

### Key Points to Remember

"There is no God!" In this age of skepticism, belief in God is no longer considered necessary or, in some cases, even desirable. The evidence for the existence of God must begin with creation.

1. *Something cannot come from nothing.* The oldest and best evidence for the existence of God is the evidence of the world itself. From sophisticated technical arguments offered by philosophers to the simple awareness of an uneducated person it is clear that the world had to be caused by something.

2. *The words "chance" and "spontaneous generation" are empty terms.* People play with these words in an attempt to disclaim God as Creator. Spontaneous generation or creation by chance cannot withstand even a rudimentary intellectual critique.

3. *If something exists now something has always existed.* Self-existence means that something has the power, within itself, of being. This power is eternal and presents no rational difficulty. Self-creation is irrational because for something to create itself *it must be before it is.*

4. *The God of the Bible is self-existent and eternal.* God created the world out of nothing (see Ps. 104:5-9; Job 38:4,5; Heb. 11:3).

5. *The world exhibits design.* This design must have a designer or it is improper to call it design.

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#### Note

1. The scientific principle for the apparent behavior of atomic particles under certain conditions.

Sproul, R.C. Reason To Believe.  
Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.  
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## "If There Is a God Why Is There So Much Evil in the World?"

If God is perfect, how can there be evil in the world? Beyond the question of suffering we must face the question of how we account for the presence of wickedness in the world. The question of the origin of evil has been called the "Achilles heel" of Christianity. This vulnerable point has been the subject of considerable philosophical speculation and criticism.

The force of the question can be illustrated by the dilemma posed by many critics such as John Stuart Mill. The dilemma is frequently stated as follows:

If God desires there to be evil in the world, then He is not good. If He does not desire there to be evil, yet evil exists, then He is not omnipotent. Thus, if evil exists God is either

not loving or not all-powerful. Evil casts a shadow over God's love and power. This is no small dilemma, and answers to it are exceedingly difficult.

Attempts to answer the dilemma posed by Mill and others have taken the form of the "theodicy." A theodicy is a rational attempt to explain how God can be just and still allow evil in the world. The word comes from a compound Greek root: *Theos* (God) *dikos* (just). The goal of the theodicy is to exonerate God from all blame and culpability for evil.

### Is Evil Really Good in Disguise?

Frequent attempts at theodicy have tried to argue that what appears to be evil is in the final analysis really good. Evil only seems to be evil from a temporal perspective but in God's eternity is really good. The classic biblical reference offered in support of such a theodicy is the text, "All things work together for good for those who love Him" (see Rom. 8:28). Such an inference drawn from the text is gratuitous. The text does not assert that "all things are good" but that they work together for good for a limited number of people (those who love God). This text does assert God's triumph over evil, His ability to redeem evil, and His ability to bring good out of evil. But evil out of which God brings good is real evil. From the betrayal of Jesus by Judas comes the redemptive act of the cross, but that in no way minimizes the wickedness of Judas' act.

The "evil is good" theodicy fails because it obscures the real difference between good and evil. It is an implicit denial of the reality of evil. Even worse, it commits the error, indeed the sin, which the Bible typifies as a characteristic of wickedness, namely the calling of evil good and, by implication, the good, evil.

### Does Evil Come from Satan?

Another common theodicy is found in the notion of an ultimate dualism. Dualism postulates the existence of two ultimate opposing forces which are equal in power and eternity. This view gets God off the hook by making the existence of evil eternally independent of Him. It resolves Mill's dilemma by submerging the one pole under the other. God's goodness is maintained at the cost of His omnipotence. Dualism limits God's power eternally. This theory ascribes the origin of evil to an eternal "devil" who is a god in his own right.

Such a view causes grave problems for the Christian because it excludes the possibility of redemption of evil. If evil is equal in power to God, God has no way to overcome it. With dualism there is no guarantee of redemption, nor even the possibility of it.

From another perspective, dualism has problems of a different kind. It fails to explain the origin of evil on rational grounds. If we have two ultimate opposing forces which are equal in power and are mutually exclusive and contradictory, how can we have anything? It is the rational problem of the irresistible force and the immovable object. What happens if we posit the theory of the meeting of an absolutely immovable object with an absolutely irresistible force? If the immovable object moves then it is not immovable. If it does not move, the irresistible force is resistible! It is rationally absurd to have two absolute, mutually exclusive entities. Even if it were hypothetically possible (which it is not) it could not account for real manifestations of good or evil. We would have a universe paralyzed by ultimate moral inertia. Absolute evil would always be checked by absolute good. Absolute good would always be checked by absolute evil. In this scheme neither good nor evil would be possible.

