

HOW GOD CAN BE GOOD WHEN EVIL AND PAIN ABOUND

God is love but what about agony? What about evil? What about confusion? Disappointment? Heartache? Frustration? What about pain? This world is often dark and the heavens are always silent. The earth is filled with griefs and graves. How can God be love? In one of Hugh Wahlpole's (?) books he has the hero speak to his lady friend: "Vanessa, you know there can't be a God! You're an intelligent woman, you read, you think...how could there be a God and the world be as it is? You know, Vanessa, there's isn't any." Some of the greatest people of faith through the ages have voiced similar doubts. John Knox, that doubty leader of the reformation in Scotland of whom it was said, he never feared the face of man, when he was in the galleys chained as a slave year after year after year he came to doubt the promises of God. Cotton Mather that wonderful Puritan leader in this country went through such agony; he was forced to ask if God was really there. And Martin Luther who turned the world around, the Copernicus of religion. Martin Luther says, "There are days for all of us when faith trembles in the balance." We ask is it true? Is it true? I am glad the Bible writers echoed this. Gideon said, "Lord, if you be for us why all this evil upon your people?" Jeremiah said, "Lord, why are you to me like a deceitful brook whose waters fail?" Elijah said, "Lord, why have you brought this evil upon this widow woman?" Job said, "Do you delight to oppress?" And purity, incarnate spotless righteousness, cried out and said, "My God, my God why..."

So, this morning in very brief compass we are going to try and summarize all that we know on this issue. It can be fairly simply done because Christians have wrestled with it for 20 centuries, because every Christian has known pain and any mature believer will tell you that you can see further through a tear than through

a telescope and that constant sunshine makes a desert...without pretending to explain the whole problem because nobody can. If we had the mind of God we would be God. Be content to know somewhat less than the omniscient one. Jesus once said, "What I do thou knowst not now but thou shalt know hereafter." And when a blind Christian boy was taunted about his affliction..."Why would a good God, loving heavenly father permit you to be blind?" He just quoted a text of Scripture: "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." There are whole books in the Bible devoted to the topic. Job is all about it. After Job and his friends had wrestled day and night with the issue of agony, God suddenly appears in the whirlwind and says, "Now answer me this," and he asks them about four score questions about earthly things. He says, in effect, now look, Job, you don't have the answer to these, why do you expect to understand heavenly things? The Book of Lamentations, that's a funeral book. That's the book that in the middle of it it says, "My mercies are new every morning...great is thy faithfulness; thou drewst near to me when I cried unto thee, thou did say, 'fear not.'" That's the funeral book, Lamentations, and I am quoting from the middle chapter. So there's Job, there's Lamentations. The book of Revelation deals with the mystery of evil...."How long, oh Lord, holy and true, you permit this and this and this, how long?" Every Christian has prayed that prayer. So the Bible is full of it.

Well, what has the Christian church learned? What can it say about the giant agony of the world? Why are the heavens silent? Why does God permit this to be the university of hard knocks whose colors are black and blue? The first thing to be said is this, if you believe that God is a God of love you have one problem, the problem

of evil. If you don't believe that God is love, you have a million problems. That's the first thing to be said...for example, the problem of good. Isn't it strange--for every thousand people that ask the question of why is there evil, no one poses the question of why is there good? Isn't it strange and that's a much bigger problem. You know, it is interesting but people who are the poorest and the most oppressed cling most tenaciously to life, you know that? Suicides always prevail among the haves, not the have-nots. Suicide is a rare thing in the third world; very common thing in the prosperous countries of the West. Apparently the people worse off still think that there is a great deal that is good in their pain filled world and their pain wracked lives.

