

Suffering & Evil

Gospel Living: Shelf 6 — Volume 60

CONTENTS

- 1** *Defining The Problem* – 2
- 2** *The Problem In The Bible* – 3
- 3** *Preliminary Considerations* – 4
- 4** *Denial Of The Problem* – 7
- 5** *Solutions To The Problem* – 8
- 6** *Benefits Of Suffering & Evil* – 16
- 7** *Reality Of Final Destruction* – 20

To many people the problem of evil has been, and is, acclaimed to be the most difficult question the believer faces with reference to the existence of God. Add to this all the suffering of this world and many conclude that there can be no God with the presence of so much suffering and evil. The presence of suffering and evil in our world has been referred to as the “evidence for the atheist” (See David. E. Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion*). Donald A. Wells, in *God, Man and the Thinker*, once wrote, “There is too much evil in the world to warrant the inference that there is a Providence or an Architect who has human interests at heart.” In *Have Atheists Proved There Is No God*, Thomas B. Warren added,

It is likely the case that no charge has been made with a greater frequency or with more telling force against theism of Judeo-Christian (Biblical) tradition than that such theism is unable to explain adequately the occurrence or the existence of evil.

It is this problem, therefore, that everyone who believes in God must face. It is simply not a problem that will go away.

This is one of the most pressing questions of our time. More pressing than the question of miracles or science and the Bible

is the poignant problem of why innocent people suffer, why babies are born blind, or why a promising life is snuffed out as it is on the rise. Why are there wars in which thousands of innocent people are killed, children burned beyond recognition, and many maimed for life.

Chapter 1

≈ Defining The Problem ≈

In order to understand the importance of the supposed problem, believers must understand the nature of the attack. Around 300 B.C. Epicurus posed the problem of evil and suffering when he wrote in *Aphorisms*,

The gods can either take away evil from the world and will not, or being willing to do so cannot; or they neither can nor will, or lastly, they are both able and willing. If they have the will to remove evil and cannot, then they are not omnipotent. If they can, but will not, then they are not benevolent. If they are neither able nor willing, then they are neither omnipotent nor benevolent. Lastly, if they are both able and willing to annihilate evil, how does it exist?

For the one who believes in an all-good and all-powerful God, the existence of evil does present a supposed problem as described by Epicurus. We must wonder how an all-good and all-powerful God could permit evil and suffering to exist, especially among those who claim to be the people of God. If God is all-good, would He not **desire** that evil cease to exist? If He is all-powerful, would He not be **able** to eliminate it if He desires that it should not exist? If God cannot eliminate evil, then how can He be all-powerful? If He can eliminate it, but does not, can He be an all-good God? These are questions that face Christians concerning their concept of God. These are not questions that must be ignored, neither are these questions that should distort our understanding of the Bible's answers to the questions.

The atheist denies God and assumes that evil is only a part of matter in motion. To him all is simply a struggle for survival. "To one who does not believe that

the world is ruled by a Loving Mind,” said Trueblood, “the existence of pain in nature, and the wanton cruelty of man to man, is not in the least surprising” (See *Philosophy And Religion*).

The atheist also has a problem. **He has the problem of explaining how the believer in God came to attribute evil in an all-material world (as atheists affirm) to be the product of a good, righteous and benevolent God.** This forces us back to the ontological argument concerning the very existence of the idea of God. It must be recognized that **the theist has to explain the existence of a benevolent God in the reality of the existence of evil in an all-material world.** On the other hand, **the atheist has to explain the evolution of the idea of a benevolent God and existence of good values from an environment of a supposedly all-material universe.** The materialistic atheist, therefore, is faced with the problem of explaining the existence of good while those who believe in God are faced with the challenge of explaining evil in the sight of a good God.

Chapter 2

≈ The Problem In The Bible ≈

The prophets often asked for an explanation from God concerning suffering and pain. Elijah questioned, *“O Lord my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son”* (1 Kg 17:20). *“O my lord,”* pondered Gideon, *“if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?”* (Jg 6:13). Habakkuk complained, *“Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours one more righteous than he?”* (Hk 1:13). Job, in his confrontation with suffering, anguished, *“My soul loathes my life; I will give free course to my complaint, I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God ‘Do not condemn me; show me why You contend with me. Does it seem good to You that You should oppress, that You should*

despise the work of Your hands, and shine on the council of the wicked?” (Jb 10:1-3). In all of Job’s suffering and questions, God never answered his questions. God simply responded that Job must trust in the all-powerful God who knows what He is doing.

