

Eye-Opener Studies



Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

18: Evil, Pain and Suffering

The great jazz musician Louis Armstrong once growled in the gravelly voice, which some euphemistically called singing, that we live in a wonderful world - and we do. He looked at nature and saw beauty and wonder. And there is. The great poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson also used his eyes and saw 'Nature red in tooth and claw' - and it



his atheism. The illogical fact that his beloved evolutionary theory is driven by suffering - or would be if it were true - does not seem to make him despise that notion as he despises the notion of God. But then the attributes of love and goodness are not part of a system of mindless chance which brought human life into existence by accident.

Christianity cannot afford the luxury of a dualistic God (or gods) where there are equal but opposite forces at work in the world: the good coming from the 'good' God and the evil from his counterpart. Christianity maintains that God alone is One and supreme, omnipotent (all-powerful), good and loving, and that the leader of the forces of evil, Satan, is subjected to His will. That being the case, why does God allow so much evil, pain and suffering to exist, since He could snuff it out if He would?



is! These lions, majestic and beautiful beasts in their own right, have both killed human beings. It's a wonderful, yet terrible and terrifying world at times. Why should this be? What does it 'say' about God?

The most difficult single subject

There is absolutely no doubt at all that the problem of evil, pain and suffering is the most persistent and difficult single subject Christians have to handle. Failure to come to terms with it, in a theistic framework, has led to more sincere atheists than any other topic. The great naturalist and broadcaster, Sir David Attenborough, when asked about his faith, or lack of it, always cites suffering in nature to justify

It was Augustine of Hippo who put his finger on the problem when he said,

'Either God cannot abolish evil or He will not; if He cannot then He is not all-powerful and if He will not then He is not all-good.'

That would seem to be a reasonable summary of the situation, and many an atheist or agnostic would stand back and applaud it, but in fact it misses the mark by a mile.

The basic essence of religion

If you were to be asked 'What is a game?', you would come up with all sorts of answers. You can recognize a game when you see one but there is no underlying, single attribute of all games which can



Worshippers on the Kop at the ‘temple’ of Anfield, Liverpool, singing hymns to their ‘gods’!

identify one. There will always be a game which does not conform in any way, but it is still a game, and we all know it. This is almost the case with a religion, but not quite. Ask ‘What is a religion?’ and you soon find yourself delving into almost silly things like football. There are ‘churches’ where the faithful meet each week. They sing praises to their ‘gods’ and gurus; they certainly pray a lot (especially if their team is losing), and readily give of their means to support the cause. In fact their love and loyalty sometimes transcends even their family and friends and they defend their teams’ honour violently at times. They also have their prophets of old and their current high priests who manage or run their ‘churches’. Oddly enough there are some forms of serious religion where they do not recognize or worship a god. Some Buddhist sects conform here, and it is a moot point whether devotion to a political ideology like Communism, Humanism and even Evolutionary idealism, where no god is ever invoked, can loosely be called religions. They certainly take faith to be believed though their adherents would hotly deny this assertion because they think their beliefs are grounded in solid, usually scientific, facts. They aren’t but their devotees think they are: ask Richard Dawkins or the aforementioned Sir David Attenborough.

When stripped to its bare bones, all religions have one basic characteristic; they are attempts to answer the problems of pain and evil, and to provide a method of coping with this life in general. Even the seeming irreligious ‘faiths’ like Communism and Humanism are, at root, man’s attempts to grapple with this problem. That such ‘isms’ actually make things worse while trying to solve the

problems, is one of the ironies of life, but then if it is not a God-given or God-driven solution it will not work in the final analysis!

The Scriptures actually bear witness to the above, and right at the start of their ‘story’ too. In Genesis 4 we read: ‘*And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.” To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time men began to call upon the name of the Lord.*’ (Ge 4:25-26, emphasis ours). Seth was born specifically to replace the murdered Abel. Evil, pain and suffering had truly entered the world at this point and not insignificantly it was as this horror took hold that ‘men began to call on the name of the Lord’. In other words they took to religion in their anguish.

It is also very interesting to note that one of the oldest Books in the Bible, (some scholars believe it is actually *the* oldest) Job, has Satan trying to use pain and suffering to turn Job’s heart against the Lord. He knew that this was always going to be his best and most effective weapon against those who claim to love and trust the Lord. Job, of course, proved that no matter what Satan could do to him, his love for God transcended everything else and not even Satan could match that love, but it was very very hard for the poor old chap. No wonder God blessed him mightily when he won through. What a man! What a faith! What a love for God! It can be done.

