

THE GOODNESS OF GOD QUESTIONED

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 4, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

For many years I have felt that the Christian religion, in order to be acceptable, must be reasonable or rational. This seems especially true in our 20th century. Blind, irrational faith is unappealing. The challenge of reasonableness is one that Christianity is glad to meet, for we find the apostle Peter admonishing Christians, "Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear." (I Peter 3:15). This seems to be quite consistent with Christ's statement, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32).

In my studies through the years I have found faith in God to be more reasonable than faith in the origin of our world by mere chance. The evidence appears clearly on the side of a great creative mind or architect, when one examines the intricate design, system and pattern of our world. I have also found belief in the divinity of Christ a better explanation of his life and influence than any other explanation. Either he was the Lord, or he was a deceiver of the highest order. The latter seems impossible, in view of his lasting influence for good. I have found faith in the inspiration of the Bible more convincing than the view that ordinary men unaided by God produced the book. It is too remarkable a book to have come as other writings of that ancient day came. In short, the evidence for Christian faith is greater than the evidence for doubt.

Problems...Questions

But there are problems. There are questions for which we do not know the answers. Most of these have to do with relatively unimportant matters, but a few of them are of major significance. One of the most difficult of all is the question, "How could a God of infinite goodness create a world with so much evil in it?" We remember the 14th Psalm, which in its opening verse says, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." However, we are not in this message concerned with those who are foolish and who give only a light, passing thought to the subject of God. We are concerned with the many intelligent people who are so deeply disturbed by the evil in our world that they have come to feel that they cannot believe in a God who allows such evil to exist.

They speak of sickness and suffering which are known wherever men live. They are impressed with the problem of death itself. Man's inhumanity to man, as seen in war, is also mentioned. Similarly, they speak of man's misuse of other men and even the subordination of whole races of men. The universality of sin and the ugliness of sin are also pointed out. Then, too, and perhaps most difficult of all to deal with, there are the earthquakes, the tornadoes, the hurricanes, the tidal waves, and other violent, destructive acts of nature. In the legal language of our day these are known as "acts of God." The strongest argument made by Woolsey Teller, President of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, in his debate with James Bales, concerned the ruthlessness of nature.

Two Premises

As we face this heavy objection to our Christian faith, I would point out two preliminary considerations. First, man's knowledge is limited. Just as a child cannot possibly understand the adult world, so man does not have the perspec-

tive to understand fully the nature of God and the makeup of the universe. Man's "line of sight" is often limited and his conclusions often inaccurate. This, if we are honest, all of us must admit from our own experiences. As Solomon said it in the Proverbs, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." (Prov. 14:12). Man is often mistaken.

Just here I should like to refer to the fact that the Hebrew language is read backward. Most of us are aware that when one sits down to read a page of Hebrew he begins at the right side of the page and reads across to the left, just the reverse of the way we read English. I have said this in order to say that often life needs to be read backward. There are many times when we cannot possibly understand a situation in life until we have heard the rest of the story. For example, in the Genesis story of Joseph it was utterly unintelligible until the story was complete. This boy could not possibly have understood why his brothers sold him into bondage and why his father did not buy him back from the slave traders--that is, until the rest of the story unfolded and he could comprehend the purpose of it all. Reading backward, every step of his life showed a beautiful plan.

For a more modern example, I would refer to a young girl who was engaged to a man a few years older than she. As the wedding approached, he broke the engagement and in doing so broke her heart. For a time she was bitter and felt that there could not be any justice or goodness in a world where she was so shamefully treated. Later, however, she found the man and in that marriage achieved a higher happiness than she had dreamed possible before. She no longer had any problem about the goodness of God, but was thankful that she had not entered into the earlier less-promising marriage.

The second important premise is that man's conception of what is good is often mistaken. The pleasure-pain view of existence is shallow and incomplete. Yet, almost all mankind considers a thing good if it gives pleasure and a thing bad if it causes pain. The summum bonum is interpreted as happiness. Every story must end, "A good time was had by all....And they lived happily ever after."

This is indeed a shallow, incomplete view of life. We human beings are not the center of the universe and God is not our private lackey or servant. To evaluate everything as good or bad in terms of whether it gives us pleasure or pain is certainly self-centered. There is greater good than pleasure and greater evil than pain. Man does not exist primarily to be happy. God wants him to be happy, but there is a higher goal. Man, the creature, exists in order to glorify God the Creator.

Underlying Principles

Now let us come to the real explanation of why there is evil in the world. We suggest four great, basic, underlying principles of our universe. Note each one carefully. Note that in order for each one to be present there are certain attendant circumstances which could not in the very nature of reality be avoided.

The first of these underlying principles is the regularity of law. We find it stated in the scriptures when we read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen. 1:1). As that opening chapter of the opening book of the Bible unfolds we read that the various kinds of vegetation and of animals brought forth "after their kind." Other evidences of an ordered system of natural law are also set forth. In Gen. 8:22, as a further example, we read, "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." God planned the universe so that it would be run by a system of natural laws, and by these laws everything functions. Without these laws life would be impossible. A world of chance would be chaotic.

