

Permission of Evil

Part 1—The Reason

“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”
—Genesis 2:17

WHY DOES GOD PERMIT

all the evil and suffering that is in the world today? This question is asked in time of war when cities are destroyed, and the young, the old, the infants, the righteous, the wicked, the believers and

the unbelievers perish because of man's inhumanity to man. It is asked by those who experience or observe suffering on beds of sickness. Why does God allow an innocent baby to sicken and die? Why does he permit the unrighteous to prosper, while his own faithful people often experience hardships?

Then there are those who are killed or injured by natural disasters such as hurricanes, typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and, most recently, the horrific tornadoes in Oklahoma, and the wild-fires in Arizona which claimed the lives of nineteen firefighters just days before this writing—cannot God do something about these things? When we

read and hear of such events, the question arises concerning this terrible loss of life, "Has God no pity?" Indeed, there are countless situations in which man, who the Bible says was created in the image of God, experiences suffering, and, of course, finally death.

This situation is not limited to our generation, nor is it confined to one part of the earth; it is universal. As far back as history reaches, man has suffered and died in war, in pestilence, in famine, in calamities, in sickness and disease. All in every generation have died, having been beaten down by the great enemy, Death. Abel, a son of Adam, whose sacrifice was pleasing to God, was the first to suffer and die, being murdered by his brother, Cain. Today, over 150,000 humans die worldwide every twenty-four hours. Our hospitals, nursing homes, mental institutions, and many other kinds of care facilities are filled with the suffering and dying. No wonder many question where God is, and what he is doing about the distresses of his human creatures.

JOB SEEKS THE ANSWER

The question of why God permits evil is not a new one. It has been asked by thinking men and women throughout the ages. Thousands of years ago, Job, a faithful servant of God, became personally concerned with discovering the meaning of his own suffering. The record of this is found in the book of the Bible which bears his name. The first verse of this book informs us that Job was an upright man who feared God and shunned sin.

To begin with, Job was a prosperous man, abundantly blessed by God along material lines. The

record is that "his substance . . . was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east." (Job 1:3) Job was also blessed with a large family, and he desired that they too should be blessed by the Lord. Job prayed for his family, and offered sacrifices, because, as he said, "It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." (vss. 4,5) Job felt, apparently, that in the event that his sons had sinned, his prayers on their behalf would be heard and favorably answered.

However, experiences were ahead for Job for which he was not wholly prepared. Satan, the great adversary of God and men, charged that this servant of the Lord was loyal to God only because his loyalty had been bought by the abundance of good things with which he had been blessed. In answer to this charge, God permitted Satan to inflict calamities upon Job to test his fidelity. God had no doubt about the outcome of this trial, and in his wisdom knew that any temporary suffering he permitted to come into Job's life would, in the end, prove to be a great blessing to him.

Job did experience great trouble. The record states: "There was a day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: and there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was

yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: and, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee."—vss. 13-19

JOB STILL LOYAL

Job's reaction to these evil tidings was: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." We read that "in all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly." (vss. 21,22) Then God permitted further troubles to come upon Job. His health was taken away. He was smitten with "boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes." (chap. 2:7,8) Then Job's wife turned against him, and said, "Curse God, and die." To this Job replied, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"—vs. 10

Job did not turn away from God when trouble came upon him, as so many throughout the ages have done. His chief concern was to know why God permitted him to be afflicted with such bitter experiences, and throughout his book we find evidences of his search for this understanding. After Job was stricken down with disease, three of his friends visited him for the supposed purpose of giving comfort. Later in the book we are informed that these three did not speak the truth concerning God, implying that the viewpoints they expressed to Job were not correct.—Job 42:7

There is chapter after chapter of philosophizing and interchange on the part of Job and his three friends. However, what it all amounted to was that, according to Job's friends, he was suffering because he had committed some gross sins which he was hiding from them, and for which he had not repented and sought God's forgiveness. Job, of course, knew that he was not perfect, but he also knew that he had not willfully transgressed God's laws, so he could not accept this explanation.

WHY DO EVIL MEN PROSPER?