Some attempts at coping

There are many religious views which refuse to offer explanations of evil, pain and suffering at all. They either accept it as a fact or simply try to deny its existence, or they accept multiple deities. Essentially there are three non-Christian solutions: i) the way of denial, ii) the way of fatalism, and iii) the way of dualism.

i) *The way of denial.* This is a mystical approach springing out of very ancient philosophies. These faiths deny the reality of pain and evil, usually linked to denying the reality of matter, declaring it to be an illusion. We only think we are in pain and, real though it may appear to be to us, we are deluded. It solves nothing but lets them off the hook.

Basically this is the approach of both Hinduism and of the so-called Christian Science Church, founded by Mrs Mary Baker Eddy, which is neither Christian nor scientific. Denial was very much around in the First Century as the Greek heresy of Docetism. In the Docetic view matter is evil and spirit is good. Thus, since God is spirit (John 4:24) and Jesus is the Son of God He too must be a spirit being and therefore could not have had real flesh - so the argument goes. Any faith which denies the reality of matter or the fact of pain and suffering must also deny the reality of the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. Thus He only appeared to suffer to save us, so Calvary was an elaborate sham or a dreadful Divine charade. What a farce this makes of the Gospel!



Mrs Mary Baker Eddy

The apostle John openly attacks this notion in his Second Letter. *'... many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.'* (2 Jn 7-11). You may care to note that this Scripture is frequently wrested out of its context and drummed into service as a proof text to attack those who disagree with what we teach in general about Christ. 'The teaching of Christ' being referenced is the teaching that tells that He came in the flesh and that His flesh was real, not illusory, and therefore His sufferings were real too. It is an anti-Docetic polemic not an anti-denominational nuance.

Pain is real and evil is too. As the limerick on this topic gently pokes fun at the notion, we must recognize the heresy behind the idea.

'Said the young Christian Scientist from Deal,
 "I believe that all pain isn't real.
 Yet when pricked by a pin
 Which punctures my skin,
 I dislike what I fancy I feel".'

To declare the reality of suffering as being unreal is really to deny the reliability of the senses. If we cannot believe in the evil things of the world because our senses confuse us, neither can we believe in the good things either because these unreliable senses over evil must be equally unreliable over good. Jude denied other Gnostic heresies in words which sum up these also as being *'waterless clouds,*

swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.' (Jude 12-13).

ii) *The way of fatalism.* This usually involves a belief in reincarnation. It says that we must accept our fate in

this life since we can do nothing about it. It is our desires which create evil so if we can subjugate our desires we will eliminate suffering. The quality of our acceptance will determine whether the next time around we are better or worse off. Buddhism is the classic example of this approach but the Scripture says quite clearly that *'it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.'* (Heb 9:27). We get one chance only to live for the Lord and once we die there is no second go at it, Buddha and his ideas notwithstanding.

iii) *The way of duality.* Most religions do not deny the reality of suffering and its evils. On the contrary it could truly be said that they are obsessed with it. They spend the bulk of their 'spiritual energy' in trying to help their followers cope with the vicissitudes of life. How they do this depends largely on the god, or gods, in which they believe, or to be more accurate, just how they view the power and attributes of the deities they acknowledge.

Many people believe in a multiplicity of deities with equal, or almost equal, powers. Life is seen as a struggle between the forces of good and evil. Most take the optimistic view that good will ultimately triumph but it is by no means certain. When things go wrong the malevolent forces within the natures of the deities must be placated as they are seen to be the cause of the current evil. Such gods are capricious and act with total inconsistency. The ancient Greek gods exemplified this. Of course it is



Statue of Zeus at the Getty Villa, Malibu, Los Angeles

never too hard for weak-willed, fallible human beings to recall some wrong which they have committed, or imagine they have committed, and for which they may be being punished when evil befalls them. Thus they come easily to accept this scenario. The gods battle for our allegiance and when evil things happen the ‘good’ god, or gods, are losing and vice versa. Such a notion makes life easier for the theist over this problem but can offer no positive hope of salvation since who can tell which god is going to win? Dualism is not taught in the Judeo/Christian system of the Bible.

Monotheism’s dilemma

It is the monotheistic religions which feel the pricks of evil most acutely, especially if the one god is viewed as not only being omnipotent but also good. Here the God of Christianity is put under most pressure because Jesus laid emphasis on Him being a loving, forgiving Father, as, for example, in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Jehovah of the Jews and Allah of the Muslims is far more apt to punish and wreak wrath on His enemies than ‘Abba, Father’ who loves even His enemies.