The problem of good--I've quoted it as a teenager and I've quoted it so many times (forgive me if I quote it again) but I read the works of Archdeacon ^{1e1}Payle (?) of England. He said, "Whoever made us could have made all our senses to minister constant pain to us but he made all our senses to minister joy," he says, "otherwise why isn't it that every sound is a discord and every sight ugly and every taste bitter, why?" The great blessings of life, our nightly rest and daily bread, the ordinary use of our faculties and our limbs, these are the greatest blessings of all! And they exist in profusion and we usually point out calamity, loss and the cross because it is the exception to life. Every life is crammed with mercies regardless of its pain. So that's the first thing to be said; if you believe that God is love you have one problem--the existence of evil; if you don't, you have a million problems. You have to explain beauty, truth, friendship. You have to explain why the world is so made that it is filled with love and filial relationships and comradeships that

can lift us above every stress...you have to explain that. So many simple things we have no way of explaining. You have to explain the miracle of design. We all know about the cornea, that transparent covering of the iris. You know, it about the only part of the body that does not have blood vessels. Have you ever thought what it would be like if that transparent part of your eye, the clear bit on the outside, the cornea, if it had blood vessels like just about all the rest on the body? It would be like trying to see through a lattice work--the miracle of design whereby every cell in the body contains more facts than there are in the encyclopedia Britannica. The miracle of fertility. Why is not every seed like a stone? How can it be that a tiny acorn bears generation after generation of forests of oaks hidden in one acorn. Why should it be?

So, that's the first thing to be said, yes, Christians have a problem. Non-Christians have a million problems, that's number one.

The next thing that should be said is this, but for the immutability of law that often causes our pain life would be unbearable, it would be a nightmare, a continual tragedy. Here's a little child who falls out of a 10th story window, you have to believe the law of gravity destroys her but, dear friends, think of the other alternative. Suppose pigs could fly, suppose the specific gravity of lead at any moment became that of thistle down, suppose what White House could suddenly dissolve into green cheese, that carrots grew up and cabbages grew down...all the worthwhile things in our existence depend on the reliability of natural law otherwise you could not have agriculture, you could not have science, you could not have education, you could not even step out of your house in safety, you might go up instead of along. So many of our problems are the other

side necessary organization, absolutely necessary, to make life possible. I guess God could work a miracle every time a wicked man brought down an iron bar on the head of a believer and turned it into a feather. He chooses not to do that because he is a God of law and this is a universe, not a multi-verse. The atoms all march in tune and they march to law. And that law ultimately is for our good and our blessing. So that's the next thing, the immutability of law explains some of the problems we experience.

Then, there's another. We are woven together in the families and friendships down here and whatever affects one member of the family or the friendship inevitably affects all. Now, of course, we can change that, God could have changed that. He could have said, no families. Can you imagine growing up without a mother or a father? You think of the strange situation of life. Here's a bald headed tyrant who shrieks all day and all night, won't permit anyone near them to sleep and they are loved--what a miracle! God could have made us grow up independently like the trees. But God invented the family and we are woven together in the families and friendships. And wherever one part suffers the rest suffer. That's the law on which we have been redeemed, vicarious suffering. Parents suffer more when their children suffer than when they suffer themselves. Would you get rid of that wonderful arrangement of filial love? Conjugal love? The love of friendship? Would you get rid of it in order to get rid of pain? I think not.

Then there is the gift of freedom. Wherever audiences are asked has most of your pain come from the things of nature or has it come from human nature? In practically every case people confess that

four-fifths of their pain has come from human nature, from people. You see, God did not invent bombs or bayonets; he did not invent the rack or the sword, not God, human beings did. It's humans who cause so much trouble. Don't say 'them--us' for sometimes it is 'us--them.' Now the alternative is that God could have made us robots. He could have made us automato~~ns~~. Would you settle for a world without pain if you were just a marionette? Would you be prepared to pay that price, just something that danced on a string? That said uncle when it should say uncle, no when it should say no, yes when it should say yes. Would you settle for that to get rid of pain at that cost to lose your freedom? I think not.

When we talk about most suffering being caused by humans, it's well to remember that each one of us has brought a lot of suffering on ourselves. I'm sure I've done more to myself in an adverse way than anybody has ever done to me. I remember once cheerfully going out on mission work from a college in Australia, going down the Beachemen (?) road; it was a private estate. There were no cars or trucks. Bicycle went down, here was a big health food factory and I knew at the bottom of this long road I would turn to the left, go over a swing bridge and then I would soon be out in an area where I could distribute some religious papers and talk to people. Very stupidly, I was reading as I cycled. You would not do anything like that! You would never be so stupid! But here were the papers to be distributed and I was reading as I went on the bicycle. Everybody knew there were no cars, trucks on this private estate but what I had not accounted for was a big chain across the road a hundred yards down and I hit the chain and hit the _____. I damaged my mouth and teeth and I spend many, many, not too pleasant hours in