Job knew that, while as a servant of God he was now suffering, frequently evil men prospered, and apparently escaped the evils that come upon so many. So in answer to his friends, he said, "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power? Their seed is established in their sight with them, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. Their bull gendereth, and faileth not; their cow calveth, and casteth not her calf.

They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ. They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave [without suffering a long, painful illness].”—chap. 21:7-13

Job knew that the explanation offered by his friends was not the true one, yet he did not understand why God was allowing him to suffer so severely. In a beautiful, poetic manner he describes his search for an understanding of God in the light of his own experiences, saying, “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him; But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”—chap. 23:8-10

Job realized, by faith, that there was a divine purpose for his being tried so severely, but he had not yet discovered that purpose. He also knew that if he maintained his integrity before God he would pass the test successfully, and would “come forth as gold.” Job’s wife wanted him to curse God, but he knew this would be foolish. In all ages, there have been those professed believers who, when affliction came upon them, have wondered where God was, and what he was doing to protect their interests. Many such have even turned against God, but faithful Job did not.

GOD’S REPLY

Beginning with chapter 38 of the Book of Job we find God’s answer to Job’s searching. This answer

is couched largely in question form. The many questions were designed to remind Job that he really knew very little about God, and because of his limited knowledge in every field where the Lord manifests himself, he should not be surprised at failing to comprehend fully why he was being permitted to suffer.

This is an important viewpoint for us to keep in mind when we ask why God does not do something about human suffering, are we not assuming that if God had the intelligence we possess he certainly would do something? Then, perhaps, if we do not see our wishes carried out, we may tend to doubt that there is a God. If we should find ourselves guilty of such faulty reasoning, it would be well to consider the questions which God asked Job.

There are four chapters of these questions. They all concern the wonders of God's creation. God asks Job if he was present when he laid the foundations of the earth—if he understood the laws by which the tides of the sea were controlled. He asks him about the instincts and habits of the various birds and animals, and even of the great creatures of the sea. Then Job is asked if he can explain the wisdom and power that are represented in these marvels of creation.

As the questioning proceeds, Job interrupts and says, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:4,5) In Job's expression, "Behold, I am vile," the meaning of the Hebrew word translated vile is, according to Prof. Strong, literally, "swift, small, sharp." Apparently Job was

acknowledging to God that he had spoken too quickly—that his viewpoint was too limited, and that it was voiced too sharply.

IMPORTANT LESSON FOR ALL

Job was now beginning to understand his own proper position before the Lord—that it was not for him to judge God according to his own limited understanding, and then so freely to speak his opinions when he really knew little about the matter. This is also a good lesson for all of us. The basic fact is that the world is filled with evil. It is not for us to lose faith in God because of this, or even to criticize him. Our proper attitude should be one of humility, and of earnestly seeking the answer to our questions from the only proper source, which is the Word of God.

God's questions continued, and eventually Job spoke again, saying, "I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee."—chap. 42:2-5

Job finally learned the meaning of his severe trial. He learned that its loving purpose was to give him a clearer understanding of God, that he might serve him more faithfully and with greater appreciation. He speaks of this clearer understanding as "seeing" the Lord, instead of merely having heard about him. Since he had gained such a wealth of

understanding, Job's brief period of suffering must have seemed to him to have been a most valuable experience.

Besides restoring Job's health, we read that "the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters. . . . And in all the land were no women found as fair as the daughters of Job: and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren."—Job 42:12-15

AN ILLUSTRATION

God's design in the general permission of evil throughout the ages was, and is still today, the same as in the case of Job. He created Adam a perfect human, in his own image. Being in the image of God implied an ability to reason. One of the questions which God asked Job was, "Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart?" (chap. 38:36) It was the Creator who had endowed Adam with the ability, through the process of reasoning, to attain knowledge and wisdom. This was in contrast to what we call instinct, which had been given to the lower animals.

However, God did not miraculously implant knowledge upon Adam's mind with the intention that he would arbitrarily be governed by this knowledge. God did not desire his human creation to be like robots, which move about mechanically and without any sense of understanding. Man was given the ability to learn, and was free to make

choices for himself by the knowledge he attained. What man would do with this knowledge was ultimately to determine his eternal destiny.

