

Summary of Veritas Lecture: "Why Does God Allow So Much Suffering and Evil?"

Those who advance the problem of evil and suffering as an argument against Christianity can do so in two ways. (1) They can claim to know the content of objective moral right and wrong and then argue that the God of the Bible fails. (2) They can say, "Forget about the problems I may have in establishing an objective foundation for ethics; the problem that you Christians have is a problem of internal coherence. The set of things you affirm about God (being all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good) are incompatible with all the evil and suffering we find in the world." For the person who does not believe in God, establishing a basis for objective right and wrong is not easy. Hence most critics take the second approach. But if the challenge is against the coherence of Christian beliefs, it is philosophically appropriate for the Christian to appeal to various aspects of Christian doctrine and belief if doing so helps in addressing the problem. (For instance, if the doctrine of the cross helps in explaining why a good God would allow so much suffering, it does not matter whether the critic rejects the doctrine as foolish. His charge, after all, is against the ability of Christians to square what they believe with the realities of so much evil and suffering.)

After discussing three important "partial explanations" (free will, development of character, and helping us see our need for God), and affirming the value of them, I pointed out that they do not account well for the amount and distribution of suffering that we observe. These partial explanations are helpful but leave much yet unexplained.

At this point I noted that advocates of the partial explanations often presume what can be called, "the greater-goods assumption": *If God allows evil and suffering it must be because some greater good arises from it.* An implication of this assumption is that the amount of suffering in the world must be optimal (given free will). If less suffering could accomplish as much good, then God would have had there be less suffering—and likewise for any greater suffering. But, not only do the problems pertaining to the amount and distribution of suffering weigh against such optimality, the assumption of optimality runs against the teaching of the Bible. The Bible portrays this world as being a deeply broken and hurting world, one which grieves, and at times angers, God. Far from being optimal, this world is in need of redemption.

Returning, then, to the initial question, "Why Does God Allow So Much Evil and Suffering?" I suggest three pieces or steps toward a more adequate solution.

1. *God is perfectly just and the righteous judge.* Typically discussions of the problem of evil do not speak of justice in God. Might it not be that justice in the character of God is relevant to the question at hand? Consider the example of parent who is also a judge. If he/she has a son who is charged with a crime and comes into his/her courtroom for trial, the parent cannot simply ask, what should a loving parent do? Justice must be met.

How important is justice in God? Reflection on "why the cross?" tells us that it is quite important. Indeed it suggests that God will always do what is just. The necessity of the cross is not a logical necessity—logically, God could simply forgive us—its necessity is tied to the fulfillment of justice. The death which we deserved Jesus took on himself on the cross. Hence the lessons of the cross include:

- (a) The depth of God's commitment to justice
- (b) The depth of God's love for us

2. *A just accompaniment of free will is that normally we must live with the consequences of our actions.* The Bible does not state such a principle, but it fits well with biblical teaching. Under the greater-goods assumption, free will has a value in itself, but one would not expect it to trump all other goods. God could allow an evil action to take place, and allow moral lessons to be learned, but thwart any severely negative consequences. However, if the above principle is correct, having to live with the consequences of our actions, even if they be horrific, is a just accompaniment of the freedom given to us. This does not mean that God cannot thwart consequences of evil, but if the above principle is correct, then there must be factors in these situations which justly permit it.

3. *When Adam and Eve turned against God, the just consequence was both a break in their relationship with God and the removal of God's constant protective care.* This third piece in a response suggests that when Adam and Eve turned against God and were expelled from the Garden, not only was their personal relationship with God broken but so was the protective relationship. God can and does still protect, but, if the principle above is correct, Christians are not spared from the consequences of living in a fallen world. Christians acknowledge that physical death is a just consequence of the fall, but Genesis 3 suggests that human suffering (from natural causes) also comes with the fall. It speaks of pain in childbirth and the toil of work to survive.

An illustration I gave in the lecture is that of the "holodeck" in Star Trek, the room in the starship that is like a computer game but simulates reality, tactile and visual. Hence in a combat program, one's opponent can hit you and knock you to the ground. But there are "safety protocols" that keep one from serious injury or death. However, in a few episodes the safety protocols fail. Serious injury and death are then real possibilities.

The Garden of Eden was no simulation, but the point of this illustration is that when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, they were placed in a world where "natural evils" are quite real. The safety protocols, as it were, of God's intimate protection were turned off, and this as a just consequence of the fall. Until Christ returns and the new heaven and new earth are brought into being, both Christians and non-Christians must live in a world where suffering is a reality. We, however, who are Christians have the comfort of knowing that God is able to bring good out of all that occurs, that he has not lost control, that he is with us in suffering, and that we can look forward to a life when suffering and death will be no more.