CHAPTER 13: WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL AND SUFFERING

IN THE WORLD?

Many people feel attracted to Jesus for some of the reasons discussed in Part I of this book, but still find it difficult to accept the message of the Gospel for various reasons. Some of these issues, those related to faith and science, have been considered in Part II. Now, in Part III we will consider objections dealing with sin and justice.

The first objection has to do with evil and suffering. Many people are troubled by the question of why God allows evil in the world. Why does he allow so many sinful things to happen, such as murders, rapes, child abuse, wars, oppression of the poor, etc. which cause so much suffering and misery for innocent victims? Why does he allow so many diseases, such as cancer, and disasters, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, to cause so much suffering and death? Why does he allow evil people like Hitler and many others throughout history to systematically exterminate millions through ethnic cleansing? Some conclude that the presence of so much evil in the world proves that God does not exist, for surely if he did exist, he would not allow such things. Others say that God does exist, but either he is not all powerful, lacking the power to stop or punish evil, or else he himself is not good, but evil. But Christians say that God does exist, he is all-powerful, and he is good. If this is true, then how can we explain why God allows evil in the world?

Before seeking an answer to this difficult question, it should be pointed out that the presence of evil and suffering in this world is a temporary phenomenon. When God created the world and everything in it, he saw all that he had made and it was very good (Genesis 1:31). There was no sin or suffering in the world, as God first created it. Moral evil entered the world when Satan tempted Eve and she and Adam disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:1-6). As a result of their sin, God enacted several consequences, including death and the cursing of the ground. Concerning death, God told Adam that because he listened to his wife Eve and ate from the fruit God told him not to eat of, he would someday return to the ground, for “you were made from dust, and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19). Concerning the cursing of the ground, God said, “The ground is cursed because of you . . . . it will grow thorns and thistles for you” (Gen. 3:17-18). As a result of the curse on the world, there was likely also an increase in natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, etc. Because of human sinfulness, humans also inflict suffering on each other as they commit crimes, fight wars, oppress the poor, etc. All of this suffering traces back to human sin, either directly or indirectly. But the Bible speaks of a time when those who do evil, along with Satan, the originator and primary promoter of evil1, will be thrown into the lake of fire to be punished forever (Revelation 20:10). Then God will make a new earth, on which there will be no curse and in which there will be no more evil, but only righteousness (Revelation 21:1-4; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 22:3). From that time on and forever, there will be no more evil in that new world. The world will be a perfect place, without sin, suffering, or death. So it is only for a relatively short period—the time of human history on this earth, that God allows evil to be uncontained. To us, it seems like a long time, but from the perspective of an eternal God, it is just a short interval, surrounded by an eternity before and after. The presence of evil in the world is not a permanent condition, but only a temporary one.

But still we must ask, why did God allow evil to come into the world at all? And once it did come in, why did he allow it to continue, even for a short period of time?

Free Will

The first main reason God allows evil and suffering is that it pleased God to create creatures with free will. When God created angels and humans, he could have made them like robots, with no free and independent thinking, programmed to obey God without thinking. He could have made us so that we only do good all the time, so that we would never have any possibility of sinning or rebelling against him. But God wanted to make creatures of free will. He wanted us to have the opportunity to think and act on our own, and to choose for ourselves whether we will follow good or evil and whether we will obey God or not. Although God made his creatures innocent and without sin, he gave them a free will so that they could choose for themselves. And with this free will came the possibility of sinning.

Related to the principle of free will, we can identify two sub-reasons why God allows evil and suffering in the world. First, God allows evil because he wants to test his creatures. In order for free will to have any meaning, it must be tested. Only when a creature of free will is tested is there a basis on which he can be evaluated or judged. God tested Adam and Eve by creating a tree that they were not permitted to eat from—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God could have simply not made that tree, but he did make it and placed it in the garden of Eden deliberately in order to test Adam and Eve’s free will. They chose to disobey, and so sin entered the world. The ongoing presence of evil in the world also provides a test for humans—will they choose the way of evil or the way of good? If evil was not present in the world, there would be no such choice.

Why does God want to test his creatures? The primary reason would seem to be that it brings God great pleasure to be worshipped and obeyed by creatures that have a choice to do otherwise. God so values a relationship with creatures of free will that he was willing to allow for the possibility that these creatures of free will would sin and bring suffering into the world. A second reason is that God wanted to give his people the opportunity for gaining greater reward.