the dentist's chair in various parts of the world because of my stupidity. Nobody did it to me except Des Ford. We have to confess some of our pain, at least, we bring on ourselves. For, example if you will forgive an old and trite illustration, but it is so important it has to be emphasized, in all western countries the top six killers are the diseases of choice--not in third world countries where half go to bed hungry but in all western countries, Australia, America, in England, in Europe, the top six diseases are diseases of choice. We eat too much and we move too little and we eat the wrong stuff. Three out of every four people in America die of heart disease and cancer, 3 out of 4! And we know what causes over 90% of both. It can be avoided. The main cause of death in all prosperous countries is suicide with the knife and fork. Many of our problems we bring on ourselves because we are free.

The next point to consider is that there is a wonderful significance in that suffering always brings fruit, it either makes us bitter or better. It either sours us or sanctifies us. As a generalization we can say, there's nothing good that if which wrongly used can bring pain and evil and there's nothing evil, tragic, which if rightly taken hold of cannot bring good and blessing. Everything has two handles. And ultimate happiness depends on which handle we take hold of. Will our problems make us bitter or better?

Now a good illustration, I guess in America (I wrote about it in this little book) is Mark Twain. Not many people know that Mark Twain wrote a book before his death that was to be published after his death. It was the most bitter indictment of religion and faith that could be imagined, a burning searing hatred of life. Now let me tell you his background. I wrote it up in these words, "Consider

the man who made all the world laugh; his father was a morose person, a derelict who never played with children, rarely expressed affection. Samuel Clemens, that was Mark Twain's real name, was brought up a neurotic little tramp. The family was always on the move, always suffering from dreadful poverty. From childhood he saw slaves whipped and men shot in the streets. When he was in his early teens he lost a brother and a sister in death. At the age of 20 he hair went white as another brother was burned to death in a steamboat which exploded on the Mississippi. When he was 30 he pointed a revolver at his own forehead. Fortunately for the world, he lacked the courage to pull the trigger. His first child died soon after birth. Another child died because of his carelessness; in a moment of forgetfulness he forgot to cover her when she was out in the baby carriage in the snow. She died of pneumonia. A third one nearly died when he carelessly let go of the pram at the top of a hill. When he was away on a lecture tour, Susie, his most talented daughter died. Not long after he returned another daughter died of an epileptic fit while taking a bath. It made him bitter. His last book was a terrible book." But then I think of the most loved American of all time, an ugly man, a crude man, a man without education, initially not a gentleman, they dared not ever print his jokes, now the most loved American and here's what one writer said about him: "The best loved character in American history, a young lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, who ran for the legislature and was defeated. Then he tried business and failed, spent many years paying the debts of a worthless partner. He fell passionately in love with a girl of his choice who loved him in return and then she died. He was elected to Congress in 1864 and served one term but was defeated when he ran for re-election. Next, he tried to

get an appointment to the U.S. Land Office and failed. Then, as a candidate for the U.S. Senate, he was defeated. In 1856 as a candidate for the vice-presidential nomination, he was beaten again. When at last he became president, he faced the Civil war which he would have given his life to prevent. His quality of character could never have come from ease, comfort and pleasantness alone. He did not simply endure his tragedies. He built character out of them. When Lincoln left Springfield they gave him a beautiful fabric woven in love and on it were the words, 'I will be with thee, don't be discouraged; be of good courage. I'll never leave thee or forsake thee.' He asked the people to pray for him. He was not a Christian. Then he lost one of his boys in early life and as he and a Christian nurse stood at the foot of the bed with Lincoln weeping, she ministered to him of the consolation that there is in Christ. But he was not yet committed. Then comes Gettysburg and he knelt in his room. He said, 'I have often been forced to pray by the conviction that there is nowhere else to go.' And he knelt to pray and said, 'Lord, if you will be with our boys, I'll be with you.' And then when he saw the thousands upon thousands of graves he surrendered himself in full to Christ. Thereafter, Abraham Lincoln was never ashamed to be seen with a Bible. And those wonderful words written in the memorial in Washington, D.C., are probably the best indication of the life and character that was built up by tragedy. He was so crude in the early years that, as I said, they would never print his jokes. He resolved he would become a gentleman. With tremendous self-discipline he became the most polished gentleman in 19th century America. Suffering can make us bitter or better. It made Mark Twain bitter; it made Abraham