In considering this subject there is usually a distinction made between three types of “evil.” These are: (1) **Physical evil or suffering** such as tornadoes, floods and deformed babies. (2) **Moral evil**, such as murder, greed, strife and lying. (3) **Eternal hell**, a place of punishment for those who rebel against God. As a whole, the atheist uses these concepts of “evil” or “suffering” as his argument against any all-powerful, all-good God who is conceived by the Christian.

Chapter 3

≈ Preliminary Considerations ≈

In order to understand the problem and deal with the argument, we must first define some terms and concepts. Once we clarify terms and concepts, we will understand the arguments. The following are some points that all must consider who claim that evil is evidence against the existence of God.

A. The existence of good

The atheist asks the theist, “If there is an all-good and all-powerful God, how do you explain the presence of evil in the world today?” However, the theist—those who believe in God—can justly ask the atheist, “**If there is no God, how do you explain the presence of good in a world that is supposedly only matter in motion?**” If all that exists is matter in motion, it is curious indeed that a material world could have developed good love, good benevolence, good thoughts and good characters.

From whence came good? What purpose is there in the good that is worked in the community by Joe Good? The atheist must answer these questions. The theist must deal with the problem of evil, but on the other hand, the atheist must deal with the problem of good.

B. The limitation of our knowledge

In this study we must realize that our knowledge is limited. It is often difficult to grasp eternal purposes. It is beyond our power to know the future. At the time of Joseph's mistreatment and sale to foreign traders by his brothers, neither he nor his brothers realized at the time all the evil that the brothers did to him was in the plan of God for a good purpose. However, Joseph later recognized this (See Gn 45:7). The same is true with us today. At a particular time of calamity we might not understand the good that will come from a particular calamity. In time we may realize that God was working in our lives through the calamity.

The Christian must recognize that there are some things that are hidden in the mind of God. Such things will be made known at their proper time (See Dt 29:29). In his book, *Towards Belief In God*, Herbert Farmer truthfully wrote, "Christianity has never claimed to take the sting out of evil by explaining it, but rather by giving victory over it."

Christianity does not take suffering and pain out of one's life. However, it helps one to endure it. It should take out the suffering resulting from sin by removing, at least to some degree, the sin of one's life. We do reap what we sow. If we sow good, we will reap good (See Gl 6:7). If we sow evil and wickedness, then certainly we will reap suffering. If we remove as much sin from our lives as possible, then we will remove much suffering which comes from that sin.

When Christians do not see the good in times of suffering, they are often limiting their thinking to that which is of this world. Paul said that all things work together for good (See Rm 8:28). However, we often interpret this passage in the context of this present world. Certainly, this present world has something to do with the final answer. However, we must keep in mind that this world exists solely for the purpose of bringing disciplined characters into an environment of eternal dwelling. **God is working through the social structure of this environment in order to train souls who have the character skills to dwell**

in eternity. Therefore, in times of suffering, Christians can count it with all joy **because they understand that this world is not all there is** (See Js 1:1,2). It is only a place of preparation for a greater environment that is yet to come.

C. Determining what is actually good

Our concept of what is actually good is sometimes twisted. We often associate pleasure with good and pain with bad. In his book, *I Believe In God*, Batsell B. Baxter was right when he wrote, “The pleasure-pain view of existence is shallow and incomplete. Yet, almost all mankind considers a thing good if it gives pleasure and a thing bad if it causes pain.” This misunderstanding causes many problems in correctly understanding the purpose for pain and suffering.

Pain does not necessarily qualify something as evil, and pleasure does not necessarily qualify something as good. Pain that guards us from endangering our lives is good. Once we go through this field of study, we will come to the conclusion that sin, not pain or suffering, **is the only real evil.** Obedience to God, motivated by love, not fleshly pleasures, is the only real good (See Mt. 22:36,37).

D. The problem of wrong reactions

Our reaction to suffering may be wrong. “At times it is our reaction to suffering,” explained Paul Little in *Know Why You believe*, “rather than the suffering itself, that determines whether the experience is one of blessing or of blight. The same sun melts the butter and hardens the clay.”