### **Do We Have to Have Evil to Appreciate Good?**

A third type of theodicy is found in the theory that a temporary experience of evil is necessary or conducive to an ultimate appreciation of the good. This argument, which has been given in very sophisticated forms, has a great popular following. The argument contends that to appreciate health, I must first experience sickness; to appreciate righteousness, I must first experience wickedness. The argument seems weighty inasmuch as we do experience the intensity of appreciation by way of such contrasting experiences. I do appreciate health more fully after I've recovered from a serious illness or a painful injury. But the theodicy has its problems. If the experience is *necessary* for the appreciation of good then God Himself must experience evil for Him to appreciate the good. If it is *not necessary*, but merely conducive to the appreciation of the good, then we fall back into the first theodicy. This would simply mean that evil is ultimately good. All the problems of the first theodicy would be repeated here plus the added ethical questions of the end justifying the means.

### **Isn't Evil Relevant?**

A fourth type of theodicy is that which explicitly denies the reality of evil. Other theodicies do it subtly and by logical implication. But this theodicy does it in bold type. It is not even properly called a theodicy because it doesn't seek to justify God but to eliminate Him (at least as a moral being). This approach maintains that there is no such thing as good or evil, only social convictions or preferences that masquerade as real values. Statements like, "Nothing is good or evil; only how you feel about it matters," are commonplace. The immediate question is, "How can it matter how you feel about it then?" When we speak of things mattering, we are talk-

ing again about values. If we value anything, we are talking about good and evil.

The above can be illustrated by relating a brief conversation I had with a devotee of Christian Science. Though believing in the reality of good, he contended that evil is just an illusion. There is really no evil. I asked the man if he thought it was good that I was teaching people that evil was real. He said, "No." I asked him if it was evil that I was teaching falsehood about evil. He had no answer. If he objected to my assertion of the reality of evil, he had to affirm my thesis in order to deny it. His only recourse was to treat me as an illusion. Frequently people argue that there is no good or evil or right or wrong. I have never heard anyone state the argument for five minutes without making assertions about right and wrong or good and evil in the process. This "theodicy" is what is commonly referred to as a "cop-out."

### **After All I'm Only Human!**

One of the most sophisticated theodicies ever devised is that propounded by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. Leibniz differentiated between three kinds of evil. He distinguished between moral evil, physical evil, and metaphysical evil.

Leibniz defined moral evil in terms of acts performed by volitional beings. Creatures with understanding and wills have the ability to perform moral evil. Stones and flowers aren't moral creatures in this sense.<sup>1</sup> Physical evil is defined in terms of physical suffering brought about by disease, injury, or natural disasters like earthquakes. Metaphysical evil is related to the limitations of finitude or creatureliness.

It is this third category of "metaphysical evil" that is the heart of Leibniz's theodicy. To be anything less than

metaphysically "perfect" is to be "evil." For example, if my knowledge is less than absolutely comprehensive, I suffer from metaphysical imperfection. Only an all-knowing, omniscient being would be metaphysically perfect. If I'm finite, I am incomplete and imperfect.

Leibniz's theory then proceeds to argue that ultimately both physical evil and moral evil "flow out" of metaphysical evil. In a word, we sin because we are finite. This is a novel expression of the old adage "to err is human." Thus, to be finite is to be *necessarily* evil.

How is God absolved of blame in all this? God is exonerated simply because He has done the best job He could do. He has created the "best of all possible worlds." Leibniz recognized that for God to create a metaphysically perfect world, He would have to create another God. Even God cannot create another God. God by definition is not a created being. If God tried to create another God, the second "god" would be a creature. The "god" would be dependent, derived, and finite. He simply could not qualify for the job description of being God.

But if God cannot create another God, doesn't that mean that God is not omnipotent? Again, Mill's dilemma seems to haunt Leibniz. Leibniz's God can still be good and loving because out of an infinite number of possible blueprints for a created world, God chose the best one. But if He were limited to imperfection, doesn't that mean there is something God cannot do, namely, create a perfect world? The answer is obvious. Yes, there is something God cannot do. In fact there are many things God cannot do. Reason tells us He cannot be God and not be God at the same time and in the same relationship. God cannot make a square circle or a two-sided triangle. Triangles by definition have three sides.

The point that is crucial, however, is that all of this

does not deny the omnipotence of God but affirms it. The point of confusion rests with the meaning of the term "omnipotence." As a theological term the word does not mean that God can do anything. What it does mean is that God does have all power over His creatures. The whole created order is always under the control and authority of God.

Leibniz's theodicy has impressed many and appears as a neat and clever argument. But the argument is filled with difficulties, especially for the Christian. There are both biblical and rational problems with it.

The biblical difficulty with Leibniz's theodicy focuses on the concept of an unavoidable fall of man. If moral evil flows out of metaphysical evil, then not only is God exonerated for evil but so is man. If man's sin is directly bound up with his creatureliness then it follows that he has no guilt. It would also mean that there is no hope of man's ultimate liberation from sin in heaven because he will still be a creature.

