

## From Acorn to Oak

*Who is God, and what is he like? Part 16: Is God still just in times of trouble?*

(An answer to the theodicy question)

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About 7:30 a.m. one Saturday morning early in my ministry the phone rang. “A terrible tragedy has occurred,” the voice on the other end of the line said. She went on to explain that the previous evening a family in the church was unloading the car at a lake house they’d rented, and while they were doing so their two-year old son had wandered down to the lake and fallen off the end of the dock into very deep water. Searchers labored unsuccessfully all night to try to find him. It wasn’t until the following afternoon that they recovered his lifeless body.

At times of personal and national crisis or tragedy, one of the first questions people ask is, “How can a just God allow such things to occur?” This question, one I’ve been asked a lot in half a century as an ordained minister, is called the theodicy question (< Greek θεός, *theos*, God + δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosunē*, justice, uprightness, righteousness): i.e., is God just when he allows evil to occur? His Word gives us a clear answer to this question.

Many mistakenly say “No” as a result of either not understanding what the Bible says about God’s character or by ignoring God’s self-disclosure in his Word. They say he is either all good but powerless to do anything about it, or he is powerful enough to have prevented such evil but isn’t all good. (Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 131)

After such trouble, when enormous emotional responses recede to permit reflection, the human desire to understand and make sense out of life returns to its normal function and questions flow. How can we answer this common question?

We must begin by keeping in mind that we are limited in our capacity to comprehend certain phenomena. “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Isaiah 55:8-9) We must avoid human hubris and arrogance that assumes we can know everything and that God has to justify himself to us; on the contrary, we need to be justified by him. However, we do know much that enables us to construct a reasonable response for those who ask (1 Peter 3:15), and we can assure people that we’ll know more when we meet God in the next phase of life. A more complete response transcends the space available here, but its basis is provided in the Bible and in historic Christian theology. Psalms 36, 37, 72, 92; Habakkuk; Matthew 24, 25; and Revelation are especially helpful.

The following reflections are just the beginning of an answer to the theodicy question. In this article we’ll concentrate on God’s justice in spite of the suffering experienced by people that they did little or nothing to cause. While easier to understand, we also need to see his justice in other human suffering, e.g., the suffering that people bring on

themselves, which is an outcome of God's justice, which we considered in the previous essay. (Romans 1:27; 1 Peter 4:4-6) We can also expect to encounter suffering as believers when we obey God in our daily witness in a fallen world. (2 Timothy 3:12) Spurning the tunnel vision focus, we lift our sights to view the situation in its broader perspective where we can even "rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us...." (Romans 5:3-5)

It's important to recall that God created everything good; Adam and Eve at first lived in bliss without evil. It was only after they disobeyed and corrupted mankind's nature that human suffering began, an occurrence God had warned them would take place if they misused their freedom, that if they disobeyed the only prohibition he gave them (which actually enhanced their freedom), it would be tragic: they would experience evil and death. (Genesis 2:16-17) They ignored that rule, and the result is that we live for a time in an age where evil (which in the Bible includes all unpleasantness) is a stark reality for which God cannot be blamed.

People refine the question in this or a similar form: "Why doesn't God eliminate evil and prevent these and other human sufferings?" We could begin our response by observing that God created people in his image, one aspect of which is freedom to choose.

When this freedom is misused by motives stemming from the corruption in someone's nature, by mistake, or by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time in a world flawed by sin and evil, suffering often occurs. God could take away the freedom people have which could reduce if not eliminate evil deeds, but the result would be to turn us into puppet-like beings with little movement or speech capability, a different kind of suffering, for we would lose an important component of the essence of what makes us human, image bearers who reflect in microcosm some of the wonderful characteristics of the Creator.

Nevertheless, God is working out a plan that he implemented as soon as Adam and Eve sinned (Genesis 3:15); he will one day eliminate all evil and suffering from the context in which we live. You may then wonder, "Why doesn't he complete his plan now?" Well, let's think about some of the implications if he did so.

For example, in the tragic Civil War in our country in the 1860's, where the bloody slaughter of human life was so huge that Gettysburg's Rock Creek was described as having a red hue, the Union and Confederate sides both contained many Christians who might have prayed, "Lord, come quickly and usher in the end of this age." What would have occurred if the Lord had done so? One obvious answer to this question is that we would not exist. Possibly one reason God is delaying the end of this age is so more people can have the opportunity to experience life and the joy it brings, especially in his kingdom. We've previously seen that his essence is love, and he may want more people to receive that love as some human parents want more children. Significantly, some, if not many Civil War soldiers who suffered, did not blame God, such as John Moseley, a youth who wrote his mother in Alabama from his death bed: "I had hoped to have been

spared; but a righteous God has ordered it otherwise, and I feel prepared to trust my case in his hands.” (Quoted in *Gettysburg*, Historical Times, Inc., p. 34)

The Apostle Peter adds another reason for God’s delay: to give people more of an opportunity to repent and be saved. (2 Peter 3:8-9) We must broaden our worldview. Our time in this age is a small part of our eternal existence.

When a loved one in Christ dies, it’s not at all wrong to express thanks for that person being with the Lord. Some misguided people, often those who value this world more than being with God, others who play psychologist and accuse one of being in denial, and still others who don’t know what to say, mistakenly chastise Christians who try to cheer a fellow believer, after appropriate time of listening and empathizing, by saying words to the effect, “God understands our sadness, but in our sadness let’s not grieve as those who have no hope; while we mourn being temporarily apart from her, and we’re sad, let’s be comforted that she’s not sad and rejoice that she is with the Lord.” That is very comforting and wise counsel, and such comments encourage and lift the heart of one grieving. Such chastisement is either ignoring or rejecting passages in God’s Word that clearly urge us to place our strongest value not on this world but on the treasures of heaven. (Matthew 6:19-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13) Recall the apostle Paul’s perspective:

<sup>21</sup> For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

<sup>22</sup> If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!