The atheist would certainly respond to suffering in a different manner than the one who understands the eternal purpose of God. It is for this reason that the sorrow that is expressed by the Christian at the grave is different than that of the unbeliever (See 1 Th 4:13). The believer and unbeliever view situations of suffering in this world from different perspectives. Therefore, we would challenge the unbeliever to view this world through the thinking of the word of God and

the eternal purpose for which this environment was created. When he does this, then he will understand not only the thinking of the believer, but also the nature and purpose of suffering.

Both believers and unbelievers should caution themselves as to how they view the occasion of suffering and pain. Our evaluation of the situation of suffering and pain may not always be objective. A mother cow charging to protect her young may be evil to the one being attacked. Nevertheless, the survival of the young calf is good, for it provides food for mankind. A bee sting may be considered bad by some, but if bees had no way of protecting their honey, predators would certainly, and quickly, destroy their life's sustenance. If the honey was destroyed, the bees would die. If the bees die, pollination in the plant kingdom would be severely hindered. Without pollination, plants die. Without plants, man's food supply is suddenly and drastically diminished. Therefore, some things that may first appear evil are actually good in the long run. We need to be careful, therefore, when we evaluate our reactions to pain and suffering.

Chapter 4

≈ Denial Of The Problem ≈

Some have sought to explain away the presence of evil by stating that it is only an illusion of the mind. In her book, *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures*, Mary Baker Eddy, incorrectly concluded, "Evil has no reality, it is neither person, place, nor being, but is simply a belief, and illusion of material sense." This belief certainly does not deal with the reality and the problem of suffering. In his book, *Philosophy of Religion*, William H. Davis correctly countered, "But even if evil is only an illusion, then illusions exist (in abundance!), and since these illusions themselves are evils, why does God permit the existence of illusion?" If suffering is only an illusion, then why fight it when we could just simply forget it?

Pain is not an illusion of the mind. When a person has a broken leg, his or her mind is not playing tricks. If he or she tries to walk, then he or she will certainly fall on his or her face and probably suffer another “illusion,” a broken nose. The excruciating pain from one’s “illusionary broken leg” will undoubtedly produce an agonizing yelp from one’s mouth, informing the one with the broken leg that he or she really does have a broken leg. Claiming that pain is only an illusion is actually ignoring the problem.

On the other hand, there are believers who simply do not deal with the problem. They ignore this attack of unbelievers because they usually cannot answer the problem themselves. They can give no answer because their knowledge of the subject is usually so shallow that they simply ignore the attack by affirming that one must just believe in God to take care of things.

God is certainly taking care of things. However, He has not left us in a vacuum of ignorance wherein we are left to the unmerciful attacks of atheistic philosophies. There are answers to our questions, and it is the responsibility of Christians to rise up with these answers in order to defend their faith. The Christian who does not know the answers is simply neglecting his or her responsibility to defend the faith. As disciples of Jesus, therefore, we have the responsibility of knowing how to defend what we believe. We assume this responsibility for the sake of the unbeliever.

Chapter 5

≈ Solutions To The Problem ≈

In order to understand the problem of evil and suffering we must understand the nature of what is truly considered evil. This understanding will produce answers to the supposed contradiction between the existence of evil and the Christian’s concept of an all-good and all-powerful God.

A. The necessity of natural laws

Much suffering and pain is attributed to physical causes such as tornadoes, earthquakes and floods. When God created the universe, He established natural laws to govern His creation. It is as Baxter stated, “God planned the universe so that it would be run by a system of natural laws, and by these laws everything functions. Without these laws life would be impossible. A world of chance would be chaotic.”

Genesis 8:22 reads, *“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease.”* God set things in order in the universe. Order is necessary. **If more disorder existed than order, then life could not exist.** There is no such thing as order without law. Therefore, **natural laws are necessary in order to maintain order.**

This brings us to an answer for many questions. In his book, *Philosophical Theology*, F. R. Tennant introduced answers to our questions by stating,

Nature’s regularity is the key to this problem. Once let it be admitted that, in order to be a theatre for moral life, the world must be largely characterized by uniformity or constancy, and most significant consequences will be seen to follow.

