CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EVIL AND
THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

If God is all-good, and all-powerful, why does He allow evil to exist and bad things to happen to good people?
  -every person who has ever existed

A Roadblock of Pain

I think at this point I have provided you with a sufficient way to explain why Christians are reasonable to hope in Jesus Christ. We have seen that truth exists, making it possible to know the God who has revealed Himself in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as verified by good historical evidence and reliable written documents found in the Bible. I hope you have seen for yourself that there is more to Christianity that mere wishful thinking, and I hope you feel more comfortable to share your faith with others. And now, as we near the end of this book, I want to arm you with a response to a common objection to God: the problem of pain.

To begin, I would like to say that evil and the problem of pain is a subject that demands gentleness and sincerity. Coldness and academia are not of much use to a grieving and hurting person. For many, the problem of pain is a serious and difficult issue to get past in coming to Christ. Evil is real, and really bad things have happened to people undeservedly.

Now please, at this point, do not throw up Christian jargon that says we are all bad and deserve what we get. Our sin certainly demands separation from God, and He is certainly right to punish us for our sins. However, it is quite another thing to say that a four-year-old girl is deserving of the cruelty perpetuated by the hands of her depraved father. This is a cruel and stupid thing to say. Evil is real, and really bad things have happened to good people, and this has
caused a real, emotional reaction against God and the belief in His existence.

In addition to those who have experienced a personal tragedy, there are some that use the problem of pain as an intellectual reason to reject Christ. They believe that because God is supposed to be all-good and all-powerful He would both want to destroy evil and be capable of destroying it. But because evil exists, they believe either God is not good or that He is not powerful enough to get rid of evil. As a result, either way you have it, He isn’t a God to be worshiped, and it is most likely that He simply does not exist.

Clearing the Roadblock

Whether the objection of evil and pain is raised from an emotional or intellectual position, care must be given to the manner in which you address it. You must discern whether a person is coming from an emotional position or an intellectual one. Determining that will determine how you proceed. But what I have most often experienced is that the problem of pain is an emotional roadblock that prevents some from coming to Christ.¹ So we will address that position first.

I begin by expressing my concern for a person’s pain. Do not disregard, sweep under the rug, someone’s grief by offering callused, un-thoughtful remarks, such as, “God moves in mysterious ways.” A mother who has lost a child will want nothing to do with a God whose mysterious ways involve the killing of children.

Don’t pretend to know the mind of God in situations of great pain and evil. I would not even offer the remark that God must have a plan. Again, grieving people do not care much for God’s plan when their personal pain is involved. I understand that these remarks are offered to give hope, but they do not. It is very difficult to see past pain to purpose.²

Instead of purpose, first offer comfort, which can lead to hope. It is not wise to assume to know why God allows some bad things to happen, and if I were to lose one of my children, I would certainly struggle with it. But, on another level, though I may not know the specific purpose for particular pains, I am grateful that God does allow bad things to happen to good people in general. And my gratitude is for one particular reason: if God did not allow bad things to happen to good people, He never would have allowed Jesus, an innocent and good man, to suffer and die on the cross, and we would all still be in our sins with no hope of salvation. I am grateful that God allowed the worst evil possible to come upon the best man ever, and that for no wrongdoing of His own.

This is comforting because, though I may not be able to understand why God may not save

---

¹ Gary Habermas thinks that most doubts are emotional in nature. Gary Habermas, “Emotional Doubt” (lecture, National Apologetics Conference, Charlotte, NC, October 28, 2011.)

² Offering the idea of purpose or God’s plan to a Christian may be of some value, but remember we are talking about people who have yet to come to Christ.
people from some specific pains on earth, I know He is not above allowing Himself to experience pain, and the pain He endured can save us from pain eternally. It comforts people to know that the pain they feel is not a foreign idea to our God.

Jesus knows full well what pain is like, and it is because of His pain that He now holds keys to infinite happiness and the deed to a future land of no evil. The path to this land was crossed through the valley of suffering, was purchased by pain, and was brought forth by the hands of evil men. So when in pain, I know that my God knows firsthand our pain, and I can rest in that. I can take comfort from the One who has been where I am.