The chief rational objection to Leibniz's theodicy deals with his use of language. The basic fallacy of equivocation is not avoided by his definitions of different kinds of evil. The word "evil" when applied to finitude connotes something morally wrong; especially when moral evil is tied up with metaphysical evil, the changes of the meaning of "evil" become obscured. Though Leibniz does not like to speak of a causal connection between finitude and sin and prefers to speak of sin "flowing out of" finitude, the implication of causal necessity is there. If there is a necessary causal connection then moral evil cannot be called "sin." If there is no necessary causal relationship then the origin of evil has not been adequately explained. If sin does not *necessarily* flow from finitude then we must ask why in some cases it does and in others it does not.

### Why Must I Suffer for What Adam Did?

Perhaps the most frequent theodicy offered by the Christian to the problem of evil is to ground the origin of evil in the free will of man. Man has the ability to sin because he is free. The strength of this argument is found in the fact that it reflects the biblical assertion that God is not the author of evil. Since the Bible clearly places the guilt and responsibility for sin on man, it seems natural to assume that sin comes with the power of freedom of choice.

However, the appeal to man's freedom as an answer to this question is not without its serious difficulties. Again the difficulties are of both a biblical and a rational kind.

The Bible tells us that sin entered the human experience by way of the fall of Adam and Eve. It tells us that they were created good and then fell by choosing to sin. The question is, how could something created good choose something evil. If we say Adam was deceived, we have two problems. In the first place the Bible makes it clear that Adam knew that what he was doing was wrong. Thus, the idea of innocent deception or sinning by ignorance are at odds with the text. The second problem is again the problem of guilt and responsibility. If Adam was deceived or ignorant of his actions, how could he be held guilty?

Perhaps Adam was coerced to sin. If he were forced to sin then freedom as an answer to our original dilemma is useless. The idea of coercion violates the biblical account and would absolve Adam of any responsibility.

What if Adam sinned because he had an evil inclination in his heart? That would explain how he was able to choose evil, but it would leave us with the thorny question of where he got the evil inclination in the first place. If God gave him the evil inclination, the responsi-

bility for sin falls back to God. If God didn't give it to Adam, how did he acquire it?

What if all the inclinations of Adam's heart were only good ones? Then we still have the problem of asking how an evil choice would come from a good inclination.

The standard reply to these questions is that Adam had no inclinations either to the good or to the bad but rather had a moral disposition that was utterly neutral. This whole view of freedom of the will is treated more fully in the chapter on "I Don't Need Religion." The basic problem, however is this: If Adam has no inclination to sin or to good, how could he choose either one of them? Without desire or disposition, the will has no power to choose. Even if the will could act without inclination, would the choice be a moral one? If Adam chose evil for no reason or from no inclination or desire, the choice would be utterly arbitrary. In a word, it would be an accident with no moral responsibility attached.

These difficulties are why Karl Barth has called the fall of man an "impossible possibility." Why does he make such an utterly absurd statement? We must say sin is possible because it is actual. If Adam did sin, that is the clearest evidence that he could sin! But we can't figure out *how* he did it. Barth's clever statement of impossible possibility is not the remark of a stupid man. The statement is made not to explain the fall but to dramatize the rational problems connected with it. Barth uses startling language to underline the rational difficulty in explaining the fall.

Some search for the explanation for Adam's fall within the dimension of the influence of Satan. This approach simply removes the dilemma one step. All the difficulties raised with respect to the "how" of Adam's fall must then be faced with the question of the "how" of Satan's fall.

These theodicies are but a few of the more popular of the multitude of theories that have been offered as possible solutions to the enigma of sin. I am not satisfied with any of them. It is not my intent to be the devil's advocate or to lend assistance to those who reject Christianity because of these objections. I am not trying to give the skeptic more ammunition than he may already have. I am trying to make it clear that the problem is a severe one and one for which I have no adequate solution. I do not know how evil could originate with a good God. I am baffled by it, and it remains a troublesome mystery to me.

However, I am not prepared to jettison Christianity because of the mystery of evil. I think there is too much evidence for the existence of a good God and for the existence of real evil to abandon either assertion.

Though I cannot solve the dilemma of evil, I think it is still important to recognize other implications of the question that at least make the burden of the mystery a bit easier to bear.

### What Is Evil?

Before any solution to the problem of evil can be found, we must deal with the question of the nature of evil. What is evil? How are we to describe it? What is the difference between good and evil?

The classical Christian philosophers Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas both wrestled deeply with the problem of evil. Though their methods of doing philosophy differed sharply, they shared some similar ideas about the nature of evil. Through their influence some basic assumptions about evil were formulated.

Classically, evil is defined in terms of the Latin words *negatio* and *privatio*. That is, the notions of *negation* and *privation* are pivotal to the definition of evil. Nega-

tion refers to the negative ways in which evil is defined. When we talk about evil we tend to do it in negative terms. We speak of *unrighteousness*, *ungodliness*, *unethical*, *irreligious disobedience* and even *anti-Christ*. These prefixes have one thing in common: they involve the negation of the positive root of the word. Their meaning depends upon a prior understanding of the positive roots themselves. To understand what *unrighteousness* is, we must first have some idea of what *righteousness* is. To understand what *in-human* behavior is, we must first understand what *human* behavior is. Our language betrays the fact that to think about and conceptualize evil, we must do it against the background of the good. Evil is understood over against the good. Thus evil is dependent, contingent, and derived from our understanding of good. Evil is spoken of as a negation of the good. It is dependent upon good for its own definition.

