

# EXCURSUS

## THEODICY

(By Prof. S. Edward Tesh, late professor of Lincoln Christian Seminary)<sup>17</sup>

The presence of so much evil in a universe under God's control is a perplexing matter, and one of broad dimensions. To the question *why*, there is no easy answer. Those who propose such will likely have failed to take into account some element that should be included in the discussion. The present writer makes no claim to adequacy in the treatment of the subject and does not promise to provide a solution. He will endeavor to present a number of significant aspects of the case, however, believing that all of these need to be considered if one is to approach an understanding of the problem.

First, we note that God is all-powerful, all-wise, and all-righteous. We are told that "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (Hab 1:13). Yet he seems to tolerate it. Is he all-powerful? Does he know what is going on? Or does he care? Since "God is love" (1 John 4:8), he *must* care. But how can a God of love subject humankind to such suffering as we see all around us?

"Oh," someone says, "evil is in the world, with the suffering that it brings, because humankind sinned, and humankind still brings suffering upon themselves because they sin." Quite true. For example, those who abuse themselves with drugs or alcohol suffer the consequences. But just as often, those who are innocent suffer at the hands of others. Is this what God had in mind when he created humankind? Is it possible that he did not know the gross suffering that would result from his creative acts? "Why didn't God make humankind so he could not sin?" I was once asked in all seriousness. And the speaker continued: "If I could create a chicken and knew that in the future the creatures would suffer what humankind suffers, I would not create it ever." A rather presumptuous statement, for the speaker seemed to be reflecting a degree of compassion that God does not have! Still, the suffering is real, and it persists.

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<sup>17</sup>The late beloved Old Testament professor, S. Edward Tesh, provided a stack of handwritten notes for volume two, which were mostly incomplete and unusable for my work on Psalms 73–150. However, he left this typed, brief essay on "Theodicy" that I wish to incorporate into volume two in honor of the life and work of our beloved professor and friend. I have revised some of the language for gender inclusiveness – Walt Zorn.

The question is compounded when we consider the suffering that is endured by the innocent because of the deeds of others. The drunken driver is involved in a wreck. Five innocent persons, all of one family, are killed. He spends three days in the hospital! At the funeral for the victims, someone says, "It is such a tragedy. But then, it is God's will." And I shudder. In my mind, it is more the work of the Devil. When I shared this thought with my friend, he asked another simple question: "Why doesn't God kill the Devil?"

That God directly wills all suffering and sorrow, all the evil that comes to humanity, must be flatly denied. Still, when we consider the above, the inevitable conclusion is that, since God is all-powerful and is Sovereign over the universe, everything that occurs is, to say the least, by his *permissive* will. God does not directly will all suffering, pain, and sorrow. Even of the evil person he says, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek 33:11). So the question becomes: "If God does not *will* the evil that comes, why does he permit it?" If God is good, and he is, there can be only one conclusion. His permissive will toward humankind must be *for a greater good* that would otherwise be unattainable.

To understand the why of suffering we must also consider the nature of man. Why did not God create Adam so he could not sin? The animals do not sin. They may be vicious and bloodthirsty, but we say, "That is their nature." But when God created man, it was that he be in God's own likeness and image (Gen 1:26-27). God is a person; man is a person – thinking, feeling emotional, exercising will. God is a *thou*; man is a *thou*. "Where are you?" God asked Adam, when he tried to hide from the Lord (Gen 3:9). Every other creature is an *it*.

God said that humankind was to have dominion over all the earth (Gen 1:28). Thus, in the creation of humanity, God shared his sovereignty with his creature! He gave to human beings a will of their own, the freedom to choose. When someone faces a situation without restraint, he may respond as he will. Being able to respond thus, he becomes responsible, accountable for his deeds. Adam knew, when he ate of the fruit that God had forbidden him even to touch (Gen 2:9; 3:3), he was disobeying God. Sin thus entered the world, and it recurs with every choice of humankind to do evil, bringing heartbreak, mental anguish, suffering, and death.

