

IF GOD IS GOOD, WHY SUFFERING?

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Far more than we do, God suffers at the nightly parade of tragedy. His solution is no spectacular but ineffective band-aid. He must get to the root of the problem—sin in the human heart.

Seldom is the nightly TV news something pleasant. We view one horror after another—spaced a few days apart as if a master mind were planning them for maximum terrorizing effect.

A horrible earthquake appears on the screen, and we imagine ourselves trapped beneath the rubble. A few days later comes news of an airplane bombed out of the sky, and we picture ourselves among the doomed. Soon it is time for scenes of rescue workers cutting people out of the twisted metal of a train wreck, a killer tornado, or another demented mass murderer spraying a classroom with bullets from a semi-automatic assault rifle.

Some tell us that these things aren't really happening more often, they are just being better reported. Most of us aren't convinced—or comforted. Between the major calamities, the newscasts report on drought, AIDS, the homeless, depletion of the ozone layer, crime, and poverty.

Meanwhile the rich get richer and the poor get poorer worldwide. How long can this go on before the “haves” find themselves barricaded in their fortress-like mansions with machine guns at the windows to keep the desperate “have-nots” at bay?

Surely we have arrived at the time Jesus spoke of when He said that “men’s hearts [will be] failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth” (Luke 21:26). No end of voices—secular and religious—warn of the dismal prospects ahead. Such a steady diet of bad news is depressing. Let us see good news instead of the bad. One aspect of this whole picture has not been seen clearly: how God feels about this world’s troubles.

Does God watch the news? How can God sit by while such human suffering parades across TV screens each night? Can He, like us, watch the news and munch on peanuts, coldly and without concern? Why does He allow such things if He has all power? Doesn't He have any feelings? We want to believe in Him, but we wonder why He doesn't do something.

It's easy for us to assume that God is detached from our world and its suffering—ensconced in perfect security, immortal, enjoying constant pleasure. In our view, God is something like a Beverly Hills millionaire who doesn't need to worry too much about homeless beggars in Calcutta. And if God is the number one devotee of Number One, why shouldn't we be the same? If God is as selfish as we are, it's no wonder “me first” has become such a popular philosophy.

Let's look at what He has told us in the Bible about His viewpoint. The Bible reveals a poignant side of God's personality that we often overlook. The truth is that God is in deep pain. He *does* care; He *does* hurt; He *is* concerned. He feels Earth's hurt so

much, in fact, that He cannot rest as long as one unhappy person remains.

Part of what Jesus came to earth to do was to reveal the truth about the Father's character. Jesus pictures God as caring more deeply about His earthbound family than any father on earth can love his children. The stumbling block is not God's love but our unbelief. We find it hard to believe that the good news can be that good.

"Without your Father's leave not one [sparrow] can fall to the ground. As for you, even the hairs of your head have all been counted" (Matthew 10:29, 30, NEB). Speaking of those who suffered for God, Isaiah says, "In all their affliction [God] was afflicted. . . . He bore them and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9).

There is no hurt we can know that God does not feel. "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him" (Isaiah 53:4, 5).

Reality and God's love

How do we reconcile such a picture of God with reality as we know it in a world of tragedy? We're perplexed. If God loves us, and if He is all powerful, how can He allow this agony to continue?

During World War II, Britons endured terrible suffering while a kind, sensitive King George VI and his gracious Queen sat on the throne. As the king listened to the daily reports of carnage and destruction, his heart was torn with sympathy for his subjects. Gladly he would have ended the war

immediately if he could. But the war was not of his making. An enemy had thrust the conflict upon him, and it must be fought through to the end.

This is a faint, imperfect glimpse of God's situation. The Bible discloses a behind-the-scenes reality that gives good reasons for what appears at first glance to be unconcern on God's part.

An enemy has thrust war upon God. It is not of His choosing. By disbelieving God and accepting Satan's suggestion to disobey Him, Adam and Eve signed this world over to the enemy's control. Thus God must continue to endure our suffering on this planet until the great conflict between Christ and Satan can be resolved with full victory for heaven.

The world is still in rebellion against God. Like King George VI and his government, God and heaven can hardly wait for V-day when the enemy of the universe will be forever defeated. The Lord Jesus is eager to return to this earth and end the reign of sin and all the cruelty it has caused. God is not sitting idly by, enjoying Himself in celestial luxury while His followers have to get along as best they can in a world where the war rages on. His suffering is far more intense than anything we can imagine. He feels the pain of everyone on earth; we can feel only our own—or at best a partial sympathy with others. Think of sharing the agony of millions, billions of people! He never sleeps as we do. He longs for this nightmare to be over far more than we can realize.