Along the same lines, evil is described in terms of privation. It refers to a lack or a want of the positive good. The Westminster Catechism, for example, defines sin as "any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God." Here sin is defined as a lack of conformity to law or failure to be obedient. Sin is a privation of obedience, a *lawlessness*.

These terms of negation and privation might bring with them the temptation to regard evil as being nonexistent. If it is merely the absence of something positive, maybe it is nothing at all. But these terms are not employed to lend credence to the notion that evil is illusory or impotent. Out of the Protestant Reformation came the added qualifier *actuosa*. Evil was defined as *privatio actuosa*. This meant that though evil is contingent and dependent, it is nevertheless real and powerful. The point is that evil cannot exist in and of itself. It depends

on the corruption of that which is good for its existence and power.

If all of this is true, how does it ease, for the Christian, the burden of Mill's dilemma? Though it does not eliminate the dilemma, it does make it a bit easier to bear. Why? Because though we are left with a serious unresolved problem, our situation is only half as bad as that of the unbeliever. The unbeliever not only has the problem of explaining the origin of evil, he has the problem of explaining the origin of good. It is only in light of the good that evil becomes a problem. We can account for the origin of good but not of evil. The pagan can account for the origin of neither. Thus, the reality of evil ironically gives indirect evidence for the existence of God.

To be sure, the atheist may counter by saying that he has no problem at all because good and evil are both nonexistent. He can say, and atheists have said, that all judgments of good and evil are arbitrary and thus ultimately meaningless. The option he chooses at this point is thoroughgoing nihilism. This option is a weighty one, but no one holds it consistently. The most radical nihilists continue to make value judgments as if they had meaning. They can't seem to escape some judgments of good and evil.

The existence of evil certainly doesn't prove the existence of God. If evil is real, however, it points to the good. Any refutation of nihilism must involve other arguments. It must be established on the basis of positive arguments for the existence of God which are offered elsewhere. But in the final analysis, the evidence for the existence of the good (God) is not vitiated by the anomaly of evil. Evil remains a perplexing mystery, but the force of the mystery is not enough to demand that we throw out the positive evidence for God, for the reality of good, and the reality of evil.

## Key Points to Remember

Where did evil come from?

1. *The question of the origin of evil has not been answered satisfactorily.* We can create various kinds of explanations that may impress people with their clever character, but they all have their deficiencies. Christian truth is not served by clever sophistry.

2. *When we talk about evil we tend to do it in negative terms.* Even our language betrays the fact that if we even think about evil we must do it against a background of the good. Even though we may not understand the origin of evil, we recognize that the reality of evil gives indirect evidence for the existence of God.

3. *While we cannot explain the existence of evil, that is no reason for us to disregard the positive evidence for God.* To deny what we do know on the basis of what we don't know is not only bad theology but bad science as well. The case for the existence of God must rely on other grounds than the moral issue of good and evil.

4. *Christians may not be able to explain evil, but they are exhorted to beware of the influence of evil.* "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you" (1 Pet. 5:8-10).

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### Note

1. Leibniz's theory of *petite perceptions* in his monadology complicates this point considerably.

## "Why Does God Allow Suffering?"

It was Pascal who, in the midst of his consideration of the nature of man and his concern to pinpoint his uniqueness as precisely as he could, described man as a great paradox. He said that the paradox is located in the fact that of all the creatures in this world, man is at the same time that creature of the highest grandeur and of the worst misery. He said that the focus of man's grandeur is in his capacity to reflect analytically on his own existence in a way that transcends anything we find in the animal kingdom. And yet, that very point of grandeur is at the same time man's point of misery. For as Pascal says, "He has the ability to contemplate a better existence than he presently enjoys."

At the point of contemplating a better existence than he presently enjoys, Pascal touches on the very nerve of

the question of the reality of human suffering. For the striking thing is that we have the capacity at least to think about life without suffering.

Recently I heard a man read from the very last chapters of the New Testament, from the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John. They are a record of the vision that John had of the inner gates of heaven and of the New Jerusalem coming down as a bride adorned from the throne of grace. They contain a matchless description of what it will be like on the other side, where there will be no sorrow or death or pain or suffering. They tell us that God Himself will come to each of His people and personally wipe the tears away from his or her eyes forever. It is a great vision, a marvelous vision! But the tears are still with us today. And until the moment comes when our eyes are lifted up to heaven and we see the New Jerusalem coming down as a bride adorned for her husband, we will have to deal with this problem.

