

Oh Lord, Why This Pain?

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OUR WELL-BEING DEPENDS ON TRUSTING THAT THE LORD IS FOR US AND THAT HE HAS THE POWER TO REDEEM AND USE ALL THINGS FOR HIS PURPOSES, EVEN SUFFERING AND PAIN.

“Ma’am, pray.....I need my child back”. I was taken aback by these broken words that were screamed in agony by a desperate mother at the funeral of her 20-year-old daughter, who had died in a tragic road accident. After two decades of being a single parent and bringing her up through life’s many difficulties, this was not supposed to happen. She was not supposed to be put through the funeral of her beloved child. In that moment, I stood there motionless and felt my faith drain away slowly like mist. I wasn’t even able to whisper after seeing the mangled remains of the once beautiful girl. I suddenly heard a subtle comment from someone nearby that there was no God.

Evil and Suffering - My mind ran through this problem that has plagued mankind, almost since the beginning of time. We would never have heard of Charles Darwin’s *Evolution of Species*, had he not lost his 10-year-old daughter to the Bilious fever. All three years of theological studies from Christ College, Cambridge, did not keep him from becoming an atheist. An all-too common story these days...Pain has a way of toppling well thought-out arguments about God and His nature. Questions arise as easy as breath in those moments of hell on earth: where is God? Why didn’t He stop this?

We see suffering everywhere, and on a daily basis. Our answer to this condition is simple: if suffering is eliminated, reduced or altered, the world would be a better place. But even in that moment, our minds are able to process the kinds of suffering that seem to have a purpose. Pain, in a certain context, has its place.

Homelessness. Natural disasters. Painful diseases. Humans being tortured. Animals dying horrific deaths.... But what can one make of such suffering that serves no apparent purpose? There seems to be no cosmic laws of any kind that govern certain types of evil that are beyond the human ken. The existence of gratuitous evil – evil that is purposeless or beyond comprehension - is also one of the arguments that is commonly used against the existence of God. Should an infinitely powerful, knowledgeable, and good being exist, He would not tolerate the existence of such potent and pointless evil. And yet, such evil does exist. Therefore, a God who permits gratuitous evil is not a justifiable idea, and so, cannot exist. This is referred to as the evidential problem of evil.

But what if we flipped the perspective? Define God. God is a being who is benevolent, omniscient, omnipresent

and omnipotent. The length, breadth, width and depth of His understanding of the universe far surpasses our own. To be able to comprehend the workings of a universe at a glance is quite obviously beyond the ability of even the most gifted of minds. Could this limitation work against us in our trying to understand gratuitous evil? How can we know that a thing is purposeless, if we lack the ability to process the full spectrum of the workings of the universe?

The fatal flaw of this argument of evidential problem of evil is this: since we cannot understand the purposes of God in the same way that He is able to, nor are we able to limitlessly view and act in the scale that He does, we cannot know with certainty about evil and suffering and its nature. Another way to look at this is that this argument that a good God cannot exist because gratuitous evil does exist, is guilty of a logical fallacy called begging the question. Begging the question is a circular reasoning in which a statement or claim made, is assumed to be true without any evidence other than the statement or claim itself. The existence of gratuitous evil does not and cannot disprove the existence of God. So, how can we know that God exists?

1) The existence of higher intelligence in the way the cosmos is organized and functions (Origin), 2) Man's inherent need for meaning in who he is and his purpose on the earth (Meaning), 3) Right and wrong as a natural code that is invoked universally in times of dispute (Morality) and 4) The recurring motif of life after death that takes place in any culture, irrespective of the religious persuasion.

As we shift from the question of evil in general to that of experiencing evil, we understand that going through horrific evil and suffering tends to change us somehow. When dreams are lost and expectations are dashed, the pain of it is personal and it is a burden that cannot be shared. The powerlessness that accompanies the overwhelming suffering leads to feelings of mistrust and betrayal towards God or to questioning whether He exists. The mind whispers, *I don't think you are big enough to protect me....why would you allow this if You are love personified? Why didn't you step in and do something? Are you even there?* The prophet Jeremiah depicts this powerfully when he said, *God, you deceived me and I was deceived* (Jer. 20:7). Though the question of God's goodness and His involvement in times of trials and

tribulations is like a thistle in the soul, it cannot be avoided. We must face it at some point. There are three possible strategies to deal with it.