Did not God know that humankind would sin? We do not deny it. Why, then, create such beings? Consider this: A young couple, sincere

in their love for one another, are married. “Do you plan to have a family?” they are asked. “Oh, we hope so.” But don’t you know, in this world that is fed daily television doses of sex and violence, stupefied on drugs and alcohol, and oriented toward self-gratification, that your children won’t have a chance? Don’t you know there is a strong possibility that they will grow up only to break your hearts?

“Yes, we know that.” And you still want children? Why? “Because we believe that if we bring them up in the love and nurture of God, we may have children who will be a joy to us, whom we may love dearly, and who will love us in return.” And there are such children in the world.

Yes, God knew Adam would sin. He knew all humankind would sin! (Rom 3:23). He also knew he would provide a remedy for sin in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. And he knew that thousands out of all generations would respond to his love and mercy, receiving the salvation and new life that he would give. By the exercise of his will man has brought great suffering. But God has permitted it that a greater good might be realized by a nobler use of the will.

A creature compelled to praise God and programmed to repeat daily, “I love you,” would be no more than a robot, and his or her statement of love would have no more meaning than that on a tape recording. But when one who is made in God’s likeness responds to God’s love with love and devotion from his or her own heart, we begin to understand why God endowed his creature with the power of will. One may choose a life apart from God with its tragic consequences, or he may choose the life that only God can give, but the latter would not be possible if it were not so of the former also. God’s invitation to all is quite clear: “Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev 22:17). But humankind is not coerced. They may abuse their freedom and often do so.

We see an element of justice in the way a person employs his or her will when we observe the blessings that come to a righteous people. In a community where the people live according to the precepts of God there will be love for one another – active good will. There will be no murder, no graft nor theft nor fraud nor embezzlement, no false charges to be defended in court, no hiring of security guards, only enough police to direct traffic and to assist on the highways. There will be no prisons to maintain, no outrageous insurance premiums to protect against arson, malicious lawsuits, etc. The above

results would be the natural consequences of such a way of life. An added benefit would be better health and greater longevity. God was never more in earnest than when he promised to bless his people if they would walk in his way (Deut 28:1,2). Would not every one of us rather live in such a community than in one where the church is outlawed and God ignored? Very definitely, "It pays to do right."

In like fashion, evil brings its own reward. There is no denying the basic truth, "A man reaps what he sows" (Gal 6:7b). When a man suffers the consequences of his evil deeds, receiving "his just deserts," we say that justice has been done.

Much suffering depicted in the Scriptures is thus recognized as retribution. This is especially true in the Old Testament. If the people should ask, "Why do we suffer famine, or plague, or invasion by an enemy?" the answer might be: "Because you have sinned" (Deut 28:15ff.).

It is a great mistake, however, to equate all suffering with retribution. When the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem fell and crushed to death eighteen men, Jesus asked: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" (Luke 13:2). His answer was no. Their deaths were not a judgment visited upon them because of their sins. This makes clear that the tragedy one suffers in life is no criterion by which to determine his or her guiltiness. All suffering is not retribution nor punishment for sin.

Actually — and this disturbs us — innocent ones may suffer more than the guilty, or even at the hands of the guilty. Why? Or why is the faithful child of God smitten with cancer? Why is it that the tornado may completely destroy the property, and maybe the family, of a devout man and leave untouched the family and property of the godless? The skeptic asks such questions, prefacing them with the conditional, "If there is a God." For him the entire matter is hypothetical. Since, as he would say, the universe is uncreated and devoid of any guidance other than chance or blind fate, there isn't any *reason* for anything.

