in order* to give the believer a sense of the majesty of God. . . . No, the majesty of God is revealed *in* the storm and the reaction to it. God’s will is in the life or death of the person caught in the storm, in the same sense as it is in the storm itself.³⁸

Our guide also reminds us that the scriptures, especially narratives such as the book of Job, teach us to deal with evil and suffering this way as well. Job came to see the wonder of it all in the face of all that he suffered. He eventually gave up on his friends (those he called “forgers of lies” and “physicians of no value,” Job 13:4) and their seemingly endless, fruitless attempts at explaining

inchoate sense of self that emerged as a result of relationships we found ourselves in when Heavenly Father created us as his spirit children—ones primarily with him, but also with his Firstborn Son and with our other spiritual siblings. Now, as a fully embodied being, my very sense of who I am is grounded in such relationships—something that becomes more apparent the more I strive to live a covenantal life. My dependence solely on Heavenly Father and on the Savior is how I can be independent of other ideas, movements, or individuals who would have me reliant on them. It is what assures that I am free in the fullest sense of the term. Because of it, I define myself as a child of God, as a member of my own family, and as a member of the restored kingdom of God on earth. Because of it, I experience this life, despite everything else, as full of hope and meaning, purpose and joy.

38. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 160–61.

what was happening to him. He eventually (and this is key) stopped placing himself in the center of things and stopped asking, “Why is this happening to me?” Instead, he came to acknowledge his dependence on God. He came to see the world and all of its contingencies as gifts from God. He patiently admitted that God is at the center of all things. God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Job eventually confessed that everything that comes to him comes as a gift, as a form of grace, as an expression of God’s love for him—the good things and the bad. Things that come as trials, things he did not want or like, are gifts, nonetheless. Job’s wonder at the whole of creation, his newfound dependence on God who is at the center of all things, and his acceptance of what comes to him, good or bad, as gifts from God, is what he meant to express in his famous claim, “The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”³⁹

There are those, Phillips observes, who are fatalistic, who contend that whatever happens, happens and insist that those of us who talk about God in such situations change nothing. He rejects this view and so do I.⁴⁰ My birth and my death happen but what I make of them, how I respond to them, indeed, what I make of my life as a whole, makes all the difference. Job initially cursed the day he was born, and then he came to see his dependence on God and the wonder of it all. *Coming to God made this difference for him; it changed the meaning of things for him. Coming to so live in this world that, like Job, I can see the hand of the Lord in all things, makes all the difference for me as well.*

When encountering instances of human evil, Phillips likewise contends that it is the believer’s dependence on God, his experience of the love and grace of God in his life, that distinguishes him from the conventional moral person. The latter fights against evil and strives mightily for the good but always acknowledges that he does

39. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 162; see 161–62.

40. See Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 161–62.

such things on his own. Those of us who depend on God do these things as well. The difference is we confess that all that we do and whatever we achieve in this regard is because of him. This further evidences, according to Phillips, a deeper response to the world on our part, one that, among other things, reflects our strengths as well as our weaknesses as human beings.⁴¹

I like the way Phillips illustrates his point about our dependency on God. He notes that Peter promised he would never deny the Savior, and yet he did. The question is, when did he do this? “The popular answer is,” Phillips says, “when he broke his promise. The deeper answer is: when he made it.”⁴² Peter’s act of self-sufficiency, his putting himself at the center of things, as Job did initially, was his undoing. He ought always to have relied on God and trusted in him. Such dependence, such acknowledgment of God’s grace and love in our lives, is what should inform all of our endeavors as followers of him. It is what steels us for our inevitable encounters with the evil one, particularly in the form of all manner of depraved human actions, and it is what enables us to do the right thing morally in our dealings with others, including being quick to forgive others while always seeking forgiveness from others and from God, as the Savior teaches us.⁴³

As I noted above, Phillips cautions those of us who try to respond to the world in this way that every now and then some of us will face what he calls “limiting cases”—profound challenges to our faith, most often, it seems, in the form of situations in which the innocent are made to undergo untold suffering at the hands of

41. See Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 162–63. Faulconer makes a similar distinction; see his article “The Concept of Apostasy in the New Testament,” in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: BYU Press and FARMS, 2005), 133–63, especially 155–56.

42. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 163.

43. One of the most memorable talks on this great principle was given by President James E. Faust in the April 2007 general conference, not too long before his passing; it is a fitting tribute to this good man. See “The Healing Power of Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 67–69.

others. Some who contemplate the magnitude and weight of such evil in the world, especially that which is visited upon innocent children, discover that it has crushed their faith.⁴⁴ For those of us fortunate enough to persist in our trust in God (it is a gift, after all), who continue to struggle to so live that we can see his hand even in the midst of such horrible things, the book of Job is again helpful in suggesting at least part of what may be involved in our being able to do this. While Job was confronting all that had happened to him, his friends joined him and, at least initially (thank heaven) did what true friends do—they came “to mourn with him and to comfort him. . . . [They] wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven. So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great” (Job 2:11-13).

When I encounter things that challenge my faith, that threaten to cause me to doubt God, I find solace in my experiences of him as one who does for me what Job’s friends did for him—he abides with me when I need him, he suffers and weeps with me in my time of grief, and he says nothing when silence is what is called for.

For me at least, to see the hand of God in situations like these is to be at peace with the fact that my experiences with the divine do not explain such things as the wrongful suffering of innocent children (or anyone else) nor do they justify them in any way.⁴⁵ It

44. The twentieth century experienced two world wars and such atrocities as the Holocaust that emerged out of Nazi horrors in Europe during the second one and the ethnic and class genocide that took place during the same time but continued long afterward, resulting in the killing of tens of millions who lived under Communist domination in a swath stretching from the Gulag labor camps in the old Soviet Union, through China, and onto the killing fields of Cambodia. It may turn out to be the worst century in human history in this regard.