**The Intersection of Freedom and Evil**

Now, at this point some will raise an intellectual response to their emotional pain and say, “Why did it have to be this way? Why didn’t God just create a world where people could feel no pain and do no wrong? In this type of world one could not hurt another, and if man never could sin, then Jesus would not have to die.” This is a fair question to ask, but let’s consider the consequences of such a place. It would have to be a place where freedom did not exist. It would have to be a place absent of the ability to choose. Quite simply, in this world, you could never make a decision because a wrong decision could be made and evil and pain might follow. Rather, you would have to be made like a robot or a tree and simply do what you were made to do.

This type of world would not be worth creating. Because, in eliminating pain, things like love and friendship would have to be eliminated as well. For love cannot be known by force: it has to be discovered by beings that can choose to give it or reject it. With the ability to choose to love comes the ability to choose to hate. The greater ability something has for good, the greater potential it has to become evil. Freedom is both good and dangerous.

Therefore, either we exist as robots, incapable of enjoying the few things that make life worth living, or we exist with the ability to make decisions, some of which will cause pain. You cannot have it both ways. And in the world where reasoning and decisions can be made, the God who is the wisest amongst the beings He created deemed it worth the risk to create a world in which evil could exist so that things like love might be known. At this point, it would be difficult to argue about what should have been with the being that gave you the ability to argue. Unless you suppose you have risen above the ranks of the Most High and can see more clearly than He who made all things.

---

3 I think I have to make an additional note here. I am not seeking to get mired in the debate over election and free will in this section. That is above my pay grade as they say. I firmly acknowledge both God’s sovereignty and our volitional freedom. I think each are taught in scripture. I do not fully understand how they relate to one another. Though, I am certain that God is not held hostage to our freedom. That is to say, God does not cater to us and our free decisions, nor is he bound by them.
**The Intersection of Sin and Pain**

So, evil exists largely because men are free to make decisions, some of which will be bad, and for God to remove evil He would have to remove freedom. I think this is a fair answer to the question of why God allows evil, but it does not address why He allows the pain that comes from things like cancer, or hurricanes, or birth defects. To which, I do not have a good answer, other than sin.

Christianity says that our sin has affected this world and our bodies. It is acting like a disease and is ruining what was originally a good world. And, as far as the power of sin goes, God has dealt with it. He has dealt with it on the cross of Jesus. And just because sin is allowed to wreak havoc now does not mean it will always be allowed to. There is a future hope that the mess we have made of this present world will be cleaned up. And for that we wait earnestly.

**The Problem of Pain is a Problem for Skeptics**

To conclude this brief discussion on pain, I would like to speak specifically to the intellectual objection. What I say now is specifically for the one who has no personal tragedy causing them to question God’s existence, but from a purely intellectual position claims that evil and God cannot exist together.

Whereas the emotional objection is centered on mostly why God would allow evil, the intellectual objection states more forcefully that, logically, God (as we know Him) and evil cannot exist together. This argument is based on the idea that since God is supposed to be all-good and all-powerful He would want to be rid of evil (because He is good) and would thus do so (because He is all-powerful). The resulting conclusion is that because evil exists God must not.

There are, though, at least two major problems with this position. The first, as I have already explained, is the connection between choice and evil. Much of the evil in this world is brought on by the doings of man. To rid the world of evil, the world would have to be rid of morally free creatures. So there is no contradiction in a good, all-powerful God allowing evil to remain.

The second problem with this objection relates to how we could identify something as evil if God were not to exist. For when we say that something evil has taken place, what we are really saying is that something has happened in a way that never should have happened; that it is wrong. We are not simply saying that something has happened in a way that we personally do not like, such as being served a steak well done when you preferred that it be cooked rare. Rather, instinctively we know that evil is something greater than mere personal taste.

Mankind universally understands, for example, that it is not just that we prefer people not
murder each other. Even despite our personal feelings about who may have been murdered, we see that it is fundamentally wrong. But from where did this idea of wrong come?