Just as a teacher cannot justly give his student an “A” if the student has not taken any tests to prove himself, neither can God justly reward his people if they have not had to pass any tests. Now eternal life is actually a gift, for the Bible says: “the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23b). (This will be explained further under the second sub-reason below). But the believer who has been saved by faith will also be rewarded according to how he or she has lived since becoming a follower of Christ. The Bible speaks of the judgment seat of Christ, at which every believer’s work will be tried by fire. Those things of moral and spiritual value will, like gold, silver, and precious stones, be purified by the fire and will be the basis for receiving reward. But those things of no value will, like wood, hay, and stubble, be burned up and result in loss of reward (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). The fact that God will evaluate believers to see if they are worthy of reward implies that those believers must have gone through some testings. These testings could involve being subjected to temptation or trials. Trials could include going through sufferings caused by illness, war, unjust treatment from others, etc. Jesus specifically notes that those who have patiently endured persecution will be worthy of greater reward: “God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven” (Matthew 5:11-12). The presence of sin and suffering in the world presents God’s people with the occasion to be tested, and these testings allow them the opportunity to gain greater reward.

It is possible to have free will only in the sphere of good, but only if the free will has been tested first. In heaven, God’s people will live for all of eternity without sin and without the possibility of sinning. This does not mean they will be acting as robots without any free will. But the reason this continual obedience and worship is meaningful to God, even though these are now perfect creatures, is that they had first gone through a time of testing on earth in which they had the choice to follow God or not.

A second sub-reason why God allowed sin and suffering in the world is that he fore-planned that he would redeem mankind. God knew that when he allowed humans freedom of choice they would in fact fall into sin, and he knew that this sin would cause great suffering in the world. Since God is a good God, he would not have permitted this if he was not also planning to provide a solution to this sin and suffering. His plan for doing this was to send his Son Jesus into the world to die for our sins so that humans could be restored to a right relationship with God. The Bible says: “But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children” (Galatians 4:4-5). God sent his Son Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, born under the obligation of keeping the law of Moses, which he did perfectly, to redeem us, or set us free from the guilt that we have for breaking God’s laws. Jesus did this by dying as a substitute, being punished for our sins. He paid the price, by sacrificing his own life, to set us free from sin and to allow us to recover the right of being called sons of God, as Adam was when he was first created.

It should be pointed out that the solution God planned for saving mankind involved a great sacrifice for himself—he had to sacrifice his own Son. This was no small matter. God could have avoided this necessity if he had simply devised a plan in which there would be no possibility of sin entering the world. But to guarantee that there would be no sin in the world, God would have had to eliminate free will from his plan. The fact that he did not shows that having creatures of free will is something that God values so highly that he was willing to undergo great sacrifice himself in order to maintain it.

God’s plan for redeeming mankind also requires a free-will response. The Bible says: “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, *so that everyone who believes in him* will have eternal life” (John 3:16). Believing in Jesus requires an act of free will. It is true that by allowing for free will, God allowed for the possibility of sin and suffering entering the world. But by exercise of that same free will, God allows mankind the opportunity to be saved from the eternal consequences of that sin. The choice is up to each individual. God’s offer of salvation is referred to in the Bible as a gift: “the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23b). The free gift of eternal life was made available through Christ’s sacrifice for our sins on the cross, and through the exercise of free will that gift is received by the individual who believes in Christ for salvation.

The Greater Good

In his lecture, “Why Would a Good God Let Bad Things Happen?**”** (Buffalo, NY, May 10, 2008)2, Dr. James Beebe presented two main reasons why a God who is both all-powerful and loving would allow bad things to happen: first, because of the principle of free-will, and second, because of the principle of the greater good. The principle of the greater good means that God may allow something bad to happen in order to accomplish a greater good. Let us consider three examples of how this can happen.

First, God may allow people to go through temporary suffering so that they can gain eternal salvation. Quite often it is the case that when everything is going well in a person’s life—he is in good health, living in prosperity, safety, and peace, that he does not think about God or his need for a relationship with God. These pleasant conditions do not change the spiritual reality, as explained in the Bible, that the person is a sinner guilty before God and heading towards an eternity separated from God. But the person does not think about that as long as everything is going well. But when he comes into crisis, perhaps because he is diagnosed with cancer, or because his city has been devastated by an earthquake, or because his country has been invaded, then he quickly thinks about his need for God’s help as well as the frailty and shortness of life and his need to be prepared for what comes after. Many people do in fact come to God and receive salvation through his Son Jesus Christ during such times of crisis. It would be preferable if it did not take such dramatic events to get their attention and to make them consider important spiritual issues, but the reality is that many times, it does. God knows that, for he knows our human nature, and so he allows suffering to come through some sort of evil so that through the temporary suffering many might be brought to eternal salvation.

