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The Reason for God 2 – Suffering – SN 1.17.10

Keller begins his chapter (ch. 2 – How could a good God allow suffering?) with two quotes:

"I just don't believe the God of Christianity exists," said Hillary, an undergrad English major.

"God allows terrible suffering in the world. So he might be either all-powerful but not good enough to end evil and suffering, or else he might be all-good but not powerful enough to end evil and suffering. Either way the all-good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn't exist."

"This isn't a philosophical issue to me," added Rob, Hillary's boyfriend. "This is personal. I won't believe in a God who allows suffering, even if he, she, or it exists. Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can't be trusted." [Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*]

I actually preached two sermons on this in the Fall (see web). The problem of pain is a real one, an issue that strikes the emotions deeply. Here's how I stated it in my first lesson (in the Fall):

The world contains so much evil, appalling injustice, and meaningless suffering.

To expand: People treat other people horribly. Murder, genocide, scams that rob the elderly of their last dollar, sudden and tragic death. A tsunami kills a quarter of a million people in a few minutes in 2004. Anarchy takes over New Orleans in 2005. A sudden car crash takes the life of an eighteen year old. A car-jacking is followed by torture and murder. A car bomb explodes, killing 15 people somewhere (and this is so common it hardly makes the news).

People deserve better than this. They ought to be treated better, by each other and by the things we call nature and chance. It isn't right that so many bad things happen all the time. Sure, there are good things to be thankful for, but even those things are often described in terms of evil avoided: "I'm thankful to have food, because millions are starving, and there doesn't seem to be a thing anyone can do about it".

Before we move on, how would YOU answer that? Not at the bedside of a dying child – that's a time for burden-bearing, not eloquence – but in talking to the honest skeptic. How (briefly) would you answer? (Look for comments that minimize the problem).

Keller's outline, my wording:

1. Suffering isn't necessarily pointless just because it seems pointless.

Joseph – sold into slavery, lied about by Potiphar's wife, a slave, a prisoner. What's the reason? It all seems pointless. Then he is promoted to ruler of Egypt, given money, power, a new name. Now it's better but it seems so random. Only at the end does he see the point, but the point was there all

along. Some people never see it in this life. Just because we can't see the point doesn't mean it isn't there and it takes a lot of faith in one's discernment to say: "This is pointless".

Most of us here can point to times when we suffered, hated it, and then came out better in the long run for it. If God is big enough to get mad at for not stopping pain, he's big enough to have a purpose that we cannot know.

2. If there is no God, there is no evil, and without evil, there's no reason to reject God.

This one is a little hard to follow, but it was absolutely astonishing to me when I realized how much it explained. You'd expect me to say that without God, there is no good. That's true too. But what does any of this mean?

The poet Tennyson, considering mortality and (in the first half of the 1800s) new ideas of evolution came up with that phrase about **nature being red in tooth and claw** (From [In Memoriam A.H.H.](#)) In the same work he also talked about **how careless nature was with a single life, spreading 50 seeds and preserving only one of them**. Nature is rough. If there isn't enough food, the herd thins by starvation. Dinosaurs are gone because the climate changed (!) maybe due to an asteroid, and that was unpleasant for them, but that made way for us. Now we're in charge, and life is supposed to be pleasant, and it really is pretty good (here), but people still suffer and do mean things and have rotten things happen to them that they don't deserve. But that is the nature of Nature! We could call it inconvenient, or unpleasant or undesirable, but not good or evil. We have the sweetest little cat who has no need for food who will torture and tear a mouse or a cricket limb from limb. Is that evil? It's silly to even use the word. That's what cats do.

Everyone agrees that genocide is evil (everyone except the ones committing it today, and even they probably have their rationalizations!) But why is it evil? Indeed, maybe the best way to decrease suffering on the planet for the next million years is to take the painful step of reducing the population NOW. Who's to say? The strong. The fittest. The rich. Indeed, if we interfere with that, we are interfering with Nature, with our own evolution. We still might want to try, but you can't call it good and evil. You can't call racism evil; or rape; or exploitation; or slavery. Distasteful, even abhorrent, yes. But they don't rise to the absolute wrong that we say they do. They just ARE. Few people see clearly that, without God, this is the case. There is no right or wrong, no good or evil, no real moral obligation for anyone to anyone.

Two points to this line of reasoning:

1. If I object to God for allowing evil, I say: Because evil exists, God must not exist, or he would stop it. Without him, though, evil and good disappears too, and everything just is, and my reason for rejecting him disappears too.
2. Thankfully, we still KNOW that some things are evil and that we have moral obligations to others that we just cannot completely explain, and these are pointers to God.

Digression: Atheists and humanists say that we DO know where these things come from, these obligations, these things we call morals. They evolved because they helped us survive. Groups that cooperated survived when groups of individuals did not. People who didn't merely look out for themselves got the benefit of being on a team, and survived in the long run. So these traits survived in

our genes, and we evolved into a species that elevates morals (not ALL morals, just popular ones!) and thus right and wrong are deeply programmed and ingrained into us, but they do not stand outside of us.

Keller has a whole chapter on that which you ought to read (ch. 9) but the main point I want to make is that it doesn't change anything. If our moral code developed to help us survive, it isn't an absolute code. It's just an accident. And it may help our species for us to be unselfish, but it may help ME right NOW to get all Lane Kiffin and be selfish, and you may find it inconvenient for you, but don't try calling it wrong.

Without God, there is no evil, so why would you hold me accountable for evil?

None of this really lets God off the hook. So he's there. And yet someone I love dies, or suffers. And I get angry and want him to answer for it. I see that I can't just pretend he isn't there, but what is the answer?

3. The Suffering God

Keller points out that Jesus doesn't die like the well-known martyrs. We have stories of saints of old (and new) accepting death cheerfully and bravely. But then: "Contrast that with the demeanor of Jesus, who is depicted as profoundly shaken by his impending doom. "...He began to be deeply distressed and troubled" saying, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (**Mark 14:33-34**). Luke describes Jesus before his death as being in "agony" and describes a man with all the signs of being in physical shock (**Luke 22:44**). Matthew, Mark, and Luke all show Jesus trying to avoid death, asking the Father if there isn't some way out of it ("If it be your will...take this cup from me"— **Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42**)." [Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*]

The idea isn't to imply that Jesus was less than these others, but rather his torment was unlike anything ever experienced.

Forsakenness – to be rejected by an acquaintance hurts. By friend or lover? Even more. What about having eternal fellowship with the Father ruptured, to endure God forsakenness. This, more than anything is what Jesus endured. Only in Christianity does God enter so completely into suffering, fully embrace it and provide the ultimate solution. It isn't the answer that ends all questioning, and all suffering here and now, but there really is nothing else like it. Why do we have to suffer this? I may not have the answer, but I know that God didn't exempt himself from it.

Camus: "...the god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death. Thus is explained the "Lama sabachthani" and the frightful doubt of Christ in agony.", [Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*]

The ultimate answer to suffering isn't a proposition or a bullet pointed list, but God joining us in it, going through the worst of it. And thus bringing it...

4. Meaning

It's an article of our faith that God intends to redeem suffering, and not just reimburse us for it, but in reality to overwhelm them and destroy them. Listen to Paul in **2 Corinthians 4 - ⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸We are**

hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

¹³It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. ¹⁵All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

This last point, being an article of faith, may not convince the skeptic if we just read about it. But the more we own it, live it, claim it and walk in it when we have troubles, the more the world will see.

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