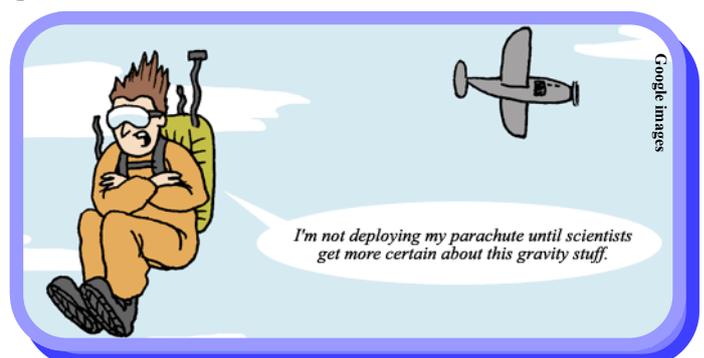
The Christian not only has to cope with the

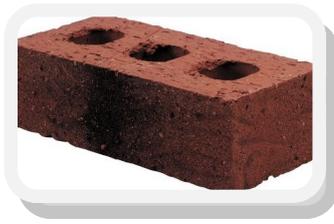
problems which his view of God presents but also with the apparent dualism in his theodicy, which means the way he is able to deal with the presentation of the presence of evil. The existence of spiritual forces devoted to evil and epitomized by Satan, make it hard to sustain a belief in a good God and in a pure monotheistic understanding of Divinity. To maintain that an omnipotent God has allowed a powerful evil being to exist, let alone oppose Him, may help explain the nature of the cause of evil but it casts questions over the nature of God and the strength of His powers. On the other hand to deny the reality of the existence of Satan, as many believers try to do, reverses the problem. It makes a consistent theology of God a lot easier but puts us in all sorts of trouble over suffering and God’s part in it.

The Christian approach

The first thing we have to face is the nature of the world in which we live, i.e. its laws and physical composition. The existence of pain in itself is not all bad; it is excessive pain which is evil. Pain serves to warn us of danger or that something is wrong or going wrong. Get too close to a fire and the painful warning we get saves us from far greater injury. An ache in the abdomen could just be wind or it could be a grumbling appendix. The unfortunate people who have no sense of pain because their nerves are not working properly usually die young. That they die painlessly is true but they always live on a knife edge that something serious could be wrong with them and they have no means of knowing.

Our world operates under known laws. Without them there could be no science and therefore no progress in these areas. The Law of Gravity tells us that if we let go of an object which is heavier than air it will fall. Thus if I lift up a brick and let go it will drop. If my toe is the first object it encounters on its way down it will continue to drop until the two objects meet. The laws which govern the composition of the brick will enable me to use it with





Exciting picture of a morally neutral, common house brick!

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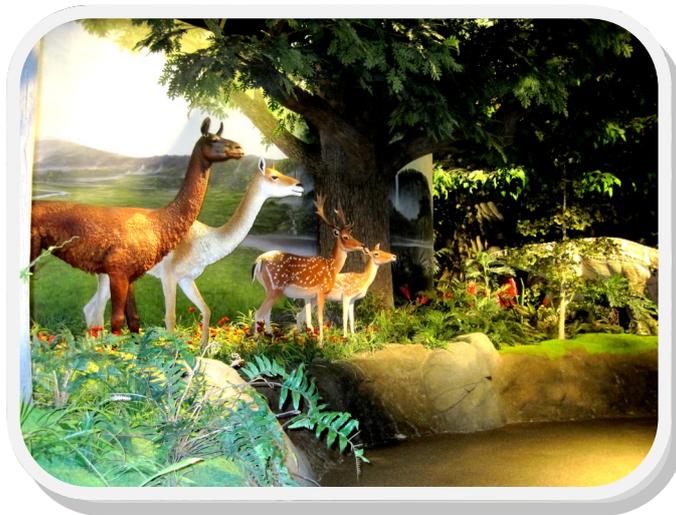
confidence to build my house. They will not alter miraculously if they sense that my delicate toe is in the way, so when it lands I naturally very quietly say, ‘Ouch!’ Sadly if that brick was propelled deliberately at my head for some evil purpose so that I am killed, the same laws which sustain that brick will continue to sustain it no matter what the end result may be. It is not the laws nor the brick which are evil in such a case but the person who misused what were intended for good. Did God place the Tree of Life in the midst of Eden so Adam and Eve could find healing if they were hurt accidentally before sin came along? It was placed alongside the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil but they were not forbidden to partake of its fruit; it was for them to use. It’s just a thought.