### Why Do We Have to Suffer?

There are multiple answers to the question of suffering proffered over the years of the history of Western civilization. Indeed, every philosophical theory has to deal with it in some way. I would like to look briefly at four different approaches to the question of suffering outside Christianity and then come back and look at these same approaches through the eyes of the Christian faith. The four approaches are those I call the Docetic, the Stoic, the hedonist, and the existential. Let me define each of them.

*The Docetic approach: suffering isn't real.* The Docetic approach is that found initially, as the term suggests, in the historical movement known as Docetism. It was a variety of Gnosticism which, following certain platonic tendencies, denied the full reality of the human nature

of Jesus. It saw the physical world as being less than perfect and less than real. It consequently concluded that suffering belonged only to the lower order of reality. I give the term Docetism to any theory that fails to take suffering seriously.

The modern "docetist" treats suffering as an illusion. Practitioners of Christian Science, for example, deal with suffering in this way. Here the way to overcome suffering is the way of "mind over matter." Pain belongs to the physical realm which is not real. By this approach suffering is not healed, but denied.

*The Stoic approach: philosophical imperturbability.* Here we think of the classic school of Stoicism at that period in history when Greek philosophy had degenerated from the lofty quests of earlier schools of metaphysics to more earthly preoccupations. At this point it was dealing with questions like, "How does a person live a successful life?" Stoics as well as Epicureans were concerned primarily with "How can I live my life in this world so as to achieve peace of mind?" Both schools sought the peace of mind that goes hand in hand with having no problems.

But although the Stoics and the Epicureans had the same goal, they had radically different methods for how to achieve that goal. The Stoic method was simple. Stoics came to the conclusion that everything that takes place in the physical world happens on the basis of mechanistically determined physical causes over which we have no control. That is, there is nothing you or I can ever do, think, say or achieve that will change the course of human events.

So they said, "Since conscience, human actions, and human events are strictly determined by impersonal forces of nature and since there is nothing we can do about what happens, the only thing left to us is to con-

trol our response to what happens. It is that alone that can set me free." They said, "All of the forces of nature cannot compel me to react against my will."

Thus the Stoics limited freedom to "my personal attitudes." And they said, "The way to overcome suffering is by *philosophical imperturbability*." That is, they attempted to condition their emotions to such a degree that nothing could disturb them. They tried to remain calm no matter what happened. This view has survived to our own day, when we speak of people who maintain a "stoic" attitude toward problems.

*The Hedonistic approach: pain and pleasure.* The Hedonistic approach also has its roots in antiquity. It is associated with the Epicureans, for although it antedates them, the Epicureans nevertheless refined the earlier and grosser forms of hedonism by seeking to establish an equilibrium between pleasure and pain. Their basic principle was that when we experience pain we are to balance the suffering by pleasure. Thus, if one is suffering too much, the answer to the suffering is to go out and increase the amount of pleasure. This approach to the problem of suffering is escapist. It seeks to intoxicate one's self from the full force of the suffering by overwhelming the suffering with other feelings.

*The Existential approach: life is absurd.* I am thinking of existentialism here in terms of the most radical variety of atheistic existentialism which maintains that there are no ultimate values and no ultimate meaning to human existence. I think of Nietzsche as one representative of this viewpoint. Nietzsche believed that life is ultimately meaningless. Nevertheless, since we are still faced with the daily question of how to live in a world of suffering, Nietzsche advocated the principle of "dialectic courage." Dialectic courage is the courage that exists in the context of the tension of meaninglessness

and of absurdity. It is telling people, "Be of good cheer, for life is absurd." That is dialectical. The heroic man is the man who dares to build his house on the slopes of a volcano knowing that sooner or later the volcano is going to erupt and take that house crashing down.

This is the courage of a man like actor Jimmy Cagney in the old B-movies of the forties and fifties. For example, in *The White Cliffs of Dover*, Cagney stood against all the orders of authority and dared things that no one else dared. In the final scene of the movie, Cagney steered his single-engine plane, in flames, right into the side of the cliffs of Dover. But just before he crashed he spit out of the cockpit into that mountain and then went down heroically in a ball of flame. That is our existential hero. He grits his teeth and faces the problem without letting it defeat him, knowing all the while that even the teeth-gritting will not solve it.

We think of a more recent film entitled *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* The Nietzschean theme is expressed in the marathon dance motif of the movie, where the contestants dance on and on and on, and one by one they drop into exhaustion or death by heart attack while the fiendish master of ceremonies sits at his little desk exploiting them. They are trying to persevere for a prize they have forgotten about since they entered the contest, but he urges them on, saying, "Yow-sa, yow-sa, yow-sa! Look at those kids go! 'Round and 'round and 'round!" There is no end to the suffering until someone has the grace to put one of the contestants out of her misery by blowing her brains out. And when they come to this person and ask why he has done it, he can only reply, "They shoot horses, don't they?"