There is a spiritual and physical sense to the law Paul stated in Galatians 6:7, *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.”* Gravity is a law of nature. Violate it and severe consequences will follow. The sun is great for the body, but too much sun will cause some unpleasant pain. Fire has properties that make it essential for the existence of life. But the abuse of these properties will cause suffering. For water to have the qualities to satisfy and sustain life, it must also have the qualities to snuff out life by drowning. Tennant reminds everyone concerning these matters: “We cannot have the advantages of a determinate order of things without its logically or its causally necessary disadvantages.” In his well known book, *Dear Mr. Brown*, H. E. Fosdick reminded us of these

things: “So, despite all the agony that nature’s law-abiding forces inflict on mankind, we would not dare substitute a lawless for a law-abiding world.”

Much suffering that is in the world today comes as a result of violations of natural law. In the normal function of natural law there are those tragedies that inflict much suffering and pain. It is unfortunate that tornadoes and earthquakes exist. How we view their existence, however, depends on how we would consider their infliction of pain and suffering. We must keep in mind that God created an environment that must carry on with the normal process of natural law. As God did with Israel, natural catastrophes were used to awaken Israel to His presence and Israel’s need to submit to Him as their God. If such catastrophes never happened, the people of Israel would never have been awakened to their necessity to both recognize His presence and submit to His law. Through the calamities, therefore, **the inner religious nature of man is awakened to the reality that this world is not all there is because there is a God above this world.**

In the purposeful violation of natural law, people bring on themselves unnecessary suffering. We must reap the wind when we sow the whirlwind. Most of the pain and suffering in the world today is the result of evil people who create wars in order to carry out their evil desires. Nevertheless, God allows such to happen for an eternal purpose. **Through the heartache of people reaping the whirlwind, we are constantly reminded that there must be a better place beyond this world.** We would thus conclude that **this environment is the best of all possible environments for the existence and dwelling of truly free-moral individuals.** It is the best environment in which they can be prepared for eternal dwelling.

B. The necessity of free choice

The necessity of the free will of man supports the necessity of the existence of evil that comes from the

bad choices of bad people. For us to be truly free, we must have the power to choose good and evil. Little asked the following for all of us:

Why didn't God make us so we could not sin? To be sure, He could have, but let's remember that if He had done so we would no longer be human beings, we would be machines. How would you like to be married to a chatty doll?

So Farmer answered the above question for all of us: "A person who is not free to do wrong is a contradiction in terms." Therefore, we must understand that God, as Fosdick stated, "cannot give man the power of choice without granting him power to choose evil as well as good." So God had to take the risk, as Baxter stated, "If man was to have freedom of will, it was inevitable that he might choose evil as well as good." Ramm rightly affirmed this in the following statement,

Freedom, to be real freedom, must be freedom to opposites. A restricted or hedged-in or confined freedom may well exist, as perhaps with an animal, but this cannot be true of man in the image of God. Freedom must be freedom to radical opposites, that is, to sin or to holiness, to good or to evil, to the devil or to God. If one puts shackles on man's freedom, he has destroyed any real sense of man being in the image of God. Therefore evil must be a real possibility for man, for only in this radical possibility is he really free; and only as he is really free is he in the image of God.

To be truly free, we must be able to make choices, even bad choices. We must be able to choose whether to make atomic reactors or atomic bombs. If we choose atomic bombs, then we must live with the consequences whereby evil people might seek to carry out their evil intentions. Nevertheless, we must be allowed to build or to bungle the whole situation. **A truly free-moral agent without the freedom to choose wrong is a contradiction.** He would be a contradiction in the sense of being free, and yet, not have the power to make free choices. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis concluded,

Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. **Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having** (Emphasis mine, R.E.D.).

It is admittedly hard to understand the purpose of God from the view point of a finite mind. Farmer was right when he wrote, “It must be admitted that the mind staggers more than a little at the thought of a divine purpose which could make a race free enough to bring about the abominations of corruption and sensualism and cruelty of which history is full” Then again, if finite minds were able to understand all that is in the mind of the Infinite, then we would no longer be finite. We would be as God who is infinite.

God purposed in the creation of humanity that the individual of humanity should be true free-moral in making choices. He could take evil from the world, but this would also take away our freedom to choose, and thus, we would all be robots. And who wants to be a robot? The fact is that no one wants to be a robot, for all people enjoy the freedom to make choices.