<sup>23</sup> I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;

<sup>24</sup> but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. (Philippians 1:21-24)

Life in the presence of God now, in heaven, and in the new heaven and new earth is far more to be valued than life in the age of sin here on earth. Christians in other cultures as well weep when a loved one dies, but they also rejoice that the loved one is with the Lord with no more suffering! See the implications in Jeremiah 23:5-6 and other Biblical passages which help answer this question, e.g., Ecclesiastes 8:12-13; Psalm 37; Luke 18:7-8; Romans 5:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7.

“God is sovereign. He’ll get us through it. It’s going to turn out all right.” This was Rev. Jeff Mladenik’s confident conviction, etched in my memory, which summarized his reflections on many occasions when he shared with me some of the monumental challenges he faced in his daily work as a Chicago business executive and in his part-time ministry in the Education Department of Christ Church of Oak Brook. This conquering conviction unquestionably sustained him during the tragic time on the hijacked Flight 11 from Boston which carried him into the north tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and into eternity.

As we’ve seen in a previous article in this series, God is indeed all good, and, as we’ll see in an upcoming study, Scripture teaches throughout that he is also all powerful and

sovereign; he is in full control of all that is going on in the universe. His character is essentially love, which being true love includes justice and righteousness; yet he has chosen to not reduce the freedom within limits he has given us.

Consider the comfort found in Psalm 37 and some related passages. King David, the author, was specially led by God to write, “Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon...die away. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.” (37:1-2, 7 TNIV) Why not fret?

The Sovereign LORD is righteous and his purposes will prevail. He *will* bring those who do evil to justice *when the time is right in his sight*. The wicked will be destroyed. “A little while, and the wicked will be no more.” (37:10) “A little while” is one of the Bible’s time-related terms that indicates the shortness of this age from the broader perspective of God’s timing. Evil and the suffering it produces is a result of the human condition brought on by Adam and Eve’s disobedience which corrupted human nature. Simply by living in this age people will be harmed by evil deeds and conditions not of their own doing or deserving (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-5), but God will provide all-sufficient help to overcome the adversities of life, small and huge.

The LORD will not forsake his people; he will help us. (Psalm 37:28-40) He makes us righteous in his sight (Romans 4, Galatians 3), gives us all we have that is good so we can give generously (37:21, Genesis 12:1-3, James 1:17), and prepares future and more extensive blessings for us and our children, including peace, wisdom, and salvation (37:9-40). Notice here one of many Old Testament concepts that is broadened in the New. Whereas the Psalmist discloses the Lord’s declaration that the righteous meek will inherit the land (37:11, 22, 29), Jesus explains that this promise of land involves the whole earth. (Matthew 5:5) God also grants us many other blessings. (37:4, 28, 33)

How does the LORD want his people to react to the evil in this age? He tells us we should trust him, avoid evil ourselves, obey him, and do what is good, confident that he will eliminate all evil at the right time. (37:3, 27) He wants us to be still and wait patiently for him to carry out his plan. We are to “refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.” (37:7-8) In times of trouble we’ll find that God is a very present help (Psalm 46:1), and we’ll experience that blessing by taking refuge in him. (37:40)

Rather than unjustly criticizing God, we should thank him for his great love for us and his unspeakably wonderful provision for our redemption, demonstrated powerfully at great cost to himself, and for not “washing his hands of us.” He could have destroyed us and created other beings who would obey him and not engage in the evil he detests. But he didn’t, even though redeeming us meant monumental suffering for himself in order to maintain his integrity and righteousness.

How do we reach the point in our lives where we can function with that degree of maturity? The Bible clearly specifies how: through daily reading and reflecting on God’s

Word (37:31), prayer (Philippians 4:4-13), desiring to be led by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26), and participating in the work of the church, relating to fellow members to whom the Lord has given special gifts to help us “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:7-13)

God works in our lives directly with us as individuals, but he also blesses us through other people, his church. It is often hard, even for believers, to observe the apparent prosperity of the wicked. Another Psalmist, Asaph, confessed that such observations became very difficult for him, until he did something. “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” (Psalm 73:16, 17)

When we celebrate Christ’s Resurrection on Sundays, we again testify to the existence of God’s plan to right all the wrongs that began with Adam and Eve’s disobedience. We rejoice in God’s love that is also just and righteous and receive renewed encouragement that the day is coming when we will dwell with God and “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:4) Thanks be to God!

A mature perspective issues in a righteous lifestyle that characterizes God’s calling of us to be holy. Rev. Mladenik understood this truth and lived it, providing a viable model especially well tooled for the workplace. He grew to become one of the “oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” (Isaiah 61:3) He impacted the lives of numerous people in and associated with Christ Church and in his workplaces. His witness and ministry will thus continue to effect many, and through them many more, far into the future.

At Advent and Christmas, we celebrate the focal point of God’s just resolution of our human plight in the life and work of the Messiah. Passages such as Isaiah 11:1-9, actually refer to both his first and his second advent, the latter being the time where he will judge with righteousness and with justice and bring a new heaven and a new earth, where “the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together...[and where he] will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.” (v. 6, Revelation 21:4)

In the meantime, “God is a very present help in the time of trouble...” directly in the lives of those involved and through his church, the body of Christ. What good news! Christ’s coming is the greatest demonstration of God’s goodness and his true love which is just and righteous, and his second coming will eternally eliminate evil from the lives of his people. The theodicy question is not only answered; it is resolved. Thanks be to God!