Albert Camus looks at the problem of suffering and says that the only ultimate philosophical question is the question of suicide. Thus, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*,

the existentialist looks at the problem and raises the question:

To be, or not to be; that is the question;  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them.

That is the question the existentialist faces every day of his life.

These are some of the approaches to the problem of suffering that are offered to modern man. But how do they differ from the biblical approach to suffering?

#### What Does the Bible Say About Suffering?

With respect to Docetism, the Christian says categorically and unequivocally, "We refuse to look at suffering as illusion." At the heart of the biblical revelation is a very earnest assertion of the stark reality of suffering in this world. There is no attempt to hide it or gloss it over. The Bible simply does not attempt to deal with the problem of suffering by euphemism.

All doctors are given to euphemisms. You go to a dentist with a toothache, for example. He takes out some ghastly instrument of Chinese torture and tells you to "open wide." You know what is coming, but he says, gently, "Now this may cause a bit of discomfort." The word "discomfort" is a euphemism. What he means is, "It's going to hurt. It's going to make you suffer." We all use euphemism like that. Preachers do. We tell people that they had better be careful or they are going to face eternal separation from God. That is a euphemism. By contrast, the Bible acknowledges the stark reality of hell and speaks of it clearly.

Novelist Herman Melville recognized reality in his own struggles with his Christian heritage and with his

family. In *Redburn* he said, "Until we understand that one grief outweighs a thousand joys, we will never understand what Christianity is all about." At that point he sounds like the Old Testament writer who says, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to spend your time with fools" (see Eccl. 7:2). Notice that our Saviour was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). He was the suffering servant of Israel. There is no attempt to hide this, no attempt to gloss it over. Nor, by contrast is there any attempt to glorify it or wallow in it. Rather, suffering is simply recognized as a part of the experience of every human being. We are creatures of suffering. Our way is the *via dolorosa*, the road of sorrow or grief.

Unfortunately, the Docetic approach to suffering has infiltrated parts of the Christian church. There are those, even in evangelical circles, who think that there is something wrong about acknowledging the reality of suffering in this world and who act in all piety as if it did not exist.

What about the Stoic approach? Christians are not called to be Stoics. As the people of God, we do not seek imperturbability. The Stoic mentality has, nevertheless, influenced the Christian community, and so many times people have confused Christianity and Stoicism as if it were a Christian duty never to experience grief or never to allow oneself to feel the passionate suffering.

Like so many Bildads and Eliphazes (see Job 2:11), Christian friends surround us in the midst of pain and suffering saying, "Keep a stiff upper lip." But a stiff upper lip is for Stoics, not Christians. Rather than this, Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus and weeps. In the Old Testament, saints of God rend their garments and wail. In fact, the lament is an inspired literary form of Scripture.

There is no sin in grief. There is a difference between grief and bitterness, sorrow and hostility. So while we are not to be bitter, we are nevertheless allowed to experience grief. There is a time to cry, as well as a time to dance (see Eccl. 3:1-9). There is a time to experience pain and cry out to God in the midst of that pain. The Bible is filled with the records of the heroes of the people of God whose pillows are wet from their tears. Jesus made the statement "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4). There may be a sense in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus is talking about mourning for our sin, but that is not all He is talking about. Jesus is talking about the basic experience of mourning.

We do not believe in a kind of determinism that says that suffering is something over which we have no control. The theme song of the church is not "Que Será Será," whatever will be will be.

What about the hedonistic approach? Should we drown our sorrows by heaping up pleasures? We can find intrusions of this theme here and there in Christian circles. Martin Luther wrote on one occasion that when he became depressed he sometimes found that the best solution (though he put in parenthesis, "I do not recommend this to other people") was to go out and have a drinking bout. Well, that is Luther! Luther can handle it. But I am glad he wrote the parenthesis, because it is bad advice to tell the people of God to seek a solution to suffering through intoxication.

In the final analysis, every hedonist has to face the hedonistic paradox that the more pleasure he experiences, the more frustrated he becomes and the more aware he is of the reality of his suffering.

*Sin and suffering.* What about the existential approach? Perhaps it is this one, more than any other, that makes us eager to respond as Christian people and gives

us a forum from which to speak about the reality of God's sovereignty. Our answer to the existentialist must start with his nihilism. As Christians we can never see suffering as meaningless. We see an undeniable relationship between the reality of suffering and the reality of sin, but at this point we must proceed very cautiously. We note that there is no suffering before the fall. We note also that in the new heaven and earth, where there is no sin, there is also no suffering. Suffering is linked to sin. At the same time, we must never establish a simple one-to-one equation between a person's suffering and his sin.

This is part of the lesson of the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John. When Jesus healed the blind man the disciples asked Jesus, "Why was this man born blind? Was it for his sin or the sin of his father?" Jesus said, "Both of your alternatives are wrong. It was not for this man's sin nor for the sin of his father that he was born blind, but that God might be glorified." Notice that Jesus does not concede that the man's blindness is a direct result of retributive justice. Nor does He say, "It just happened." Rather, there was a reason for it, but that reason was not part of an equation involving his sin. It is the same with Job. When Job suffered as he did, his friends came to him and said, "Job, you have a lot of repenting to do. Anybody suffering this much must be really wicked." But they missed the whole point.