God's solution is infinitely efficient. He applies no spectacular but futile band-aids; He must get to the root of human problems. And that root is sin and

selfishness entrenched in human hearts. All the tragic agony of the world is in some way the consequence of sin. God has solved the sin problem, but for the war to end, humanity must hear and understand a message of good news that makes clear just what Jesus has accomplished as our Saviour from sin. The time has come for a glorious victory in this great conflict with sin, and God is eager for it. Can it happen? Is there really such good news? If so, how does it work?

The good news that the Lord wants to give to you and me is not a thunder-and-lightning denunciation of sin. It is a heart-warming assurance that grace abounds much more than sin. That alone is what can change hearts and bring about victory.

You have already received the free gift of salvation, it's in your hands. If you refuse to believe the good news, then you are throwing away your birthright possession. You are in possession of a checking account in which someone graciously placed a million dollars. If you refuse to believe that the money is there and truly is your money, then you are throwing away your gift because you are afraid to "spend" it. And being afraid and not believing, you continue to live in a miserable hovel when you could have a mansion. The power to overcome sin and develop a righteous character is a reality that already is in our possession through legal justification, if we would just believe it.

Faith is our saying "amen" to God's incredible promise, just like Abraham did. Believing the good news then transforms our character as we continually say "amen" and continually surrender to

God's will for us. In this way Christ dwells in us through the power of the Holy Spirit; we are transformed into His likeness as we allow our minds to be conformed to His mind (Phil 2:5; Rom. 12:2). As EGW stated in DA p. 668, "when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses."

God has a last message for the world: grace abounds that can conquer the sin that causes crime, injustice, tragedy, pain, and depression. Satan's last trump card is his claim that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was futile. "Look," he sneers, "the world is worse now than when He died for its salvation!" To answer Satan's challenge the gospel must produce a beautiful change in men and women; it must give evidence that Jesus did not die in vain.

How the gospel is easily misunderstood. It's easy to think that we understand the gospel when in reality we are mired in a do-it-yourself program of works. Many have the idea that the gospel means they must work at overcoming this or that fault, be more faithful, pray more, etc. Like those who asked Jesus, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" we don't listen to His answer. "This is the work of God, that you believe" (John 6:28, 29). We tend to fear a salvation that comes by faith alone, lest it cause us not to do enough good works.

Such a distorted gospel can cause only frustration and discouragement. The true gospel reveals a faith that works. In these last days, God is proclaiming a message that transcends fear and casts it out of our lives by replacing legalistic

imperatives with gospel enablings. I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven,” John said, “having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth. . . . saying with a loud voice, ‘. . . give glory to Him [God], for the hour of His judgment has come” (Revelation 14:6, 7).

A second angel follows. He also has good news, but he warns against a counterfeit gospel. ““Babylon is fallen,” he cries (verse 8).

A third angel warns against a still more clever counterfeit, the most subtle the world has ever seen; worship of the beast and his image and receiving “his mark” (verse 9; see also verses 10, 11).

Heaven’s activity, as pictured by these angels flying through the sky, is not in vain. These angels’ messages result in a group of people worldwide of whom the Bible can honestly say “Here is the patience of the saints, here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (verse 12). God’s infinite investment in giving His Son to die will pay off.

This last message will go triumphantly to the whole world through a revelation of God’s grace. This gospel message does not appeal to fear but to a clearer vision of God’s love than the world has ever seen. This is what motivates a lasting change of heart and life. This is what Paul calls “righteousness by faith” (Galatians 5:5).

The good news reveals a God who loves us as a heavenly Father, a Saviour who remains a member of our human family for all eternity, and a Holy Spirit who will “abide” with everyone who desires His

presence. How can any of us be depressed or fearful if we believe such good news?

God’s has a problem. When we pray, “Lord, why don’t You do something about this sad, suffering world?” the answer comes back to us: “Why don’t you do something?” When Jesus was rejected and crucified, God was, in effect, voted out of office on Earth. He cannot stage a coup or usurp control where He is not wanted.

Everybody has heard of God, and He usually enjoys good PR because of His excellent reputation. But it’s extremely unlikely that He could ever win a free election as Chief Executive anywhere on earth. The simple reason is that fallen human nature is in a state described as “hostile to God” (Romans 8:7), and the general run of mankind has always been against having Him as ruler.

Jesus symbolically represented Himself in a parable as a certain “nobleman” whose “citizens hated him and sent an embassy after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us.’” Luke 19:14. Like it or not, we humans must admit that this has been our general attitude throughout history.