However, in the heart of a believer the questions are very real, and they cry out to be answered. The Scriptures shed much light upon the subject. And if they do not dispel the last shadow that clouds a heart troubled by some undeserved pain or suffering, they do enable the child of God to proceed with confidence, come what may. This was true of Job, the righteous sufferer of olden time,

whom God himself declared to be “blameless and upright” (Job 1:8). Blessed of God, and wealthy, he lost all his possessions, and all of his children — seven sons and three daughters. “Why?” Job cries out. “I have always served the Lord, and I was blessed. I still reverence God. *I haven’t changed*. Has God changed in his love for me?” Various reasons for suffering are given in the book, but the *why?* is never given fully. Two things, however, Job learned or was reminded of. First, man’s wisdom is limited. The wisdom of God is infinite, encompassing a far broader perspective than that of finite man. Here, the reaction of the person with faith is, “Some day we’ll understand.” Again, Job found out that God had not abandoned him. God still cared. And that was enough for him.

Other insights regarding suffering are introduced in the book of Job. Sometimes its purpose may be discipline, as that of a parent toward a child. “Blessed is the man whom God corrects,” Eliphaz said to Job, “so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty” (Job 5:17). On the other hand, the apparent prosperity of the wicked is often illusory (he or she has no real happiness), or it is transitory: “What he trusts in is fragile; what he relies on is a spider’s web” (Job 8:14).

The purpose of some suffering seems to be didactic; it teaches what may be difficult to learn in any other way. When Hosea suffered the bitterness of rejection and shame from his unfaithful wife Gomer, he could better understand the scandal of Israel’s rejection of God. Certainly one can come to know true sympathy and compassion only when he himself has endured pain, sorrow, and despair. In addition to this learning process, one may become stronger in faith and in character through what he or she endures. So it was with the apostle Paul. In spite of the infirmity that plagued him, in Christ he found the strength to carry on (2 Cor 12:7-10). He was stronger because of his weakness!

In addition, there is suffering in the world, perhaps more than we can know, that is vicarious. That is, out of love and compassion, one may choose willingly to suffer for another, as a mother for a child, as the swimmer seeking to rescue a companion, or as the fireman who enters the burning building. The one may endure pain, even death, for the sake of the other, even if the other be a scoundrel or worse! Innocent suffering? Yes — vicarious suffering. Thus it was with Jesus. He who was without sin bore the curse of sin for all who will come to God the Father through him. Not for his own sins, but for ours, he “endured the cross, scorning its shame” in

order that “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Truly, “by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5).

One other truth regarding the suffering of the innocent should be noted. In the Old Testament this truth is demonstrated; in the New Testament it is declared to be universally valid. Consider Joseph. His own brothers, through jealousy, wronged him dreadfully when they sold him as a slave into Egypt. There, although he served his master faithfully, he was thrown into prison through the machinations of an evil woman. Surely such injustices were not in accord with the will of God. Yet God permitted it! And in the end, Joseph knew why. Through God’s mercy he attained a position of great power and favor in Egypt. Then, when his guilty brothers were brought before him, Joseph said to them: “Don’t be afraid. . . . You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Gen 50:19-20). In all his experiences, Joseph saw the hand of God at work for his good (see Gen 45:5-8). In the New Testament the apostle Paul states categorically: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

Dealing with problems is one avenue to maturity. The parent who would shield the child from every difficulty makes a weakling of that child. Faced with no challenges, one has little to stir initiative or to stimulate purposeful endeavor, and life becomes boring. Above all else, trials make possible the exercise of faith, giving it a chance to grow. If one has never experienced the rigors involved in climbing a mountain, he or she will never know the feelings of joy and of confidence that come from reaching the top. A faith that is never tested may be genuine, but it can never equal the faith that has weathered the storms of life.

## **II. COMPLAINTS OF THE CONGREGATION: “WHY, O GOD?” (74:1-23)**

It seems quite likely that Psalm 74 was written sometime during the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (c. 586 B.C.). Quite obviously it is a cry or complaint of the community for help. However long Jerusalem has endured her desolate state, to these people it seems that God has abandoned them completely, and they conclude that he must be forever angry with them (v. 1). Yet, at one time they were the people of God, people whom