On the other hand, we dare not jump to conclusions in the other direction and say that there is never a relationship between human suffering and the corrective wrath of God. Anytime I suffer I should ask: What does God have in mind? He may not have anything in mind that I will ever know about in this world. But He might, because we know that the Scriptures teach us that God does chastise those whom He loves and that part of the

chastening process is the experience of pain and suffering. I may not come to the conclusion that my particular pain at a particular moment is for a particular sin. But I should certainly allow the occasion of my suffering to be at the same time an occasion for an evaluation of my relationship to God.

*The wrong question.* We see this matter of sin and suffering handled in a particularly astonishing way when another question was put to Jesus. On this occasion some people had come to Jesus and said, "What about those 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell over on them and crushed them? And what about the Galileans who were killed at the very moment of making their offerings?" (see Luke 13:1-5). These 18 people were presumably walking down the street, minding their own business. They were not heckling the construction workers. They were not blaspheming. They were just walking down the street, and the tower fell on their heads and they were crushed.

How did Jesus answer? Did He say, "I know that the Old Testament says, 'He who keepeth Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps,' but you have to understand that this is Hebrew poetry and that the Jewish people of the Old Testament are given to hyperbole. Remember that my Father gets tired. We read in the opening chapters of Genesis that He created heaven and earth in six days and finally took a rest. I suppose that on this particular afternoon He was just taking his 40 winks and the tower accidentally fell over on the heads of these people. I promise I'll communicate with my Father. I'll ask Him to be more efficient in the future." Is that what Jesus said? No, that is not what He said!

Nor did Jesus say, "I know I said that the hairs of your head are all numbered and that my Father knows every sparrow that touches the earth. But I was just trying to

make a point. Don't push it too far. Remember what a herculean task it is to count all the hairs on all the heads of all the people on earth. Do you know how many birds there are in this world? Well, this one afternoon there was a great flock of migratory birds that diverted my Father's attention from that tower." That is not what He said.

What did He say? The words He gave were words that theologians put under the category of the hard sayings of Jesus. He said, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). What an answer! What is Jesus saying here? I think that what He is saying is that these people were asking the wrong question. The question they should have asked is not "Why did God allow these innocent people to die by having a tower fall on their heads?" Rather, the question they should have asked is: "Jesus, why didn't that tower fall on me?" We are puzzled and bewildered whenever we see suffering in this world because we have become accustomed to the mercy and the long-suffering of God. Amazing grace is no longer amazing to us. So our astonishment is in the wrong place. The real question is: Why has God not destroyed us all since we got out of our beds this morning? Why does He tolerate us as we continue our work of sin and destruction upon His planet?

*Real injustice.* But you say, "Wait a minute; there is still the problem of unrequited evil, of injustice in this world." Yes! There is a very real sense in which you and I suffer unjustly in this world compared to other people. In the earlier part of the book of Revelation you have the saints of God behind the altar crying out for vindication. They had been abused. They had been slandered, persecuted. They had been slain by wicked people for righteousness' sake. We look and understand that there is such a thing as injustice. It is not an illusion. When

you slander me, you have created an injustice and caused me to suffer unjustly with respect to our relationship. When I slander you I injure you without just cause. But there is a certain sense in which, although we may suffer unjustly at the hands of men, horizontally, we can never turn in the vertical direction to look into the face of the Creator and say, "God, it isn't fair!" We cannot do that because, although the horizontal relationship may be one of injustice, the vertical relationship is never one of injustice. I always tell my students, "You can pray about whatever you want to pray about, my friends; but don't ever ask for justice from God, because you might get it."

What I am saying is that the suffering of the Christian or anyone else in this world is never ultimately an accident. All suffering is within the pale of divine sovereignty. All suffering comes within the broader context of the sovereignty of God. However, when you start asking about particular cases and particular applications, we cannot answer that question.

Job wanted an answer. I think he pushed God a bit too hard when he screamed out for vindication. So when God answered Job out of the whirlwind, He said, "Who is this who darkens counsel with words without knowledge? What is your name?" As if He did not know his name! He knew his name. He knew who it was. He knew that it was His servant Job upon whom He had heaped blessing upon blessing, prosperity upon prosperity. And then He said, "Job, I'll answer your questions, after you answer mine. I'm going to interrogate you just a little bit. Job, where were you when I established the foundations of heaven and earth? Where were you, Job? What was your address?" And Job is looking at Him, his lips quivering; and he is trying to think of an answer, but he does not have time. God goes on to the next question. "Job,

can you send a bird south in the winter? Can you find the lion's prey? Can you bind the stars in the sky? Can you? Can you? Can you?"