We must also understand that much evil is attributed to the unwise, greedy and lustful choices of unrighteous people. These are choices of free-moral people for which God cannot be held accountable. James wrote, *“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’”* (Js 1:13). Solomon said, *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”* (Pv 14:12). People often accuse God of evils that they themselves have brought upon themselves. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the mythological god Zeus rebuked mankind by saying,

Lo you now, how vainly mortal men do blame the gods! For of us they say comes evil, whereas they even of themselves, through the blindness of their own hearts, have sorrows beyond that which is ordained.

People do not live unto themselves, nor by

themselves. Our life affects others. It is as Paul wrote, *“For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself”* (Rm 14:7). So Bales and Tell remind us all, “In a world in which there is some freedom of will it is impossible ... for a man to abuse his freedom without hurting someone else in many instances.” People who are motivated by selfish incentives will invariably make choices that will cause suffering and pain on the part of others. We cannot accuse God for this suffering. It is our own fault. We must be held responsible for our own wrong doing.

We must take into consideration in this discussion the fact that God created and originally intended for us to thrive in a garden-of-Eden situation. Such an environment—and we do not completely know its benefits and glories—was certainly a haven for a truly free-moral individual to make choices. This was God’s original plan. However, man fell by sin. Adam gave up this first home by **choosing sin**. As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, God cursed the earth. As a result of the curse it would be from the sweat of man’s brow that he should provide food for himself (See Gn 3:16-19).

Because we do not know what the earth was before God cursed it, we do not know the extent to which God cursed it. There is more to what Paul said in Romans 8:19-21 than what we can understand.

*For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. **For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.***

We would assume from what Paul wrote that before the fall of man the earth did not experience tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes. It was an environment in which free-moral people could live without the infliction of natural catastrophes. However, it was still an environment in which free-moral people could make choices. And because one person made a

bad choice, the environment was changed for the remainder of the existence of humanity.

Paul wrote, *“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin”* (Rm 5:12). People are to be blamed for sin, not God. For people to coexist on earth, there must be law. When we break this law, we sin against God. Our breaking of the law often leads to the suffering of one’s fellow world citizen. For this we blame ourselves. God started society in a good way. It was people who made the mistakes. People continue to make wrong choices which leads to great suffering in this present world, and thus, we must be held accountable for the wrong choices we make.

C. God can do that which can be done

Some charge that the presence of evil is evidence that God is not omnipotent, that is, all-powerful. If God is all-good and desires that evil not exist—so it is stated—then He must not be all-powerful because evil does exist. Atheists wonder why an all-benevolent God would allow evil to exist if He is claimed to be all-powerful.

The argument should be considered from the viewpoint of the existence of a free-moral person. How could a free-moral person exist without the existence of our ability to sin? If people could not make free-moral choices, even though the choices may be wrong, then we could not exist as free-moral beings.

The charge that an all-good God who is omnipotent would not allow evil to exist is inaccurate as well as unjust. We must ask, **Can God do the impossible?** Can people be free creatures without having the right or ability to choose evil as well as good? Can good exist without evil? These questions must be answered in order to understand the nature of God’s relationship with creation and humanity.

God can do all that which **can be done**. God’s omnipotence does not mean that He can do things that are not possible to be done. Lewis wrote that

omnipotence “means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense.” Davis added, “But to say that God is all-powerful means only that God can do everything that **can be done**, not that He can do contradictory things like make square circles.” “Nothing which implies contradiction,” replied Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, “falls under the omnipotence of God.” God cannot do that which is impossible.

It is certainly not the case that there are no limits to what an omnipotent God can do. God cannot make square circles, round squares, four-sided triangles and three-sided rectangles. These things do not exist and cannot exist. God cannot make something exist and not exist at the same time. He cannot do that which cannot be done.

The point, then, is this: **God could not have created a true, free-moral individual as ourselves and at the same time not allow us to be able to sin, to do evil, and make bad choices.** We could have been created as puppets of God and not allowed to make evil choices. Or, we could be free-moral individuals, as we are, with the ability to make evil choices. True freedom demands the latter. For people to be truly free we must have the capacity of choice. This capacity includes the ability to make wrong decisions. **A true, free-moral person without the power to choose evil just cannot exist.**

It is not a question as to whether God could have created a being that would not be able to sin. He could have done such. However, to create a free-moral being and not allow him to choose, would be an impossibility. God can do what can be done, not what is impossible or contradictory.

