

“Developing a Christian Mind, How to Get One and Keep It”

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Session VIII

“How Does A Christian Mind Deal with the Problems of Evil, Pain, Suffering, and Miracles?”

Among the most memorable sayings in William Shakespeare's tragic play, *Macbeth*, is when he speaks of *life as* “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” What a perfect theme statement for writing on the philosophy of life! How often do we find ourselves asking: “Why me God?” Puzzled people have asked the question through the centuries. In the midst of tragedy they cry out, “I have tried to be good and do what’s right. And now this happens!” Then the inevitable question comes, “Is God really good?” When faced with the problems of evil and pain and suffering, even Christian theists may find themselves resonating with the question of atheistic philosophers, “Isn’t it contradictory for an all powerful God to allow evil to occur?”

Last month when I spoke at the Little Saints Chapel, I took the opportunity to lay the groundwork for their believing in the goodness of God by teaching them the saying, “*God is good all of the time and all of the time God is good.*” But how can we say that when life is so full of hard and harsh realities? Might it be possible that God has reasons for allowing evil? Could it be that he has purposeful designs in allowing suffering and pain? Just where do human wickedness and the fall of the created order fit in? What did Job discover in his test of suffering that might help us? Or are we mixed up in some way in God’s age-long battle with Satan?

How Can a Good God Allow Suffering?

“I just don’t believe the God of Christianity exists, says Hilary, an undergrad English major. “God allows terrible suffering in the world. So he might be either all powerful but not good enough to end evil and suffering, or else he might be all good but not powerful enough to end evil and suffering. Either way the all good, all powerful God of the Bible couldn’t exist.”

“This isn’t a philosophical question to me,” added Rob, Hilary’s boyfriend. “This is personal. I won’t believe in a God who allows suffering, even if he, she, or it exists. Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can’t be trusted.”¹

“For many people it is not the exclusivity of Christianity that poses the biggest problem, it is the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Some find unjust suffering to be a philosophical problem, calling into question the very existence of God. For others, it is an intensely personal

¹ See the George Barna Report, “One in Three Adults Is Unchurched” (March 28, 2005).

issue. They don't care about the abstract question of whether God exists or not—they refuse to trust or believe in any God who allows history and life to proceed the way it has.”² That being said, who can blame those Jews who are secular instead of religious when one considers the Nazi gas chambers, the atrocities in Somalia, or the genocide in Cambodia and Bosnia? What about natural disasters great and small?³

Granted, inexplicable suffering is a problem for theists, but it is even a greater problem for non-theists. Speaking from his own life experience, C. S. Lewis describes how that as an intellectual atheist he rejected the idea of God because of the cruelty of life. He writes:

“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of ‘just’ and ‘unjust’?...What was I comparing this universe to when I called it ‘unjust’?...Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended upon saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies...Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple.”⁴

Lewis' conclusion is that if you think the natural world is unjust and filled with evil, you are assuming a supernatural standard upon which to make your judgment. Philosopher Alvin Plantinga makes the same point in saying:

“Could there really be any such thing as horrifying wickedness [if there were no God and we just evolved]? I don't see how. There can be such thing only if there is a way that rational creatures are supposed to live, obligated to live...A [secular] way of looking at the world has no place for genuine moral obligation of any sort... and thus no way to say there is such a thing as genuine and appalling wickedness (...and not just an illusion of some sort), then you have a powerful... argument [for the reality of God].⁵

Having established that the problem of the existence of evil does not disprove the existence of God or prove the case of the atheist,⁶ the question of the goodness of God becomes relevant. In other words, “Is God good?” When I was a child and when the question of my behavior arose, my grandmother was fond of saying to me, “Pretty is as pretty does.” Since both goodness and pretty behavior fall into the category of morality, we can logically say that the being good places one within a moral category. When it comes to being perfectly good or even behaving in a perfectly pretty manner, we can only be speaking of God. Jesus says as much to the rich young man in Mark 10:17-23 when the latter makes the mistake of saying, “**Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” To which Jesus says before answering his question, “**Why do you**

² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 22.

³ Who can forget the massive tsunami in December 2004 that killed 250,000 around the rim of the Indian Ocean?

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1960) 31.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, “A Christian Life Partly Lived,” *Philosophers Who Believe*, edited by Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 73.

⁶ By definition the atheist believes that God does not exist.

call me good? No one is good—except God alone.” Jesus knew that in calling him “good” that he called him God without even realizing what he was saying. Rather the young man was actually only using the word “good” in a patronizing way as he might in speaking to any rabbi.⁷

Indeed, the Bible implies the goodness of God from the very beginning, for as God created the earth, we are told, *“And God saw that it was good.”*⁸ It logically follows that if God created the earth, and said that it was ‘good,’ that the One who created must be “good.” From this theologians tell us “goodness” is an attribute of God. Of course the story does not end there, for we learn that a part of the goodness of God is that he gives Adam and Eve free will, which is both the ability and the responsibility to choose to obey God’s commands or not, and by chapter 3 of Genesis, we find their choice (regardless of who made or tempted who to do what) lamentably not ‘good’ at all. In his Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul expounds on the disobedience of our first human parents by saying in essence, with their ‘fall’ into sin, all creation ‘fell.’ Ever since then, we live in a ‘fallen’ creation which while beautiful in the true sense of the world, is not perfect like God originally created it. So we must live in a world with natural disasters⁹ illness, pain, suffering, and death. But just as the problem of evil does not prove that God does not exist, neither does the existence of natural disasters, illness, pain, suffering, and death prove that God does not exist, nor does it prove that he is not “good” in the truest sense of the word.

To keep all of this straight in our minds, it is important that we understand what John Wenham writes in his book, *The Goodness of God*:

“The Bible presents us with a personal God, who is Creator, and Sustainer, Revealer, and Inspirer, Governor and Judge, Lover and Savior. God created the world. It is entirely dependent on him, but he is entirely independent of it. God is no way to be identified with this world [as far as his not being ‘good’ or being responsible for it not being ‘perfect’ in its present state]. Yet he is everywhere, the creation exists only by his will. He orders everything in it ‘according to the counsel of his will.’¹⁰

Now that we have established that God is neither the author of nor responsible for evil, we might ask, “What possible purpose(s) might God have for allowing evil, pain and suffering?” C.S. Lewis treats the problem of a ‘good’ God allowing pain and suffering, as a result of the Fall. Even so he often said, “Pain is God’s megaphone, to get our attention.”¹¹ I must say, that works for me! But it becomes intellectually tolerable when I realize that as the Book of Job teaches, God is never the first cause of pain and suffering (Job 1-3), that he uses it to bring us into a

⁷ This was patronizing because “good” is used only of God in the Old Testament and in Judaism. See William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974) 364-365.

⁸ Genesis chapter 1.

⁹ Usually called “acts of God” by Insurance companies as though punitive on his part.

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974) 182.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962).

deeper relationship with him (Job 38-42:7), and even blesses Job when he passes the tests of pain and suffering (Job 42:7-17).

Who can forget what the Apostle Paul teaches us in Romans 8:18-39 (also see Romans 8:1)...where God promises to use all things for our ultimate benefit, to be there while we are suffering, and that nothing can separate us from the love of a good God!

Ultimately it dawns on us that in Jesus Christ we have a God who knows the full measure of pain in his death and crucifixion and therefore as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, ***“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*** (Hebrews 2:18)