THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND HUMAN SUFFERING

by

Edward P. Myers, M.A., M.Th., Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

The problems of evil and human suffering always have been complex. Human suffering is a common denominator to man. Grief, pain, disappointment, heartache, heartbreak, trials, and tribulations often occur in our lives. Having an adequate answer to the suffering found in the world is something that is a "must" for the Christian. There are three axioms that the Christian must affirm: (1) God is good and wise; (2) God is all-powerful, and has the ability to achieve His purposes; and (3) Evil, both physical and moral, is a fact. With these three axioms in mind, these questions then arise: "Why has God allowed evil to exist?"; "If God could prevent evil but will not, can we then say that God is perfect in goodness?"; "If God wishes to prevent evil but cannot, can we then say that God is omnipotent?"; and "If God has both the power and the will, then why is evil still here?"

It is not the purpose of this paper to prove the existence of God. For my purpose here, I presuppose the existence of God (i.e.: the God of the Christian theist). The challenge being dealt with here is not "prove God." The challenge under consideration is "reconcile the God of the Christian with the existence of evil." This paper is concerned with whether or not evil in this world is, in fact, enough evidence to disprove God's existence.

GOOD AND EVIL

Almost from the beginning of time, as recorded in Scripture, good and evil have existed. As we consider the book of Genesis, the first portion of the book states: "In the beginning, God...." When we speak of God, we think of the spiritual Being Who has created, or brought into existence, all things past and present. We know that during God's creative activity He created man and woman, and at the end of that creation stated: "It is very good." Shortly after their creation, however, both good and evil existed on the Earth. Man and woman sinned by being disobedient to God, and because of their sin were driven from the Garden of Eden where God had placed them. With every year that has passed, the problem of good and

evil has continued to plague mankind. Sometimes this occurs due to man's own inability to understand why things happen. It is shortly after the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden that we find Cain slaying his brother Abel. Why did Abel suffer? As God's creation, we have searched continually for the answer concerning the problem of good and evil. Though we can understand somewhat the cause of, and subsequent sorrow resulting from, the departure of Adam and Eve from the Garden, it is difficult to understand why a person like Abel suffered even when he was pleasing to God. Actually this is where the problem lies.

Our difficulty stems not from trying to understand why the **unrighteous** suffer, for in the minds of most men when the unrighteous suffer they receive what they justly deserve. The difficulty in understanding occurs when the **innocent** or **righteous** suffer.

THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Let me state at the outset that God is infinitely good (see Lewis, 1948, Chapter 3). Let this not, however, become a problem that would cause faulty reasoning in our life. Part of the problem arises from a misunderstanding of the definition of the word "good," and its use in reference to God. Paul Little has stated:

> Part of our problem arises from our limited definition of the word **good** and our applying this term to God. Hugh Evan Hopkins observes, "In his famous essay on Nature, John Stuart Mill clearly sets out the problem with which thinkers all through history have wrestled: If the law of all creation were justice and the Creator omnipotent, then in whatever amount suffering and happiness might be dispensed to the world, each person's share would be exactly proportioned to that person's good or evil deeds. No human being would have a worse lot than another without worse deserts; accident or favoritism would have no part in such a world, but every human life would be playing out a drama constructed like a perfect moral tale. Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism can the government of nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once both good and omnipotent" (1972, pp. 119-120).

Perhaps the greatest test of faith for the Christian today is to believe that God is good. There is so much that, taken in isolation, suggests the contrary. Helmut Thielecke of Hamburg has pointed out that a fabric viewed through a magnifying glass is clear in the middle and blurred at the edges. But we know the edges are clear because of what we see in the middle. Life, he noted, is like a fabric. There are many edges that are blurred—many events and circumstances we do not understand. But they are to be interpreted by the clarity we see in the center—the cross of Christ. We are not left to guess about the goodness of God from isolated bits of data. He has clearly revealed His character and dramatically demonstrated it to us in the