Lincoln better. What will it do for you, what will it do for me? Suffering will come; there is no way of dodging it unless you die very young. It is good to remember that it is true that what we said earlier that constant sunshine makes a desert. It is people in prosperity that most easily lose Christ, not people in adversity. For every one person who gives up Christ under the pressures of pain, trouble and sorrow, there are a dozen that lose him because of success and wealth and ease.

You know, the Bible in many ways is hilarious book. You take the book of Acts. When these men received the Spirit of God at Pentecost they were so joyous that people thought they were drunk. The way they behaved looked as though they were drunk. They put Paul and Silas in prison and what do they do? They sing Psalms. They take Stephen, they are about to stone him, he takes all their lies and replaced them with the truth of a holy life so that heaven seems to shine from his face and he prays for his murderers and Christ prayed for his, "Father lay not this sin to their charge." As you pursue the book you find that out of that murder came Paul, the apostle. He witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen. It changed him. Right through the New Testament you find that all the evil under the mystic alchemy of God becomes good--but not in a hurry. He does not pay all his accounts in 30 days, you know. The mills of God grind slowly but they grind exceeding fine.

But constantly in the Bible, this is the story, that he takes evil and turns it into good. Here's Jesus, he goes 40 days into the wilderness to be tempted to of the devil, nothing to eat or drink, just temptation--"If you're the son of God..." We are only told three characteristic ones. He was forty days tempted! But he came

out able to help men and women with their temptation. He came out filled with the Spirit. And then John, the Baptist, was sent to prison and the next line says, "And Jesus came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom." The Baptist's mouth is shut; the mouth of the Son of God is opened. Then John the Baptist sends him a message: "Are you really the Messiah, or not?" And Jesus turns this doubt into glorious light. He says, (his argument is not in manuscript, it's in man) "Look at the blind, they see, look at the paralyzed, they can move; look at the deaf, they can hear; look at the lame, they can run." And it says, "A certain lawyer stood up tempting him saying, 'Who is my neighbor?'" He turns that into glory. Aren't you glad the lawyer did that? For now we have the story of the Good Samaritan. On another occasion when drew near to him all the Publicans and the sinners to hear him, again, there is a torrent of abuse and blasphemy and criticism: "This man receiveth sinners and eats with them!" Jesus turns that into glory. He tells the story of the lost coin and the lost sheep and the lost boy. Aren't you glad they slandered Jesus? Look at the good that came from it. And then there was the day when he said, "I must work miracles today and tomorrow and the third day I'll be perfected." What did he mean by the third day I'll be perfected? He meant the day of the cross. And while they are grumbling among one another as to who will be the greatest, he takes them to a mountain and talks about his coming death with Moses and Elijah who also have been through terrible troubles and tragedies and then, suddenly, he is transfigured. He wants them to know that transfiguration comes from death. The glory comes out of apparent defeat and loss. And then he goes to the cross and Christ's torn flesh becomes a glorified body. The crown of thorns becomes a crown of glory and the crucified malefactor becomes the redeemer of the

world. And good Friday gives way to resurrection Sunday and the greatest tragedy the world has ever known is symbolized by the three hour eclipse--becomes the glory of the world. We commemorate it with John 3:16, "For God so loved that he gave...."

So, here is the testimony of Scripture that all things work together for good to them that love God. We have a Christ who gathers up the fragments that nothing is lost. Without suffering there would be no sympathy; without hardship there would be no hardihood; without pain there would be no patience. There is no way to holiness except through hell.

There are two ways to react. Jacob said, "All these things are against me but Joseph said, 'You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.'" We've got to learn to dance Adam's dance backward. He disbelieved the word of God and disobeyed; we have to learn to believe the word of God and obey. Paul can say, after being shipwrecked, stoned, beaten with rods, meeting with false brethren, enduring a thorn in the flesh year after year, he could say, "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor things present or things to come, nor principalities or powers, nor any other created thing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ, Jesus, our Lord.