One example is my father-in-law. His wife became a true Christian during the first year of their marriage, but he remained an unbeliever for 50 years. He was an agnostic and an alcoholic, refusing to believe in a God who would allow one of his daughters to die of leukemia before the age of ten. His wife prayed for him, as did others, for 50 years, but seemingly with no effect. But then his wife was diagnosed with cancer. His attitude began to change. He began to pray, and he listened to the gospel message he had rejected for so long. Finally, he did believe and he received Jesus as his Savior. Shortly after, he himself was diagnosed with cancer. He died within a year, but he died at peace with God and himself, and he died with now an eternal home waiting for him in heaven. This would not have happened if the crisis of cancer had not come into his life. God allowed temporary suffering in order to bring about the eternal saving of his soul.

Second, God may allow his people to go through suffering to strengthen their character. Just as precious metals such as gold and silver become more pure and valuable by going through the refiner’s fire, so the character of a person becomes more pure and strong by going through the fire of suffering. And just as a tree grows stronger by withstanding strong storms, so people can become stronger by passing through the storms of life. God often uses suffering in the life of a Christian in this way. The Bible says, “We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation” (Romans 5:3-4). Many Christians claim as a precious promise the following verse: “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them” (Romans 8:28). This doesn’t necessarily mean that God works things out for our financial good or for the good of our health, or that he causes everything to happen the way we would like. The next verse tells us the good that God has in mind: that we might be conformed to the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). That means that in everything God is working towards our *character* good by working to make us more like Jesus. “Everything” doesn’t only mean those things that we think are good, but also those things we think are bad. God sometimes allows suffering into our life, but his purpose is to use it to work towards the development of our character.

Third, God may allow his people to go through suffering in order to prepare them to help others in the future. In 2 Corinthians 1:4 we read, “He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.” A person who has experienced God’s comfort in the process of going through cancer can minister to and encourage others who go through cancer. A soldier who has been injured in war will be sensitive to the plight of others who have been injured in war. An individual who has been displaced from his home because of a natural disaster may be moved to help others when they are similarly displaced. Undoubtedly, this is not the *only* reason God allows people to go through such sufferings, but it is one greater good that he can accomplish through them.

The greatest example of all in which God allowed suffering for a greater good was in the suffering and death of his own Son. God says, “I take no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ezekiel 18:32, NIV). All the more so was this true of his own Son. Yet God did allow him to die, and not just any death, but the torture and shame of crucifixion. Those who have watched “The Passion” by Mel Gibson can begin to appreciate the severe suffering that Jesus went through. Why did God allow his own beloved Son, in whom he was well pleased (Matthew 3:17, NIV), to suffer in this way? The Apostle Paul records the answer: “But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s condemnation” (Romans 5:8-9). God allowed his Son to suffer and die for us so that through the sacrifice of his blood we can be made right in God’s sight and be saved from future condemnation. This is confirmed by another Bible passage: “God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins” (1 John 4:9-10). God allowed his Son to die as a sacrifice so that our sins could be taken away and so that we might live (have eternal life) through him. In other words, God allowed a great evil—the suffering and death of his only Son, to provide for the greater good—a way for us to receive forgiveness and eternal life.

The Demonstration of God’s Character

A third reason why God allows evil and suffering is that by so doing the fullness of his character can best be demonstrated. Although God is in no way evil, yet certain aspects of his character can best be demonstrated and appreciated if there is evil in the world. For example, God’s righteousness can best be appreciated in contrast to sin. His justice in punishing evil can only be observed if there is evil to be punished. The demonstration of his mercy and love in providing a way of salvation for lost mankind through the death of his Son was possible precisely because mankind had fallen into sin and thus needed to be saved. God’s power will be demonstrated in his ultimate victory over Satan, the instigator of evil. In all these ways, God’s character is demonstrated in ways that would not be possible if there was no evil in the world.

Now we should not think that God allows evil in the world just to make himself look better. God is characterized by sacrificial love, not by self-seeking pride. Therefore it seems best to say that the primary reason God allows evil in the world (that is, the reason why he allowed sin into the world in the first place) is the principle of free will. The secondary reason, that is, the reason why God allowed evil to continue for a period of time once it did come into the world, is the principle of the greater good—he allowed evil to continue because he also knew that he would be able to bring about many greater goods through that evil. The third reason for allowing evil—the demonstration of God’s character, could be seen as an intrinsic by-product of an all-wise God implementing the best plan. The nature of God’s unimaginable perfection is such that when God chooses the best course of action (as he always does), it always results in the most complete demonstration of his perfect character.

ENDNOTES

1. Satan was himself an angel created by God with free will. His original name was Lucifer, and he was likely the most beautiful and most powerful of all the angels. Because God gave him free will, there was also the possibility that he would sin. This he did, and his sin was the first sin in the universe. He was lifted up in pride and thought that he could take the place of God. As a result of his rebellion against God, he was thrown down to the earth, where he proceeded to tempt man and woman to also rebel against God. (see Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-17).
2. Dr. James Beebe is a Philosophy professor at SUNY Buffalo, and the lecture was presented at Amherst Baptist Church.