Once when God actually was the theocratic ruler of a special nation, Israel, the people demanded of His prophet that He be displaced: “Appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.” The Lord told the prophet Samuel to do it, “for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” 1 Samuel 8:5, 7. Israel would probably have denied that they were rejecting God, but it is obvious that He had lost at the polls. The

ultimate rejection of Christ by their descendants correctly interpreted their entire national history.

This human pattern of hostility began to develop after the Fall, when Adam and Eve lost their original sinlessness. By the time of the Flood, only eight people were loyal enough to God to go inside His ark, at a time when world population could well have numbered one billion.

God may be almighty, but He will not force Himself on people or impose on their free will. Neither, however, has He been willing to wash His hands of planet Earth and accept defeat at the polls as final. As Creator, He has a rightful stake in affairs here. His plan has always been to achieve a comeback in spite of man's ongoing hostility. Because of the opposition of the masses, He has had to work through a minority. The Bible describes this minority as a "remnant."

Put yourself in God's place and try to appreciate the continual frustration God has known, always trying to bless all families of the earth through His people, yet stymied by their rebellion or rejection. In age after age He has tried it again, working through a remnant. So it has been even throughout what we call the Christian age—the majority even in the church steeped in apostasy, while a small remnant bravely endures the fire and the rack because they bear witness to the truth of the gospel. As James Russell Lowell wrote:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
wrong forever on the throne;
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
and behind the dim unknown

Standeth God within the shadow,
keeping watch above His own.

Christ warned His true followers not to expect more in this world than remnant status. But the Lord assures us that His patience and perseverance will pay off at last. Just as He has always had a remnant who have remained faithful, so just before Christ returns, he will have a faithful remnant who will stand before this world distinguished as "those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus." Revelation 12:17.

This final remnant are described elsewhere in the book of Revelation as those who keep not only the commandments of God, but also "the faith of Jesus." Chapter 14:12. They boldly announce the arrival of God's "hour . . . of judgment," and call upon the world to "worship him who made heaven and earth" (Revelation 14:7), a clear allusion to God's alternative to the theory of random evolution. Those who are described as reviving the Bible truth of creation and keeping all of God's commandments will undoubtedly be observing and emphasizing the seventh-day Sabbath, which commemorates His creation in six days and His resting on the seventh day. See Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11.

But this remnant do not keep God's commandments as legalists, for they are represented also as "an angel" proclaiming to the world the pure truth of the "eternal gospel." Revelation 14:6. The word *gospel* means "good news of salvation by faith in Christ alone." "By grace

you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” Ephesians 2:8.

To proclaim such an “eternal gospel” requires that God’s final remnant also unmask the counterfeit gospel that leads away from loyalty to the true Christ and His law. This work is symbolized by “another” angel’s message, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.” Revelation 14:8. Babylon has always been a place of “confusion” (that’s what the word itself means). Those who claim to follow Jesus, but who reject obedience to Him and His commandments, find themselves in a confused, fallen state, symbolized as “Babylon.” Sincerity in error becomes knowing, willful refusal to identify with God’s remnant who stand on the side of full loyalty. Finally, according to Revelation, a third angel warns against the peril of continuing down the broad road of popular custom: “If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives [his] mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger.” Revelation 14:9, 10.

Thus Revelation introduces us to the role of God’s faithful remnant in the final act in the great drama of world history. God has been standing in the shadows, and many have imagined He has abandoned planet Earth. But He has not been asleep. His age-long search for those who will serve Him has resulted in a people who by His grace stand “without fault before the throne of God.” Revelation 14:5, KJV. He trusts them to remain His faithful allies in the final conflict.

Christ’s apostles in their day looked forward to “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 2:7. This end-time display of God’s grace in the lives of His remnant, the full fruitage of the redemption accomplished at the cross, will be the undoing of Satan and all who have chosen hostility to God as their permanent stance. Every lying accusation against God will have been refuted, every question answered. At last, every mask has come off, every underground machination of evil has been exposed. In the experience of His final remnant, God’s handling of sin will be vindicated in the eyes of the universe. Even the wicked will confess His justice unanimously and voluntarily.

Then God will win His case. The remnant sing a hymn of triumph: “Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy. All nations shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed.” Revelation 15:4.

John heard “every creature in heaven and on earth” joining in acclaiming God as the rightful Ruler of the earth. Revelation 5:13. For once, God will win at the polls.

Are you willing to stand for Him today?

But He can work in and through those who respond to His Holy Spirit. Christ is “the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world” (John 1:9). Not all will welcome and receive the light but some do. God has encircled the world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air we breathe. Those who choose to welcome it become

His children and co-workers in securing the victory that will bring the tragedy of sin to an end.

God must have the cooperation of forces who are loyal to Him in this great conflict, ministering grace in practical ways to the world. The rules require that the only hands He can use the only voices He can use—are ours.