Man acquires knowledge through his five senses. He learns from observation, which is the exercise of his sense of sight. He learns from what he hears, the sense of hearing being the “antenna” which collects information. With the sense of touch, man feels pain when he comes in contact with boiling water, and learns by experience to temper the water he uses for internal and external purposes. Man smells the fragrance of a rose and is delighted by it, but turns in revolt when his sense of smell detects the presence of unpleasant odors. Man rejoices in the taste of wholesome food, but learns to avoid the eating of unpalatable things, even though his sense of sight might at first indicate that they are beautiful.

Thus we see that in the exercise of his five senses man learns from information communicated to him through observation, and through experience. According to the dictionary, man also acquires knowledge through “intuition,” but this is not strictly true, because the so-called intuition of man is based upon information already at hand. God alone possesses the inherent ability to acquire and develop knowledge entirely independent of all outside sources. The knowledge acquired by man through his claimed intuitive ability is, at best, trifling and of little value.

For man to be a faithful child of God it is essential that he receive a knowledge of evil as well as of good, that he might be able to make an intelligent choice between the two. God desires those to worship him who “worship him in spirit and in truth,”

Jesus said. (John 4:23,24) God does not desire blind worship, but a fidelity to, and trust in him which is based upon understanding and appreciation. The accomplishment of this in connection with Adam and his offspring is one of the major objectives of the permission of evil in God's great plan of human salvation from sin and death.

EXPERIENCE—THE ALL-IMPORTANT FACTOR

Right and wrong, as principles, are established by divine law. The world today is filled with war, crime, chaos, and suffering because God's laws—his standards of right and wrong—are ignored and denied. While man was endowed with a conscience, the conscience itself is not aware of what is right and what is wrong unless it is furnished with this information from an authoritative source. This source, we believe, is only to be found in the Word of God, the Bible.

Knowing that Adam possessed the ability to understand facts which were communicated to him, God placed a test of obedience upon his human son, defining the law which was involved. The Creator had provided our first parents with a wonderful home "eastward in Eden," possessing "every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food." (Gen. 2:8,9) There were the trees of life, and another which is described as "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." God commanded Adam not to partake of this particular tree, and informed him that the penalty for disobedience would be death: "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (vs. 17) The Creator had a right to demand obedience from his human creature, and to sentence him to death if he disobeyed.

This demand of obedience was a divine law, and since God informed Adam that death would be the penalty for disobeying, we can say that by information he knew the result of transgression. True, Adam could not look down through the ages and visualize all the suffering and death that would be brought about by human sin and selfishness which had their beginnings in his own disobedience. However, he did know that his disobedience would lead to his own death.

However, this information was not sufficient to deter Adam from taking the wrong course. He lacked a heart understanding of what was involved in his disobedience, because his knowledge was based, not on experience, but merely on what he had been told. Doubtless, Adam loved his Creator, but perhaps falsely reasoned that since Eve had already transgressed, and would die, it would be better to die with her than to live without her. So, not having the additional strength that experience would have given him, Adam transgressed divine law and was plunged into death.

A KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

In God's plan, in which he could foresee man's fall, it was Adam's freewill disobedience that was to lead ultimately to his acquiring a fuller knowledge of God and of his standards of right and wrong. The tree of which he was forbidden to partake was "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." It followed that having partaken of this tree he would gain the knowledge implied by its name, even though in the process he would need to suffer and to die.

After both Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit, God said concerning them, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil." (Gen. 3:22) This does not mean that the forbidden fruit had some magical effect upon our first parents, enabling them at once to have a full knowledge of good and evil. We do read that soon after their disobedience they became ashamed of their nakedness, but this was no doubt due in part to the sense of guilt they felt in having disobeyed their Creator's command.

We think God's statement means, rather, that because of disobedience man was now destined to know both good and evil, and that he was to gain this knowledge through experience. Thus, the education of our first parents immediately began. They were driven out of their garden home into a harsh environment where they would die. They were to be plagued with all sorts of unfavorable elements, spoken of as "thorns" and "thistles," which the "cursed" ground would bring forth to them, and against which they would have to struggle until, in death, they would return to the earth from which they were taken.—vss. 17-19 ■

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*"I will sing of the LORD'S great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness
known through all generations.*

*"I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you established your faithfulness
in heaven itself."*

—Psalm 89:1,2