Furthermore, given the world in which we live, we can’t all travel downhill. One person’s down is another person’s up, and no matter how vexed we may become panting uphill when we draw the short straw it will always be so. We could not survive if God had made the Earth’s surface perfectly flat so He made hills and valleys for our benefit - which included preserving our sanity because flat land is exquisitely boring! There is nothing wrong with struggling uphill a little, it can often be character-building under the right circumstances.

The nature of the creation

This is the nub of the argument and here we must honestly face the nature of the world view we have adopted. If we accept the biblical view of creation and origins - which we do in this course - we believe that God made an originally perfect creation, without evil and corruption of any sort, and which

was ruined entirely by sin (Gen 3), then we have a ready explanation of evil, pain and suffering. If we adopt, or are inclined to adopt, an evolutionary approach to origins, not only do we not have an answer to the problem, we must view it as a blessing - a paradox if ever there was one. The Evolutionist must applaud suffering, because by it we are what we are and through it we will become what we can be! All atheists are stuck with being evolutionists no matter what the implications are. The Theistic Evolutionist (one who believes that God controlled and created via the processes of evolution to make the universe) must inevitably see suffering as God’s greatest creative tool. If true, God used death and the ability to survive not as a punishment for sin but as the means of perfecting His creation. It must seem rather odd to such Christian believers that death is described as ‘the last enemy to be destroyed’ when the Lord returns at the end of time (1 Cor 15:26). How can God’s creative tool be an enemy? Something is wrong here.



Edenic perfection
(Creation Museum tableau Kentucky, USA)
(Photo by the author)

The atheist cannot logically use the notion that evil, pain and suffering is bad with which to accost the Christian, and declare that because of it God cannot exist. He must embrace it gladly. (Evolutionists are notoriously inconsistent philosophically.) And the theists who accept evolution as God’s creative process are left totally stumped by Augustine. Such a God is indeed either not all powerful or not all good. So let us look further at the biblical view of the nature of creation.

The Bible is quite clear that God made the universe from nothing by Divine command. As Hebrews puts it: ‘By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.’ (Heb 11:3). He did not tinker or experiment to see what would and would not work. Each day of Genesis 1 saw a new phase of creative perfection

installed in its place until ‘*God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.*’ (Ge 1:31). This ‘very good’ creation did not contain disease, death, volcano, hurricane, flood, etc. The physical environment was geared harmoniously to meet man’s needs and, though man was required to do some work (Gen 2:15), it was not to be a fight against nature but a joyous working with it. The curse made work a battle of man against nature.

one word of creation. The hymn writer Dora Greenwell mused on this in the third verse of her hymn ‘I am not skilled to understand’ thus:

‘And was there then no other way
For God to take? I cannot say;
I only bless Him day by day
Who saved me through my Saviour.’

Creation was not an idle pastime for God but a total commitment where the cost was counted beforehand and deemed to be worthwhile.

The Christian therefore accepts that we humans have a genuinely free-will which we can control. The cynical, unbelieving psychologist will often counter that in the last analysis a genuine free-will is illusory. We are composed of chemical elements and all our reactions are naturalistic responses to the genes, atoms and chemistry with which we are composed. Our actions are totally determined and ‘we’ have nothing much to do with it.

John Hick, in his book *Death and Eternal Life* (pg. 117) demonstrates the fallacy of total determinism when he writes:

‘...any attempt rationally to establish total determinism involves the contradiction that in arguing for it the mind must presume itself not to be completely determined, but to be freely judging, recognizing logical relations, assessing relevance and considering reasons; whereas if the determinist conclusion is true the mind is, and always has been, completely determined and has never been freely judging, etc. Thus if the mind has the intellectual freedom to come to rational conclusions it cannot rationally conclude, that it is not free rationally to conclude.’

Thus whilst we recognize that there is a case frequently for determinism on a day-to-day basis, in the final analysis, when the chips really are down, we have the freedom of will freely to choose and therefore we are responsible for our decisions and actions. Any love we can share with God is not pre-programmed love and we are therefore able to choose to enter into a loving relationship with Him or to spurn the love He wants to give us.