Job says, "No," chapter after chapter after chapter.

And when God is all finished Job says, "I am sorry I asked. I abhor myself. I repent in dust and ashes. I take my hand and I place it upon my mouth and speak no more" (see Job 34—42).

I think this is telling us that, although we know with certainty that all suffering fits into the scheme of God's sovereignty, nevertheless, there are those things about suffering that God has not chosen to reveal. This is where trust is really put to the test in the Christian's life. There is nothing glamorous about pain, but we have the right to ask God why. There are two ways in which we can ask that question. We can ask it angrily or calmly. If God is pleased to show us the ultimate meaning of our suffering in this life when we ask calmly, then we are blessed. But if He is pleased to wait until we see without the prism fully, then we are also blessed. Because, in this latter case, God does say certain things about suffering for us that we can live with and grasp now.

*Triumph in tragedy.* God tells us that in this He stands against the existentialist. He says that suffering can be redeemed, that it is not the last word. That is why no true Calvinist would ever hide behind the doctrine of God's sovereignty in the face of social responsibility to be the agents of alleviation of suffering in this world. We know that suffering can be redeemed and that we can be used of God to bring that redemption to bear. So we are to be concerned about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, visiting and caring for the orphan and the widow. Ultimately we know that suffering is fully redemptive in the hands of God.

Suffering itself is used by God for our sanctification.

Asking "Why do we suffer?" is like asking the doctor, "Why do we have to take that awful tasting medicine?" Who wants an operation? Who wants to have a knife cut through the skin of our body? Nobody! But the context of suffering is sin. And part of the process of our sanctification is the crucible of suffering.

That is why Peter can say to us, "Do not think it a strange thing when you are called upon to suffer." Why should we be surprised that suffering exists in a world of sin when we see that suffering itself is used in the depths of the riches of the grace of God to bring about our very sanctification? Fire is hot, but it does refine; it produces precious gold. And the Christian faith is what Luther called a *theologia crucis*, a theology of the cross, of suffering and pain. The New Testament does not say to Christian people, "You might suffer." It says, "You will suffer" (see John 15:20-27).

Moreover, it not only says, "You will suffer," it says "You must suffer" (see Rom. 8:17). So every baptized person carries the sacramental sign of his or her participation in the humiliation of Christ. He carries the sign of his identification with the suffering servant of Israel. Yet, although our suffering is real and although our pain abides, we know that this is the way (irony of ironies) that God in His magnificent sovereignty has chosen to save the world.

We are called to courage in the midst of suffering. But our courage is not dialectical. Jesus does not come to us like some kind of existential Good Humor man who says, "Wrap up your troubles in an old kit bag and smile, smile, smile." He says, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). If we can accept that truth, then we can rejoice in tribulation even if we do not fully understand it. If it is not true, then we should sleep late tomorrow morning.

### Key Points to Remember

Why does God allow suffering?

1. *Suffering is real and can't be dealt with piously or simplistically.* No one can tell us why we must go through suffering. The Christian must openly acknowledge the presence of the tragic in life. Any attempt to give pat answers to grief will be met with contempt.

2. *Docetism (suffering is an illusion), Stoicism (face suffering with passive acceptance), hedonism (overcome or avoid suffering by pleasure-intoxication), and existentialism (recklessly defy suffering) are inadequate approaches to suffering.* Christians must face the problem of suffering head-on.

3. *Suffering is related to sin; but people do not always suffer in direct proportion to their sin.* Suffering is a consequence of human fallenness. Suffering is a result of sin. Here it is crucial that we not make the mistake Job's friends made, to assume simplistically that every person suffers in direct proportion to his sin and guilt.

4. *The ultimate question of suffering is "Why don't we all suffer more than we do?"* We should wonder why God has not destroyed us all since we got out of our beds this morning. Why does He tolerate us as we continue our work of sin and destruction upon His planet?

5. *Christians are called to participate in the suffering of Christ.* God uses suffering as a means of redemption. Christ is the model of the Suffering Servant who triumphs over the world through the avenue of suffering. All Christians are called upon to participate in the suffering of Christ. We embrace suffering not to gain merit or to be involved in masochism but to identify with Christ's ministry to those in pain.

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## "When You're Dead You're Dead! There Is No More!"

Death is obscene. It runs counter to the vibrant flow of life. When we encounter it we shrink from it in horror. We use our finest cosmetics to disguise its impact. When death strikes it always leaves the question, "Is this the end?" Is there absolutely nothing more to hope for?

Perhaps the most ancient question of all is the question, "Is there life after death?" We think of Job in the throes of his misery crying out, "When a man dies, will he live again?" (see Job 14:14). We think of Hamlet musing over the question of suicide in his classic soliloquy, "To be, or not to be?" He contemplates the mystery of the grave and weighs the burdens of the alternatives of life and death. He retreats from suicide asking if man would "rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of?"<sup>1</sup> From Job to Hamlet to the present