People must have the power of choice in order to be free. **The abuse of such power answers numerous questions concerning the existence of evil and suffering in the world today.** How much evil is the result of our evil choices? We live in a world where the majority of its citizens have gone wrong.

They have given up a knowledge of the one true God, and thus, have created their own social laws. The result of this choice has plagued the world with wars and a host of calamities that continually inflict society. The existence of a free-moral individual has led to human suffering that surely causes God to weep over our rejection of His guidance through His laws.

At this point in our discussion one might even question why God created us in the first place. We must be reminded, therefore, **that God never intended that this world be the final dwelling place of those who submit to His guidance.** Heaven is the final reality for the Christian. In order to prepare us for heaven, therefore, **there had to be an environment in which true heavenly characters could be developed.** This world is that environment. Therefore, in order to prepare an individual who had the capacity to love, God had to create an environment in which love could be developed by our interactivity with one another. This environment allows such, and thus, **this is the best of all possible environments that could be created in order to prepare us for heaven.**

Chapter 6

≈ Benefits Of Suffering & Evil ≈

In order to understanding the presence of evil and suffering we must understand that evil and suffering inherently have benefits. Too often we question God's wisdom in allowing suffering and pain and sin to exist without realizing the benefits that do exist because God allows them to go on.

A. Suffering Produces Better Sons Of God

For people to truly be free-moral in making choices, **we must live in an environment that allows choices to be made.** For an individual to develop into a true son of God, he or she must live in an environment that will promote character-building. The world provides such an environment. The environment in which we live, as Lewis wrote, "must be an environment which

offers to man the **challenge** of choosing to become and to live as a son (of God) and a brother (to one's fellow man) at a possible very high price (a great deal of sacrifice.)” **This environment (the world) offers the best possible environment to accomplish God's purpose to bring disciplined individuals into eternal dwelling.**

This world, in light of God's omniscience, is **the best possible world for the preparation and character-making of individuals for now and eternity.** Could God eliminate all suffering and yet expect us to develop courageous characters? We think not. The unbeliever contends for a better world by the elimination of pain and suffering. However, for what would it be better? In such a world—a world free of suffering and pain—it would be impossible for people to make better choices. It would be impossible for us to develop spiritually by making right choices. In his writings, *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, “For Peter was in a healthier condition when he wept and was dissatisfied with himself, than when he boldly presumed and satisfied himself.”

Suffering does forge better characters. James wrote, “*The testing of your faith produces patience*” (Js 1:3). Without trial, temptation and turmoil, there can be no courageously developed people in a spiritual realm on earth who are prepared for heaven. T. B. Maston was right when he wrote in *Suffering: A Personal Perspective*,

The main point, from our immediate perspective, is that God did not remove the thorn but said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength [“power,” RSV] is made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:9). How could Paul have known the power and sufficiency of the grace of God without his thorn in the flesh?

Again, Trueblood was correct when he stated, “The crucial question is not whether ours is the **best** possible world, but whether it may be the **only** possible world.” For soul development, it appears that **this is the only possible world.** God “cannot eliminate all hardship,

risk, pain, and difficulty from life,” wrote Fosdick, “and still expect courageous character and venturesome minds to develop here.” An environment must exist in which these true characters can be forged for eternal dwelling.

Peter wrote, *“But may the God of all grace, ... after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you”* (1 Pt 5:10). Peter had earlier explained the reason for suffering persecution.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pt 1:6,7).

Therefore, there are benefits that come from suffering. Suffering produces strong characters. It produces characters who are prepared for heaven. “If God thus intervened for his child,” wrote T. B. Maston in *Suffering: A Personal Perspective*, “the child would become what someone has called ‘a cosmic pet,’ and a petted child is a spoiled child. Our Heavenly Father has no petted or spoiled children.” Therefore, in order for God not to have spoiled children, He must allow all His children to exist in an environment in which they are disciplined and trained for the new heavens and earth wherein dwells righteousness (See 2 Pt 3:13).

B. Evil Exemplifies Good

Ramm wrote,

Man would never know good if he did not know evil. A man created in goodness, eternally protected from evil, would have no appreciation of goodness. Therefore evil is introduced into the universe so that man may experience evil and in so doing come to know good. He is therefore eternally better for having experienced evil, for he now knows the real character of the good.

