

## The Emotional Problem of Evil

We are going to wrap up our discussion today of the problem of evil and suffering. I initiated this problem by saying that there are really two versions. There is the intellectual version of the problem of evil, which comes in both a logical and a probabilistic form, and then there is what we could call the emotional problem of evil.

I've argued over the last couple of weeks that the intellectual problem of evil ultimately fails. The atheist is unable to show that the evil and suffering in the world is either inconsistent with or improbable with respect to God's existence. Therefore, the intellectual version of the problem of evil fails.

I indicated that I think for most people the problem of suffering and evil is not really an intellectual problem. It is really an emotional problem. They've never really thought very deeply about this problem, but they just emotionally react to God's permitting the terrible evil and suffering in the world. You might be thinking, *Then why go through all of this intellectual material if this is really just an emotional problem?* I think there are two reasons why it is important to have dealt with this intellectually.

First, people *think* that their problem is intellectual. So by working through the intellectual problem of evil we can show respect for their opinion and try to help them to see what the real problem is. We take their objections and arguments at face value and deal with them intellectually.

But secondly, I think also that what we've seen can be of tremendous help to us when we are called upon to go through suffering. The health-and-wealth gospel and the gospel of positive thinking that is preached in so many mega-churches and

denominations in the United States are simply false gospels. They set people up for a fall. They cannot make sense of terrible, apparently pointless suffering entering in your life and therefore are setting people up for tremendous doubt and perhaps abandonment of their faith when they encounter that sort of suffering.

It is very obvious that these are false gospels because that sort of health-and-wealth prosperity gospel won't preach in Ukraine or in Syria or in North Korea or in a thousand other places. If it won't preach there, then it is not the true Gospel. We need to understand that God's plan for human history may involve terrible suffering for us, whose point or reason we may not be able to see; indeed, we cannot expect to see it. Our hope is not in worldly happiness, but rather in that day when we go to be with God and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

But we need to address the emotional problem. What can be said to folks who are struggling with the emotional problem of suffering? In one sense, the most important thing may not be what we say at all. For many people, I think the important thing is that you just be there as a sympathetic listener, as a loving friend who cares about them. You don't need to have all of the answers. They may simply need someone who understands, who sympathizes with them, and gives them a shoulder to cry on.

But still there will be people who need counsel. We ourselves may need to deal with the emotional problem of evil when we go through suffering. Does the Christian faith have something to say to deal with this problem?

It certainly does! It tells us that God is not some sort of distant creator or impersonal ground of being. Rather, it tells us that God is a loving heavenly Father who shares our hurts and who suffers along with us. On the cross Christ endured a suffering of which we can literally form no conception because he endured the punishment for the sin of the whole world. Even though he was perfectly innocent, he voluntarily took upon himself the consequences of the sin of the entire world that we deserve. None of us can comprehend that suffering. Even though he was innocent, he voluntarily took upon himself incomprehensible suffering for our sake. Why did he do this? Simply because he loves us so much. To bring us back to a relationship with God, our heavenly Father. How can we reject him who was willing to give up everything for us?

So when God asks you to go through suffering that seems pointless, unnecessary, or unmerited, I think that meditation upon the wounds of Christ can help to give us the moral strength and the courage that we need to bear the cross that we are asked to carry through life. Don't torture yourself trying to figure out why God is permitting you to go through that suffering. As I said, given our cognitive limitations, we should not expect to perceive the reasons for which God is allowing that suffering to enter our life.

The British theologian, J. I. Packer, calls this “the York signal box mistake.” Packer says that in the city of York in England there is a great train yard filled with tracks that have tracks and sidings and so forth. The trains are controlled by a signal box in a tower overseeing the entire train yard. To someone who is in the signal box, he can see on a lighted electronic map the little glowing

worms of the various trains and why one is shunted on to a siding there, why another train is pulled over here. It can all make sense to someone in the signal box. But to someone down on the tracks, it is utterly incomprehensible why these trains are moving all about in the way that they are and why they are being shunted in the ways that they are. It would look chaotic to the person down on the tracks. Packer says that when it comes to the evil and suffering in our lives, for better or worse, we are not in God's signal box. We can't see the big perspective. We are down on the tracks!