Wider consequences the misuse of free-will

We learn too that when Adam and Eve sinned not only did they fall as humans they also corrupted the whole of nature both here on Earth and throughout



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“...cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you...”
(Gen 3:17-18)

The crucial creation

The most significant part of God’s original creation was the creation of free-will for humans (and angels). For creation actually to be creation and not merely extension, we had to have this side to our natures and it had/has to be genuine. If it were not genuine but only seemed genuine, we could never choose to love God. Then there would be as much meaning in the loving relationship we have with God as a pre-programmed doll to its little owner which says, “I love you”, when the appropriate button is pressed or the doll tipped up. The reality of a genuine free-will meant that a genuine rebellion was possible. If it were not so, God could hardly punish the rebellious. He would indeed have been a malevolent deity toying with men to satisfy a wicked whim. We could no more trust Him to bless us and save us as we could trust Him not to ruin us, and the Cross would have been the sickest charade a sick-minded god could have invented.

We learn that our will is indeed free and that God anticipated that it would lead to rebellion, consequently He prepared a plan of salvation, which involved the death of the Saviour, before He uttered

the universe to the most distant of stars. It was not just a spiritual collapse but a cosmic physical one too. God made the world in its full perfection, natural and human, and thus it remained, for how long we are not told, until man sinned. Nature was then subject to decay, or, as the scientist might express it, 'When man fell, the Second Law of Thermodynamics kicked in and began to operate.' Paul indicates this truth in Romans: *'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.'* (Ro 8:19-23).

The doctrine of the Fall not only deals with suffering on a human and spiritual scale but also with the world of nature. God's laws of nature which upheld creation were modified and decay set in. They could be used now for good or evil. Some animals turned carnivore and Nature turned 'red in tooth and claw'. The forces which can tear the Earth apart were unleashed, though not all were evident until the time of the Flood and thereafter, some 1656 years after Creation. It is the only answer to the question 'Why?', when applied to the problems posed by evil, pain and suffering, and it is not God's fault. If the Earth was fashioned out of violence over countless millennia, there is no answer anywhere. If Christians accept the popular scientific explanation rather than the biblical position it makes no sense at all to proclaim the notion that we worship a good God. He then would be the architect of all pain and suffering because He could have



Dangers in a fallen world

made a perfect world yet chose to make a massively imperfect one. We need a solidly biblical understanding of Eden and the true reality of Adam and Eve or we will fail to supply any answers to those critics of God and concede them victory over their best weapon, that of the reality and problem of suffering. Genesis 1-11 is the foundation on which the Gospel depends (see study Number 8). Without it the whole story of the Cross and the meaning of evil, pain and suffering becomes nonsense. That is why modern atheists and agnostics invest so much time promoting theories of millions of years of evolution and mock the Bible-believing position of a young Earth.

Conclusion

Most human suffering can be laid firmly at the door of human wickedness, or stupidity. This may be hard

when we see the innocent suffering because of the faults of others, but it is when we grasp the horrors of suffering that we see the true significance of sin. A forbidden bite out of a piece of fruit in Eden may seem very trivial to us who are soaked every day by accounts of sheer wickedness in our papers, and on our radios and televisions. It was probably the murder of Abel which finally brought home its enormity to our original parents, and they began to call on the name of the Lord. God has never accepted the human notion that there are 'big' and 'little' sins. Sin is sin and it results in evil, with its 'wages' being death (Rom 6:23), no matter how small the offence may appear to be to us.

God is not powerless to do something about it. He probably has not chosen to deal with it as we would expect or have Him deal with it, nor in the time-frame we frequently would like Him to act, but deal with it He has. He chose not to isolate Himself from the problem but rather joined us fully in its fury when Jesus came. Jesus was God's solution to the question. God does not deal fairly with anybody's sin. If He did even the finest of 'saints'

would not and could not escape His wrath. He knows our weaknesses and that we are dust, so He forgives. One day, however, He will call a halt and will deal with all evil justly and fairly, and woe be-tide those who have defied Him to the end (see study Number 15).

Such an answer may not always satisfy the in-nocent victims of some act of wickedness against them, who feel the perpetrators are getting away with it, or have got away with it, but it is true. There will come a time of reckoning. Belief in this ulti-

mate justice depends on a biblical understanding of the creation and a belief in the promises God has given about vindication for the righteous.

So, how do we know if this is still to come? The answer is simple. God gave it to us at Calvary and proved it on Resurrection Day. The Resurrec-tion is always ‘the horse which pulls the believer’s cart’ which is why it is our study Number 1, for it is the Christian assurance of just what God’s promises are and that He *will* fulfil them.

Task

What thing, or things, do you find difficult to believe and could hinder your faith in God? Discuss