That which is good often results from evil. After Joseph had undergone numerous evils as the result

of the evil doing of his brothers, he later proclaimed to them, *“But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive”* (Gn 50:20). In the overall view, all things work together for good to those who love God (See Rm 8:28).

Therefore, it is not evil that evil exists. Warren was right when he stated that “it is the case that evil really does exist, it is not evil that it does exist.” **Sin is the only real evil for it is the willful transgression of God’s will** (See 1 Jn 3:4; Rm 3:11,18; 4:15). It is not evil that God gave us the power of freedom. It is evil only when we abuse that power by choosing rebellion against God. God cannot be held accountable for the sinful choices we make.

C. Evil Points One Toward Heaven

“It must be remembered,” wrote Warren, “that God did not create the world to be man’s permanent home but to be merely his temporary ‘vale of soul-making,’ the environment in which man’s one and only probationary period is to be spent.” If we were free from suffering and pain in this life, would we truly thirst after heaven in the next life? Probably not. So John Bennett, in his book, *Christian Realism*, wrote that “the very absence of evil would constitute a problem since there would then be nothing to jar us out of an attitude of self-sufficiency.”

Paul would add, *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”* (Rm 8:18). There is a better land than this land, a land of no more pain, tears or sorrows (See Rv 21:4). It is this land in the future, this rest to which we strive as Christians (See Hb 11:24-26; Rv 2:10). Therefore, the believer does not consider this world his last hope. He views the present world as only a place of trial through which he must transition into the next. Once this view of life is understood, then one understands the purpose for which the world was created by God.

We must respond to the presence of suffering

in the light of what God has promised to those who endure through this world. Too often it is our reaction, not the suffering itself, that causes most of the trouble. Wallace Maston was right when he exhorted in his book *The Existence of God*, "... suffering in general, can and will be used of God to deepen and enrich our lives if we will react rightly to it." Right reactions, however, are only found in a truly biblical understanding of what evil really is and the purpose for which this world was created. Right reactions will come only to those who realize and understand the great reward prepared for those who overcome this world, and thus, transition into the next. When one realizes the reward, then there is reason to live the right reaction to suffering and evil.

Chapter 7

≈ Reality Of Final Destruction ≈

We must continually remind ourselves that God has given us the power to choose our own destiny. If one abuses this privilege here on earth, then he will have to suffer the consequences for his wrong choices (See Gl 6:7). We destine ourselves to destruction because we so choose the course in life that leads to such. When we violate natural laws that are necessity for our own existence, we must pay the price. It is the same in the spiritual realm. When one violates moral laws that of necessity must exist, he or she must pay the price. We must know that we will pay the ultimate price for sin.

This brings us to the accusation of the atheist concerning the Christian's concept of hell as the final punishment for those who are wicked in behavior or refused to obey the gospel. The atheist charges the Christian with belief in a supposedly fiendish God who is unloving and unmerciful in His final punishment of the wicked. His argument is against those who affirm that God is supposed to be good, but this good God will supposedly punish with destruction those who sin against Him. The atheist charges that the Christian

believes in a God who periodically checks up on the wicked throughout eternity in order to make sure they are burning in an unending fiery torment. Some think that the condemned are burning in hell because they did not obey the gospel for the remission of their sins. They will burn in hell forever and ever while God checks in on them in order to make sure His punishment for them carries on without end. The atheist states that he would not believe in such a fiendish God because this God cannot be good and loving, while at the same time, inflict upon the wicked such unjust punishment.

The atheist may here have a point. This argument is usually ignored by most Christians. It is ignored because most Christians do not have an answer for this contradiction in their belief concerning a loving and merciful God who would punish beyond the nature of the crime those who were good people, but never had a chance to hear and obey the gospel. There are two schools of thought here among believers in their efforts to answer this argument:

A. Dismissing the contradiction

There are those who simply dismiss the argument by saying that unending punishment is God's business. If He desires to hand down unending punishment for crimes that took place in a brief lifetime on earth, then such is His business. If He desires to punish with eternal torment those who were of a good character, but never had a chance to obey the gospel, then it is His desire to do so. We do not have the option to question what He would do with the wicked.