45. There is suffering and there is suffering. All of us experience it; it is part of the very point and purpose of life in this mortal realm. For most of us, the suffering we encounter and need to find the courage to endure, if properly approached and understood (that is, within our ongoing trust and dependence on God), can be ennobling, refining, even sanctifying. The Savior taught this. But other kinds of unspeakable

is to acknowledge that in these and other similar situations in life it is folly on my part to try to explain the ways of God. Rather, my course is to depend on him and wait patiently on him, in silence and in hope.⁴⁶

It seems clear that the Prophet Joseph Smith understood this. Writing from Liberty Jail in the winter of 1838-39, Joseph told how the Lord assured him that all the suffering and anguish he and the other members of the church were being forced to undergo at the time, at the hands of others, would “give [them] experience and be for [their] good” *if* they would “stand still” with the “utmost assurance” in God (D&C 122:7; 123:17). One of the many things he must have learned at that time about life in this lone and dreary world is the age-old truth we all need to learn, that we must “cheerfully do all things that lie in our power” and then wait on the Lord and trust in him (D&C 123:17).

suffering, imposed upon the innocent, are needless, pointless, and evil. I find that one of the many things the Holy Spirit does for me, if I am living the life I know I should, is help me recognize instances of the former and give me the needed strength to withstand them. He will also aid me in discerning instances of the latter and embolden me to fight against them with all of my might.

46. Phillips ends his chapter on this same note. Following up on what he said earlier about evil inflicted on innocent children, he observes that “to witness absolute evil, as we do in this persecution of children, is to feel at the same time that an absolute good is being outraged. An absolute good does not triumph when violated by absolute wrong: it suffers. It can offer no explanation, no end to which the evil is the means. On such matters, it is dumb. In the religious responses that we have been discussing, God and absolute good are one. If absolute good can suffer, so can God. The presence of the divine does not explain away the suffering or justify it in any way. The divine suffers. It was said by Jesus that to do this to children was to do it to him. The suffering of innocent children is the suffering of God at the same time. In Isaiah we read the following words: ‘He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.’ But confronted by the silence of God, we have seen many philosophers of religion react by saying: ‘Well, if he did not open his mouth we will, and give you here, as elsewhere, the justification for this evil.’ One way of understanding the arguments of this chapter is to wish that those philosophers had not spoken” (Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 165).

Several years ago, Phillips gave a lecture, and part of it found its way onto the Internet.⁴⁷ In a simple yet dramatic fashion, he contrasts the two very different approaches to God, and hence, the two ways of viewing the world that I have sketched out in this paper. He began by noting that if one believes in God, he will, no doubt, be asked to give reasons for his belief. This is not unusual, Phillips says, since we think it reasonable to be asked to give reasons for our beliefs. This is something we take for granted.

Then he read an eloquent passage from one of the psalms:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.

Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. (Psalm 139:7-14)

Here, Phillips notes, the psalmist speaks of the “inescapable reality of God.” “Inescapable?” Phillips asks. “But what about the evidence?”

47. “D. Z. Phillips and What It Means to Believe in God”; an audio recording of the lecture and a transcript are available at <http://www.contra-mundum.com/?p=894> (accessed 10 June 2010). This Web page is the source for the following ideas and quotations from Phillips.

What about the reasons?” According to our guide, it would never occur to any prophet or writer in scripture

to seek evidence for this existence of God, let alone to prove it. For them this would be quite pointless, even senseless. *The movement of thought in the Old Testament is not from the world to God, but from God to the world.* The whole world declared God’s presence. Not because it gave excellent evidence for God’s existence, but because the world was seen from the start as God’s world.⁴⁸

Phillips observes, in a nostalgic tone, how far away that view seems to most of us today. “That world is not our world. It hasn’t been our world for quite some time. Ever since the Renaissance and through the Enlightenment, the view of the world as God’s world has been under attack.”

At this point, he notes that for us today it is natural to view religious beliefs as conjectures or hypotheses and to look for evidence to justify them. He points out how philosophers who write about such matters weigh the probabilities for and against God but never seem to agree. And then asks, “Is that our problem? A difficulty in weighing probabilities?” and answers his own query, “Surely not.” Rather,

Our difficulty is that the majority of us no longer naturally see the world as God’s world. It’s all too easy to escape from God’s presence. If we ascend into the heavens, well even Bishops tell us He’s not there. If we descend into the depths, again psychoanalysts tell us He’s not there either. Our problem, it seems, is not how to escape from God but how to find him. We all too easily rise in the morning and lie down in darkness without him. The heavens no longer declare his glory for us, and the hills no longer sing for joy.⁴⁹

48. “Phillips and What It Means to Believe in God,” emphasis added.

49. “Phillips and What It Means to Believe in God”; Phillips earlier recited the following verses from the Psalms: “The little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are

I think Phillips correctly portrays the modern perspective on the world. What he and Faulconer say about many if not most of us who are religious today is true. It used to be true of me. But not anymore. I have heard God's call, and my making every effort to live in covenant with him has made all of the difference: I think about him differently and, in turn, respond to or view the world differently. I agree with the psalmist. From the heights to the depths, God is there—"and that my soul knoweth right well" (Psalm 139:14).

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clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing. . . . Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together. . . . O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches" (Psalms 65:12-13; 98:8; 104:24).