If something comes about by accident, it has no purpose. It does not mean that it cannot come to have a purpose, but the purpose would be decided by whoever stumbles across it and makes it so according to his or her own desires. For example, say a man stumbles across a rock that has broken off of a bigger rock by chance. He finds it and decides to use it for a hammer. The rock now has purpose, but it very well could have been used for a thousand other things. Therefore, there is no right or wrong way to use it. It was not created for any specific purpose, thus you cannot use it wrongly.

Likewise, if God did not exist to create life, life is the result of randomness; it is an accident without specific purpose. And if life has no purpose, there is no way things should be, and, consequently, no way things should not be. There would be no way to use life wrongly, because life itself was an accident. Even if men assign life purpose, they are still just acting like the man that stumbled across the fallen rock and gave it a random purpose when it could have had another. It would be an arbitrary purpose, one devoid of any real significance, and one that is not binding.

But when it comes to evil we are saying precisely that somewhere life is being used wrongly. For instance, we call molestation evil because we believe children should not be used in that way. We call racism evil because we believe people should be judged on their character not their color. We call the torture of innocent people for pleasure disgusting and pure evil because we believe one should not use another’s pain for personal satisfaction. And we call the Holocaust evil because we believe one should not use their power to annihilate people they do not like.

But why should things be one way and not another if life is an accident? The word “should” here is problematic for the skeptic. Why should you not steal? Why should you not rape? Why should you not murder? Why should you treat people based on the content of their character and not their color? The problem of evil is actually a problem for skeptics more than it is a problem for Christians because without God or a transcendent standard of right and wrong, which could only come about by a God, there is no good answer to “why.” Ask the skeptic these questions, wait for his answer, and you will see from his answer the problem of his position.

They will be forced to say the above things are wrong either because it hurts others or because it doesn’t benefit society, which is really the same answer. But, again, why is it wrong to hurt others? Why is wrong for me to do things that benefit me and not society? Who cares if society goes to hell as long as I am fine? Who says hurting people is a bad thing? Who’s to tell me that I can’t say an action is good if it helps me? How can the skeptic say otherwise?

The skeptic likely would go back to saying that hurting others is wrong because it doesn’t
benefit society, and a functioning and safe society is to everyone’s advantage. But, again, what if I prefer to live in a society that is unsafe where I can take what I want. How could you tell me that your way of thinking is more correct than mine, and furthermore, why “should” I prefer your society to mine? To what standard of rightness are you appealing? You cannot simply say that I ought not be selfish because it doesn’t answer the question of why I should be unselfish. And if you were to say because it benefits society, we would be right back where we’d begun (thank you C.S. Lewis for that last bit of wisdom).

If life just happened to happen, as the skeptic says, then there is no way things should be. And if there is no way things should be, every rule we have made is according to personal preference. It may be true that people prefer to live without fear of their possessions being taken, and even if a majority of people prefers this, it is completely different from it being wrong. For wrongness implies going against something’s intended purpose, not just a group of people’s preferences. Without a transcendent standard of what is right, there is no way a skeptic can argue that I “should” do anything.

Contrary to the skeptic’s position, we understand that evil is something more than just infractions on man-made rules and preferences. We understand that things that are evil are violations of something sacred and ancient that we had no hand in making. Furthermore, we know that even if mankind said that torturing innocent people was legal it would still be evil. We just know that there is a certain way that life is supposed to be. But how can life have any meaning and purpose without a creator? Purpose can only come to be on purpose; it cannot come by accident.

The notion of evil only makes sense in a universe of purpose that contains a standard of purpose and goodness. We call things evil when they violate this standard. But, again, from where did this standard come? It can’t be a result of evolution. An accident is not binding. No, this standard must come from one being outside of creation that had an intention for life. This being is God. He, Himself, is the standard of goodness that we compare actions to.

Even though the problem that evil and pain cause people is a serious issue, it is an issue that is proof for God’s existence. With love and compassion, help people see this. This may seem surprising, but use the problem of pain as a way of gently leading a person back to the God who loves them, has created good things, and will free them from pain perfectly one day.