This is usually the approach to answer the atheist's argument by those who affirm the unending torment of those who have not obeyed the gospel, whether they were morally good or wicked. However, this seems to be an effort to ignore the dilemma. **It ignores the fact that the biblical definition of God is that He is a just God who renders just punishment for crimes committed.** Throughout the Old Testament the extremity of the punishment that God commanded Israel to deliver to those who broke the law **was**

measured by the crime that was committed. The principle of punishment was an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” We would assume, therefore, that God would Himself justly work after this same principle. To simply say that God will unendingly punish the wicked because it is His business seems to dodge the principle by which He commanded us to live.

The approach to answer the argument by just saying that it is God’s business does not satisfy the atheist. He thus maintains that his argument proves that the God in which the Christian believes does not exist simply because the Christian’s theology contradicts itself on this point. It contradicts itself because a God who is just and merciful cannot be a God who will unendingly punish with a fiery hell the wicked or morally good person who never had a chance to hear and obey the gospel.

B. The just God

There is a second biblical answer that many believers have affirmed that answers the argument of the atheist concerning the punishment of the disobedient. It is based on passages as Matthew 10:28: *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”* Since Jesus made this statement concerning the power of God, then certainly He can carry it out. After due punishment has been measured out, **God can terminate both soul and body in hell.** Paul says that He can destroy those who do not know God or obey the gospel (See 2 Th 1:7-9). In other words, once the punishment has met the crime, the body and soul of the wicked, or the morally good person who did not have a chance to obey the gospel, **is terminated.** Once the disobedient have been rendered the “stripes” that match the crime, **the individual ceases to exist.** This school of thought, therefore, contends that God is a just and merciful God (See Lk 12:42-48). **He is not a fiendish God who holds in unending confinement those He**

desires to unmercifully torment. (See Volume 49 in the IBI Library. roger-e-dickson.org).

If this second answer is true—and it is—then the atheist cannot say that the Christian proclaims a concept of God that is inherently contradictory. God can remain a just and merciful God, and at the same time, render just punishment to those who rebel against His will. He is just in that He deals justly. He is not fiendish in the sense that He unendingly torments the morally good who have never obeyed the gospel.

In order for people to be truly free, they must have the power to choose between good and evil. If we choose evil, then there must be consequences for our behavior. If not, then we would choose only that which pleased ourselves. Every person would do only that which was right in his or her own eyes. We would do only that which brings pleasure to self or power over our fellow man. Such would certainly lead to human annihilation. When people give up a knowledge of God, they seek their own pleasure and power.

If people were not severely warned for practicing sin, certainly numerous societies would have vanished long ago. Or at least, various societies would have debased themselves to being animals. Therefore, we must understand that we cannot do wrong against our fellow man without a final and just punishment. This is the way it must be for mankind to survive in an environment that allows choice. It brings no pleasure to God to see His creation suffer because of evil choices. God is not a sadistic old man. He is a loving Father guiding His children toward heaven. As a loving father chastises his son, so God chastises His sons to keep them on the right road (See Hb 12:6,7). This is the way it should be. This is the way it is.

After we have covered all the material concerning the problem of suffering and evil, there are still unanswered questions. However, these unanswered questions do not cause us to forsake or even question God. After all, if we reject God, to what will we flee? Trethowan wrote, “If we reject God on this ground

[that evil exists], we exchange obscurity for chaos and for a more inspissated darkness—for in a supposedly purposeless world we should be faced with a still more intractable problem, the problem of good.” Therefore, we will not turn out the light on what we have. We will not dispose of faith for fiction and a world of chaos.

When Job questioned God on this issue, God answered Job by revealing to him that He was infinitely greater than what Job could possibly imagine. Therefore, God’s answer to Job was basically, “**Trust Me, I know what I am doing.**” And after considering all the problems of life, we must confess that it is still all worth the effort. Life is worth the struggle. When considering the hope that is before us, we cannot conceive of a better environment in which characters could be prepared for eternal dwelling. Therefore, we will trust in God that all things are working together for good. Habakkuk concluded,

Though the fig tree may not blossom,
 Nor fruit be on the vines;
 Though the labor of the olive may fail,
 And the fields yield no food;
 Though the flock may be cut off from the fold,
 And there be no herd in the stalls –
 Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
 (Hk 3:17,18)



ABREVIATIONS OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**

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