Cross. “He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

Believing that God is good convinces a person that man at his very best is capable of being good, since he is made in the image and likeness of God. We know that goodness is better than evil. Kindness is better than cruelty. Love is better than lust. Self-denial and sacrifice are better than self-aggression and selfishness. If there is a God, His nature must contain all of those things that are good. If His nature does not contain them, then that makes men better than God, causing them to despise Him (see Findlay, 1966, pp. 47-56), which in that case would be just the opposite of good. Christ taught that God is good. Christ lived a perfect life, exemplifying all goodness, and told us that God is like that. Therefore we have to hold many things, like disease and evil, in abeyance, awaiting further light. We must hold to the fact that it is impossible to believe that God is evil. On the other hand, if God is evil, then whence does goodness come? By saying this, we have replaced the mystery of evil by a greater mystery of good. There is not a single thing in this world that has the power to separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:35-39). It is with this thought that God will keep us in His loving care, that we find a God of goodness, love, fairness to all men, and One Who has the power and ability to control life. God blesses all men because He is a God of love and a God of goodness.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND HUMAN SUFFERING

Perhaps the most puzzling problem to man in relation to God’s existence is the problem of evil and human suffering. Why must evil, suffering, and even death exist in the world today? Often the question is asked, “Why are the evil blessed?” This also can be reversed to ask, “Why do the innocent suffer?” Why is it that a baby, born full of innocence and purity, has its life snuffed out as it is growing up? Why is it that thousands of innocent people are killed in wars? We wonder how it is that God, Who loves men so much, should allow suffering to come into our lives. A Christian must approach the problem of human suffering neither by denying the reality of suffering nor by trying to offer an “easy” way of escape. The world was created by God, yet evil is real. It surrounds us every day and, according to the Christian view, man, the creature made in God’s image, is involved in this terrible and very real conflict. The problems

found are intense and deep. The question is asked, "Why doesn't God do something?" The answer is: God **has** done something, and **is** doing something.

> ...God **has** done something about the problem of evil. He has done the most dramatic, costly, and effective thing possible by giving His Son to die for evil man. It is possible for man to escape God's inevitable judgment on sin and evil. It is also possible to have its power broken by entering into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The ultimate answer to the problem of evil, at the person level, is found in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ (Little, 1976, pp. 119-120).

FALSE ANSWERS TO EVIL AND SUFFERING

There are many false answers that are given to the problem of human suffering, yet which are inadequate. In almost any book of philosophy of religion that deals with the problems of evil and pain and suffering in our world, one will find these answers discussed (Cushman, 1946, 1:260-261; cf. also Trueblood, 1957, Chapter 17).

One of those answers is that suffering is just an illusion (cf. Crawford, 1968, 2:3-4; cf. also Trueblood, chapter 17 and Geisler, 1974, pp. 311-312). Mary Baker Eddy and her followers have insisted that all suffering is a product of twisted thinking, rather than actual reality in the physical world. That is to say, suffering is not something that is real, but is instead something you only **think** is real. Most people, however, find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept this point of view. When a loved one, who has been an intimate part of our home, is taken away, it is difficult for us to believe that the pain we suffer is not real but simply the product of twisted thinking. Such a description of suffering is, to say the least, unrealistic. Or, when someone who has been in good health for many years suddenly finds his life blighted with a painful and incurable disease, it is rather unconvincing to tell him that it is all in his mind, or that it is simply the product of the wrong kind of thinking. The great masses of people today are too realistic to accept this explanation of evil and suffering.

Another explanation sometimes given for the suffering and pain in the world is that these things are the result of man's own sin (Little, 1976, pp. 119-120; cf. also Crawford, 1968, 2:1-2 and Trueblood, 1957, chapter 17, pp. 235-236). This has in it so much truth that oftentimes it is easy for us to feel it is the **whole** answer. There are many evidences that suffering is a result of man's own sin. The man who drinks heavily eventually pays the price in his own body, and often in the tangled strands of his own life. The

person who misuses his body in any way inevitably will pay the price. The liar, the cheater, and the hypocrite also eventually will suffer—sometimes in this lifetime, and invariably in the next. To say that this is the explanation of **all** suffering, however, is to speak too quickly. It explains **much** suffering, but it does not explain all suffering. Think of innocent people who suffer. The example from the Old Testament is the man known as Job. Most of the book of Job is devoted to the arguments of his friends who said: "Job, you must have sinned a grievous sin because you're really suffering." The answer continually came back from Job: "I have not sinned. I am innocent." Therefore, there must be another explanation of suffering. In the book of Luke, our Lord was faced with the question.

> Now there were some present at that very season who told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered and said unto them, Think ye that these Galileans were sinners above all Galileans, because they have suffered these things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and killed them, think ye that they were offenders above all men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish (13:1-5).

The Lord simply was saying that these catastrophes did not come upon them because they were more wicked than the rest. In the book of John, the same subject is discussed briefly.

> And as he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind? Jesus answered, Neither did this man sin, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him (9:1-3).