Though the pain of loss and suffering can be unbearable at times, the distortion of people's perceptions of God and their broken relationship with Him, are of far greater consequence. To avoid/manage pain, they turn away from God and take charge of their own situations, act on value systems that they devise on their own, and make decisions that are independent of God (Isaiah 50:11). Any effort made to remain intact and safe, though it creates an illusion of safety, leads to subtle autonomy and inevitably to torment. To the degree that they labour to keep themselves intact, they become less loving and more rebellious. A complex web of rage and contempt are often hidden below an assertive confident exterior that does not appear wounded or scathed.

However, the deep wounds and scars, because of the profound powerlessness experienced during suffering, don't heal with time; time only blunts and numbs the memory. Wounds that stay unresolved and unprocessed remain deep in the spirit, leading to despair, which leads to the beginning of total abandonment of hope. With no ultimate reality and absolute systems to turn to, there arises a suspicion and a despondent view of the world and a distrust of God. This gives rise to a loss of a sense of self. And this in turn amounts to living in a haze of distortion that lacks any sense of objectivity.

The second strategy is to live in denial, separating the mind from the agony in the heart. Betrayal by an intimate deeply trusted companion is almost too much for the soul to endure and when this betrayal is felt towards God who is the source of all trust, it is better to deny the past and to ignore the memories than to effectively cope with the wound. The past becomes insignificant and one need not ponder over the central question: why did not God intervene? However, this soul numbing choice by denial of the past is tantamount to forgetting the journey that God has called us to live as it leads to the deadness of soul by turning a person into complacent spiritualized automaton. This ambivalence leads to depression as all the energy goes into silencing the memory recall. In an effort to mask this struggle, the mood swings between feeling helpless and feeling abandoned, while experiencing overwhelming rage. The outwardly pleasant layer functions to hide the inner chambers of the

wounded heart, robbing the joy of loving and being loved by others. God has made us to be as He is - alive, passionate and loving and not dead.

The best strategy to deal with pain involves the risk of bringing the wounded, bloodied and stained heart to God, despite the rage and emptiness. Many saints who have passed through this terrain have also wrestled with God over the deepest questions of life and God honours their faith. God cannot do anything with that which has not been left at His feet. Jacob's wrestling with God resulted in the wound on his thigh, but also resulted in the freedom of his heart. The wound of Jacob was his victory, as it exposed the weakness of his heel-grabbing approach to life and transformed him into the father of the nation of Israel.

The journey through the valley of the shadow of death helps in transitioning from the abstract knowledge of God to a personal encounter with Him. This becomes possible when we walk through this terrain with the slowly solidifying knowledge that God is loving and trustworthy and that He can be trusted, without our self-effort or denial of the past. In the surrendering of our will and life entirely to Him, we discover the infinite nature of His love, unsearchable depths of His wisdom and incomparable mercy and grace of Our God. Our well-being depends on trusting that He is for us and He has the power to redeem and use all things for His purposes, even suffering and pain. Many times, God leads His children to abundance via the paths of brokenness and pain. The Lord has promised that He will not put out the smoking flax or break the broken reed (Is 42:3). This poem depicts the journey of the wounded heart, when God is in the midst of gratuitous evil and pain.

Long time ago, I was beating on His Chest,
Not knowing that I was doing so within the circle of His Arms.
Until one day I noticed the wound upon His Breast
Intrigued I moved closer and still closer
And was drawn by a powerful loving force that sucked me
Through the wound and made me reach for His Heart
There in the recesses, I heard the faint sound of His Heart beat
My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?
Now, I know He was forsaken, so that I will be remembered.
He was broken, so that I will be made whole

He was pierced, so that I can be freed
He was shamed, so that I will not be ashamed
He was alone, so that I would be loved
Finally, I stopped the beating and turned to rest my head on Him
Breath in, breath out ...

The wonder of the gospel is that, though the Cross of Christ never negates or dismisses our pain, it becomes manageable in His brokenness and this is the comfort to a suffering person. The Cross does not directly deal with the question: why me? But it gives the answer to a different question: why am I loved so much? His cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me", soothes us. John Stott says in 'The Cross of Christ', "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross.'" The Cross helps us place our trust in the Person to whom it ultimately belongs and propels us towards pouring ourselves out for the sake of others.

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