Therefore, when we try to figure out why God allows us to suffer in a certain way, we are presuming to be in his position in the signal box, and we are not there. Rather than try to figure out why God is allowing you to suffer in this way, you should simply ask him to give you the strength and the courage to bear the suffering that Christ has called upon you to bear and to see what lessons you might learn out of this.

I mentioned earlier in our study that the knowledge of God is an incommensurable good to which our suffering cannot even be compared. To know God, to come into relationship with him, is a good which is literally incomparable to the suffering that we undergo.

Few of us, I think, really understand this truth. But I had a colleague when I taught at Westmont College who got to know a woman who did understand this. He used to make it a practice of his to visit shut-ins in nursing homes in the community in an attempt to bring a bit of cheer into their lives. One Mother's Day he was visiting a nursing home in which he met a woman whom he

would never forget. This is his account of that woman and that friendship. He says:

On this particular day I was walking in a hallway that I had not visited before, looking in vain for a few who were alive enough to receive a flower and a few words of encouragement. This hallway seemed to contain some of the worst cases, strapped onto carts or into wheelchairs and looking completely helpless.

As I neared the end of this hallway, I saw an old woman strapped in a wheelchair. Her face was an absolute horror. The empty stare and white pupils of her eyes told me that she was blind. The large hearing aid over one ear told me that she was almost deaf. One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek, and it had pushed her nose to the side, dropped one eye and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly. I also learned later that this woman was 89 years old and that she had been bedridden, blind, nearly deaf, and alone for 25 years. This was Mabel.

I don't know why I spoke to her. She looked less likely to respond than most of the people I saw in that hallway. But I put a flower in her hand and said, "Here is a flower for you, Happy Mother's Day." She held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it, and then she spoke, and much to my surprise her words, though somewhat garbled because of her deformity, were obviously produced by a clear mind. She

said, “Thank you, it’s lovely. But can I give it to someone else? I can’t see it, you know. I’m blind.”

I said, “Of course,” and I pushed her in her chair back down the hallway to a place where I thought I could find some alert patients. I found one and stopped the chair. Mabel held out the flower and said, “Here, this is from Jesus.”

It was then that it began to dawn on me that this was not an ordinary human being. . . . Mabel and I became friends over the next few weeks, and I went to see her once or twice a week for the next three years. . . . It was not many weeks before I turned from a sense that I was being helpful to a sense of wonder. And I would go to her with a pen and paper to write down the things she would say. . . .

During one hectic week of final exams, I was frustrated because my mind seemed to be pulled in ten directions at once with all of the things that I had to think about. The question occurred to me, what does Mabel have to think about? Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, not even able to know if it is day or night. So I went to her and asked, “Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?”

And she said, “I think about my Jesus.”

I sat there and thought for a moment about the difficulty for me of thinking about Jesus for even five minutes. And I asked, “What do you think about Jesus?” She replied slowly and deliberately as I wrote, and this is what she said,

I think how good he has been to me. He has been awfully good to me in my life, you know. . . . I’m one

of those kind who's mostly satisfied. . . . Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned. But I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus, he is all the world to me.

And then Mabel began to sing an old hymn:

Jesus is all the world to me,  
My life, my joy, my all.  
He is my strength from day to day,  
Without him, I would fall.  
When I am sad, to him I go.  
No other one can cheer me so.  
When I am sad, he makes me glad.  
He's my friend.

This is not fiction. Incredible as it may seem, a human being really lived like this. I know, I knew her. How could she do it? Seconds ticked and minutes crawled, and so did days and weeks and months and years of pain without human company and without an explanation of why it was all happening – and she lay there and sang hymns. How could she do it?

The answer, I think, is that Mabel had something that you and I don't have much of. She had power. Lying there, in that bed, unable to move, unable to see, unable to hear, unable to talk to anyone . . . , she had incredible power.<sup>1</sup>

What an amazing testimony! Paradoxically, even though the problem of suffering is the greatest obstacle to belief in God, at the end of the day God is the only solution to the problem of evil. If God does not exist, then we are locked without hope in a world

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas E. Schmidt, *Trying to Be Good: A Book of Doing for Thinking People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 180-183.

filled with pointless and gratuitous suffering. God is the ultimate answer to the problem of evil, for he redeems us from evil and he takes us into the everlasting joy of an incommensurable good, fellowship with himself.

That is what I wanted to share about the emotional problem of suffering and evil.