Taking the word of Christ as final authority, we must reject the idea that sin in one's life is the **full** explanation of suffering. Much suffering and evil come to the innocent without their having deserved it in any way.

There is another explanation of suffering, which suggests that God simply cannot do anything about it (Brightman, 1946; cf. Trueblood, 1957, pp. 240-243). This idea says, in essence, that God does not **want** suffering here, because He is an infinitely loving God, but He is powerless to put it out of the world. This is sometimes referred to as the "finiteness" of God (cf. Carnell, 1970, p. 294). Yet we must look deeper, for there are many other factors involved. We find a number of statements in the Bible that indicate God is powerful beyond our comprehension. In the book of Daniel, three Hebrew young men were cast into a fiery furnace, all the while uttering the statement, "Our God is able to deliver us" (3:17). Their meaning was that God was able to do anything that He needed to do. The Bible also declares: "With God

all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). The explanation, therefore, that evil and suffering are in the world because God is unable to cast them out is false and should be rejected.

Having suggested a few incorrect explanations of the problem of human suffering and evil, we need to examine some principles that will bring us to the correct answer. There are several principles that will help us in understanding the difficulty.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

The Power of God—God Limits Himself

One principle we must bring ourselves to comprehend in relation to the existence of good and evil in the world is that God limits Himself (Geisler, 1974, p. 294). This, in some respects, has a likeness to the finiteness of God, as viewed by some philosophers. However, this limitation is not a limitation imposed upon God by some external force, for there is no external force in the Universe that can limit God's power. The only limitation upon God's power is a limitation that is placed there by God Himself. The very nature of the Universe that God created and designed makes it impossible for Him to do things that are mutually exclusive or diametrically opposed. For example, God cannot be both present and absent at the same time. He cannot create a mountain that He cannot climb. He cannot dig a hole He cannot fill. He cannot make a square circle. Actually, these are childish conundrums rather than real impossibilities. These certainly are not limitations placed upon God by Satan or by some other external force. They simply are limitations that God included in the make-up of the Universe—limitations that allow Him to be consistent with His own eternal nature.

The Bible, in fact, speaks of certain impossibilities for God. In Hebrews 6:18 the Scripture says that it is impossible for God to lie. By the very nature of God, it is not possible for Him to lie. In James 1:13 we learn that "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he, himself, tempteth no man." This is another impossibility with God. In the Old Testament (Habakkuk 1:13), we find the statement that God cannot look upon or countenance evil. All of this simply means that when God created the Universe, He created it in such a way that His own nature, being what it is, made it impossible for certain things to happen. This is not a limitation upon God in the ultimate sense. It is merely a limitation because of the nature of God.

This background prepares us to understand that when man was created by God, he was created with freedom of choice and freedom of will (Little, 1976, p. 156). When God chose to make man a creature of freedom, the inevitable result was intended to be good. God determined that man should not be merely a robot, but a creature of freedom who could choose good. When man chooses to love God, it has a real and deep significance. Deciding that man should have freedom made it necessary that this freedom include the possibility of not only choosing good, but also choosing evil. Because man has freedom of will, there have been mistakes, blunders, and wrong choices. The events of history give sufficient evidence of the fact that man often chose wrongly—and suffered as a result of that choice.

The Nature of the Universe

A second observation that can be made is that the very nature of the Universe helps to explain some of the suffering and evil in the world (Trueblood, 1957, pp. 250-254). Think for a minute about what man calls the "laws of nature." As we look at the whole Universe, we see a system composed of law and order—a system in which everything is good and faithful. Scientific investigations made in one part of the world can be verified through the same experiments in another. There is uniformity throughout the natural laws of our Universe. This must be the case, or the world would not work properly. Principles true today must be true a year from today, if they are indeed principles of law and nature. Principles true in one part of the world must be true in another, else man would not know how to build a civilization.

This uniformity, this system of law and order, also has much to do with man's suffering in the world. For example, the natural laws of the Universe that God has created include certain principles that enable man, if he uses the right elements and the right processes, to create fire. Man does it now through the striking of a match, which is simply a cooperation of the laws of the Universe. The same principle that enables man to have fire for cooking his meals and heating his home also enables him to have fire that can burn his home and destroy people's lives. The principles that make it possible to have fire for **con**structive purposes may be misused by man for **de**structive purposes.