It is precisely because of the universal laws of nature that storms occasionally occur. God's plan of causing the sun to evaporate the oceans, of winds to carry the moisture in the form of clouds over the mainland, and of atmospheric conditions which cause rain creates the possibility of floods. As the waters flow down the mountains and through the valleys, as the streams carry the torrents away, it is inevitable that occasionally there will be whirlpools with attendant danger to human life. The winds that normally purify the atmosphere occasionally cause a tornado.

Gravity can be cruel, when someone falls from a height and is crushed in the fall, but without gravity it would not be possible for the normal activities of life to go on. Similarly, fire is destructive on occasion, but without fire it would not be possible to cook man's food, nor to provide power for many of life's activities. Sunshine and rain are great blessings, though occasionally the sun causes droughts and the rain causes floods. It is necessary to look at the total picture. If we look at all of nature we find that it is very good indeed. The occasionally destructive aspects of nature are so few in comparison with its blessings that the verdict must be solidly in favor of God's system.

Secondly, there is the freedom of man's will. When God choose to make man he paid him great honor by giving him freedom of will and making him a creature of choice. Man is no robot or automaton, but a creature of free will. In this crucially important act God did two things. He lifted man above the realm of the animals and above all inanimate objects on earth, giving him a dignity and an importance that are unique. At the same time God made it possible for man to choose evil as well as good. There was no other way. If man was to have freedom of will, it was inevitable that he might choose evil as well as good. Man's misuse of his freedom has brought untold suffering to humanity.

In spite of the charges of some, God is not responsible for much or even most of man's sufferings because they come from man's own unfortunate choices. As an example, we might mention a woman who married a tyrannical husband and then blamed God for her unhappy state. Actually, however, God did not cause her to marry this particular man. That was her own decision and her suffering was a result of her wrong choice. In a similar manner, when a drunken driver veers across the center line of the highway and causes a collision that takes the lives of several people, this is not God's act. It is a result of man's sin against his fellowman. There is no possession which man has that is more important than his ability to make choices, yet there is no element of his nature which has been so costly. When God made man with the capability of reaching the stars, inevitably there was connected with it the possibility of plumbing the depths.

The third underlying principle of our universe is the value of imperfect conditions. The problems, imperfections and challenges which our world contains give us opportunities for growth and development which would otherwise be impossible. Sorrow and suffering help us to develop traits which fit us for eternity. A teenage boy does not develop his muscles by lying in a hammock in the shade in the summertime and eating ice cream. Rather, he develops his muscles by the hard labor involved in mowing a lawn, constructing a house, or plowing a field. The imperfections of our world serve a purpose in allowing us to grow and develop into mature, responsible beings in a way which would otherwise not be possible.

The fourth underlying principle is the inter-dependence of human life. It was the apostle Paul who said, in Romans 14:7, "None of us liveth unto himself, and none dieth to himself." Much of man's suffering results from the actions of other people, people of the past as well as the present. The misdeeds of our ancestors continue to plague us and our misdeeds will inevitably be a burden for our children.

But to avoid this it would be necessary for each one of us to live in an airtight compartment. Only in this way could we avoid the interconnectedness of life and thereby avoid the results of the misdeeds of others.

Yet, I am convinced that our greatest blessings come from the love which we give to others and the love which we receive from others. Without this interconnectedness, life would be barren and largely meaningless. The avoidance of all contact with other human beings might save us some suffering, but it would cost us the greatest joys and pleasures of life.

Conclusion

As I have faced the tragedy of evil in our world and have tried to analyze its origin, I have come to the conclusion that it was an inevitable accompaniment of our greatest blessings and benefits. Without the regularity of law, with its attendant occasional destructive storms, there could be no life on earth. Without freedom of man's will, there could be no meaningfulness to life. Man would be reduced merely to the role of robot, or machine. Without the imperfect conditions of our world, there would be no means by which we could develop the inner strengths of character that are so essential. Without the interdependence of human life, there could be none of the great blessings of friendship and love. By the very nature of reality, these attendant circumstances are a part of the pattern. Where there is an up there must also be a down. Where there is an inside, there must also be an outside. The operation that saves a man's life, cannot take place without an incision and without stitches. In a similar way, our blessings would be impossible where it not for some of the imperfections that go along with them. We must look at the whole and in doing so we find that God's plan is good.

There is one thing more, a very important one. Even though God cannot take away the evil that is inherent in the world, he does promise that if we love him he will see us through. It was the apostle Paul in writing to the Romans who assured us, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28). This does not say that all things are good, but that if we are lovers of God he will see that all things work together for our ultimate good.

It is in a similar vein, I think, that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it." (I Cor. 10:13). There is no ultimate tragedy that can happen to a Christian. It is for these reasons that we believe in the goodness of God, in spite of the evil that is sometimes so distressing and so painful in our world. When one sees all of life and understands the reasons behind life's suffering, I believe he will agree with the judgment which God himself declared in the Genesis story of creation, "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." (Gen. 1:31).

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