One of man's greatest achievements has been the production of the automobile. But along with its fine uses, there also have been tragic misuses. Similarly, steel, which makes great building possible, also

can be used for guns and tanks that destroy lives in war. The principles of nature, if used properly, result in good; but if used improperly, they have within themselves the power for destruction.

Laws Must be Constant and Faithful

The only basis on which a game can be played correctly is if there are certain rules that are followed in every instance. Similarly, the only way in which a world can possibly work is for the laws of nature and order to be constant and faithful. When man uses God's laws of nature as he ought to use them, he prospers and is happy. His well-being flourishes. But when he misuses those laws, he suffers. The law of gravity is a wonderful and necessary thing, but its misuse can bring tragedy, misfortune, and even death. So it is with the other laws of the Universe.

Now, apply these observations to the problem of suffering. When God made man a creature of freedom, He opened the door to suffering. It could be no other way. When God made the Universe, He made it possible for man to use his freedom to find the good. But this inevitably included the possibility of evil and suffering. Why does man suffer? Often it is because he, his ancestors, his neighbors, or his friends have misused their freedom. In some way they have violated some of God's laws and have destroyed that which God wished to be perfect and whole.

Is Suffering Always Evil?

When the subject of human suffering is mentioned, men generally assume that all suffering is evil. Let us examine this presupposition to see if it is true. Is the negative value that we put on suffering its **real** value in **all** cases?

Man's primary purpose in existing is to honor and gratify God. This being true, everything that takes him away from God is evil, and everything that brings him toward God is good.

When we accept this standard, we see the events of the world in a different light. It is quite possible then that riches, honor, and the pleasures of this world actually serve to hinder rather than help. In other words, they can be evil rather than good. It is quite conceivable that illness, loss of money, or even the loss of friends ultimately might serve some good purpose. Under certain circumstances, poverty is better than riches. Jesus said: "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth"

(Luke 12:15). All too often worldly things blind us to the spiritual things, and thus they become curses instead of blessings—not just in this life, but for eternity. Riches, honors, and pleasures are not necessarily evils; they can be blessings. It depends on man's attitude toward them, and how he uses them. Do they draw him closer to God, or take him farther away? No one would claim that suffering is good in and of itself. But what is good is that through suffering man is often brought into submission to God's will. It is quite possible that the frowns of the world are better than its honors.

It is quite possible that illness, in some instances, is better than health. Many would consider this completely unreasonable; but remember, our primary concern in living is to honor and glorify God. The man who spends some time on his back in a hospital room often sees things in a clearer light than he ever saw them while he was going through life without a care or a worry. This is not to say that when we become sick there is rejoicing, but to accept illness in the proper manner can be a blessing, both to the person involved and to those with whom he comes in contact.

Suffering is Remedial

Much of the pain that we suffer is remedial in character (Geisler, 1974, p. 385). It is part of the deceitfulness of sin that so long as things are going well with us, there is little disposition to give up error and sin. It is when we are hurt that oftentimes we see the need for God. It is by suffering that we overcome. A man who has no sorrow in his life often tends to be immature. Through the suffering that accompanies hard work, we develop physical stamina. It is through suffering that we learn to overcome the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. Things that once looked so glamorous to us lose their appeal following crises in which we come face to face with the real issues of life.

There is a passage in the book of Hebrews that says God allows us to suffer because of His love for us:

> For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. It is for chastening that ye endure; God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chasteneth not? But if ye are without chastening, whereof all have been made partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore, we had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection to the father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed good to them; but he for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness. All chastening seemeth for the present to be no joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness (12:6-11).

This is what David meant when he said, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I may learn of thy statutes” (Psalm 119:71).

Suffering and Trials Build Character

Suffering has the power to beautify and ennoble the character and the spirit of the one who suffers (Trout, 1963, p. 80; cf. Crawford, 1968, p. 6, Geisler, 1974, p. 386, and Ferguson 1963, p. 16). Some people seem to feel that the love of God guarantees that they will be able to have everything they wish—that life simply will be a “bed of roses,” untarnished and untainted by anything. This is unreasonable. God’s love for man never is described in the Scriptures as the soft, indulgent honoring of the child in the manner that sometimes is attributed to grandfathers. Rather, the figures of speech that the Bible uses to convey the infinite love, which God has for man, are of such a nature as to indicate discipline rather than license. God is pictured as a builder Who cuts and places stones in such a way as to make a beautiful edifice. He is a Shepherd Who devotedly cares for, but also guides, His flock for its own protection. A father who genuinely loves his child must, from time to time, cause that child to suffer through the administration of discipline, lest that child destroy himself and bring upon himself greater suffering by his own blunders. Loving care involves discipline!

If God promised immunity from suffering to those who followed Him, men would serve God only out of self-interest. As a kind of cosmic insurance policy, men would become followers of God. It would be foolish not to follow God, if to follow Him meant that one automatically would be protected from illness, death, and disappointments of every kind. But this would defeat the real essence of religion. The earnest and genuine offering of worshipful love and devotion to God from man is a free response. If God offered immunity from suffering to all those who followed Him, He would rob them of the means of developing the beauty and strength of character for which all should strive in this lifetime. God does not promise His children that they will be immune to all suffering and evil. But He does say, “We know that to them that love God, all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Because Men Live Together

The answers already given indicate that even when evil and suffering come to those who are innocent, there may be the possibility of great good within that suffering. Further explanation of why the innocent suffer lies in the fact that men live together on this Earth. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 14:7: "None of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself." The nature of the Universe is such that when certain causes are put into operation, certain effects inevitably follow. Sin, which is essentially rebellion against God, causes suffering. When God decided that men should live together upon the Earth, it was inevitable that the innocent should suffer. Yet we should remember that living together also brings many of the most cherished blessings that mankind enjoys. To live alone, and thereby miss the sufferings that one sometimes must bear because of his connections with other human beings, would be a price too great for most men to pay. Most men, were they given the chance to make the choice, would choose to cast their lot among their fellow men, accepting the sorrows and suffering along with the joys and the blessings (Warren, 1972, pp. 70ff; cf. also Baxter, 1972, p. 277).

Look Up Toward Heaven

The Bible describes man's existence on Earth as a temporary sojourn through which man is preparing for a better and a more permanent abode. The Bible says that Abraham "looked for the city which hath the foundations whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). In the same chapter, we read that Moses made his choice to live and work among God's people rather than enjoy the pleasures of Egypt, "for he looked unto the recompense of reward" (Hebrews 11:26). Paul said: "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). He emphasized:

> Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory.... For we know that if the Earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens (2 Corinthians 4:16-17; 5:1).

God has prepared for us a home, and to that home He wishes us eventually to make our way. Were it not for the heartaches, disappointments, and sufferings of this world, we might forget the greater destiny that lies before us (Baxter, 1972, p. 276). Perhaps the suffering of this world is designed in part to cause

all of us not to be satisfied here, but to lift our eyes toward a more wonderful world that is to come. Beyond this life with its toils and tears, its struggles and disappointments, lies a realm of pure delight of which John wrote: "He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more" (Revelation 21:4).

In the final analysis, the Christian answer to evil and suffering is found in the Savior. The Christian finds in Jesus Christ the guarantee of God's love and of a life someday free from all evil. The Bible says: (1) To be in Christ is to suffer (2 Timothy 3:12); (2) To be in Christ is to learn from suffering (Hebrews 12:5-11); (3) To be in Christ is to rejoice in suffering (1 Peter 4:13; Matthew 5:3-12); (4) To be in Christ is to look beyond suffering (Romans 8:18); and (5) To be in Christ in the midst of an evil world, to cry "Abba, Father," and to know that He hears and cares is sufficient for the one who is a child of God. If it seems to the finite minds of men that God is going about it all wrong, then we should remind such men of the God who possesses a much more perfect wisdom than our own. We must trust Him, with Whom we all have to do, and live this life the way He would have us to live it. And if we do not find every question answered to our complete satisfaction here in this life, let us rest in the assurance that such questions **will** be answered in eternity.

REFERENCES

Baxter, Batsell Barrett. (1972), *I Believe Because* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).

Brightman, Edgar S. (1946), *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice-Hall).

Carnell, Edward J. (1970), *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

Crawford, C.C. (1968), *Genesis* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press).

Cushman, Herbert E. (1946), *A Beginner's History of Philosophy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin).

Geisler, Norman L. (1974), *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

Ferguson, Milton (1963), "The Problem of Evil and Suffering," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (Fort Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary).

Findlay, J.N. (1966), "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: S.C.M.Press).

Lewis, C.S. (1948), "Divine Goodness," *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan).

Little, Paul E. (1976), *Know Why You Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press).

Trout, Virgil R. (1963), *Christian Evidences* (Austin, TX: Sweet).

Trueblood, D. Elton (1957), "The Problem of Evil," *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row).

Warren, Thomas B. (1972), *Have Atheists Proved There Is No God?* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate).