

God and Suffering

In spite of doing a lot of reading in preparation for this summer series of messages, I've managed to avoid, for the most part, making lengthy quotations. I've been summarizing a lot of material, and trying to give you the gist of some of the stuff I've come across - leaving a whole lot "on the floor", with the hope that you will continue this journey on your own. (Which is really exciting to me because it sounds like you are!)

Well, I'm going to make up for that right now by beginning *this* message with a lengthy quote! But I think this is a critically important point, and the author (Dinesh D'Souza, a apologist and writer who travels around debating well-known atheists) makes it better than I could sum it up...

Fresh from a debate on whether or not humans can be moral without God, D'Souza in this interview from Christianity Today, offers a few reflections on his sparring partner, Princeton University's Peter Singer, a bioethicist:

"Singer is a mild-mannered fellow who speaks calmly and lucidly. Yet you wouldn't have to read his work too long to find his extreme positions. He cheerfully advocates infanticide and euthanasia and, in almost the same breath, favors animal rights. Even most liberals would have qualms about third-trimester abortions; Singer does not hesitate to advocate what may be termed fourth-trimester abortions, i.e., the killing of infants after they are born.

Singer writes, "My colleague Helga Kuhse and I suggest that a period of 28 days after birth might be allowed before an infant is accepted as having the same right to life as others." Singer argues that even pigs, chickens, and fish have more signs of consciousness and rationality—and, consequently, a greater claim to rights—than do fetuses, newborn infants, and people with mental disabilities. "Rats are indisputably more aware of their surroundings, and more able to respond in purposeful and complex ways to things they like or dislike, than a fetus at 10- or even 32-weeks gestation. ... The calf, the pig, and the much-derided chicken come out well ahead of the fetus at any stage of pregnancy."

Some people consider Singer a provocateur who says outrageous things just to get attention. But Singer is deadly serious about his views and—as emerged in our debate—has a consistent rational basis for his controversial positions.

To understand Singer, it's helpful to contrast him with "New Atheists" like Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins. The New Atheists say we can get rid of God but preserve morality. They insist that no one needs God in order to be good; atheists can act no less virtuously than Christians. (And indeed, some atheists do put Christians to shame.) Even while repudiating the Christian God, Dawkins has publicly called himself a "cultural Christian."

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But this position creates a problem outlined more than a century ago by the atheist philosopher Nietzsche. The death of God, Nietzsche argued, means that all the Christian values that have shaped the West rest on a mythical foundation. One may, out of habit, continue to live according to these values for a while. Over time, however, the values will decay, and if they are not replaced by new values, man will truly have to face the prospect of nihilism, what Nietzsche termed “the abyss.”

Nietzsche’s argument is illustrated in considering two of the central principles of Western civilization: “All men are created equal” and “Human life is precious.” Nietzsche attributes both ideas to Christianity. It is *because* we are created equal and in the image of God that our lives have moral worth and that we share the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Nietzsche’s warning was that none of these values make sense without the background moral framework against which they were formulated. A post-Christian West, he argued, must go back to the ethical drawing board and reconsider its most cherished values, which include its traditional belief in the equal dignity of every human life.

Singer resolutely takes up a Nietzschean call for a “transvaluation of values,” with a full awareness of the radical implications. He argues that we are not creations of God but rather mere Darwinian primates. We exist on an unbroken continuum with animals. Christianity, he says, arbitrarily separated man and animal, placing human life on a pedestal and consigning the animals to the status of tools for human well-being. Now, Singer says, we must remove *Homo sapiens* from this privileged position and restore the natural order. This translates into more rights for animals and less special treatment for human beings. There is a grim consistency in Singer’s call to extend rights to the apes while removing traditional protections for unwanted children, people with mental disabilities, and the noncontributing elderly...

Why haven’t the atheists embraced Peter Singer? I suspect it is because they fear that his unpalatable views will discredit the cause of atheism. *What they haven’t considered, however, is whether Singer, virtually alone among their numbers, is uncompromisingly working out the implications of living in a truly secular society, one completely purged of Christian and transcendental foundations. In Singer, we may be witnessing someone both horrifying and yet somehow refreshing: an intellectually honest atheist.*¹

I’ve begun this message with this rather lengthy quote because it succinctly sets the proper context for today’s topic: any discussion about morality – such as introducing ideas like ‘right and wrong’, ‘fair’ and ‘unfair’, when we use words such as ‘duty’, and ‘ought’, any concept of ‘transcendent rights of an individual’, anything at all along these lines – bringing up these concepts without having a what D’Souza terms a ‘transcendental foundation’ i.e., something *outside this fixed*

¹ *Dinesh D’Souza, "Staring into the Abyss," www.christianitytoday.com (3-17-09) [italics mine]*

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system (God) is ultimately meaningless talk.

Many authors have made this point, and made it well, but none more powerfully (in my opinion) than Ravi Zacharias in his book *A Shattered Visage: the challenge of atheism*. Ravi writes much along this line, including this: “It has great appeal to say, “Duty!” But again, if natural selection is a starting point, the questions of duty to whom, and to what purpose, are not answered. An infinite number of theories have emerged to explain “duty,” but they keep sliding down slippery slopes... Whichever way they move, each system ends up at the edge, or the heart, of autonomy, which literally means a law unto one’s self.”²

Ideas have consequences. Thoughts matter. While I certainly don’t want to trivialize the anguish that is part of the human experience of suffering by turning it into a philosophical discussion, I feel that we have to set the stage properly when the being of God is challenged due to the existence of suffering, as many do.

How many times I’ve heard the sentiment: “If there was a God – this “_____” would not have happened.” Now, we’re going to talk about that specifically in a moment, it’s an idea as old as Scripture, from the Book of Job, to Mary and Martha’s cries to Jesus after the death of their brother, Lazarus.

But when God himself is rejected because of the existence of suffering among humans, we need to recognize the huge philosophical/ theological issue that is in front of us, although seldom acknowledged: ‘How can we label *anything* as categorically good, or bad, right or wrong, fair or unfair, if there is nothing outside this fixed system?’ Without God *there is no morality that goes beyond my idea of my own ‘happiness’*. D’Souza’s point is logically on target: when it comes to morality, atheists have no ground for claiming *oughts* other than their own personal preferences. Who is to say what is right or wrong?

We can appeal to popular consensus, but as Zacharias points out, that is truly a slippery slope. One

² Ravi Zacharias; *A Shattered Visage: the challenge of atheism*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, p. 56

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society says ‘love your neighbor’, another says ‘eat your neighbor’, and without a transcendent Law, either one is just as valid, or *invalid*, as the other.

If we recoil at the sight of suffering... we truly need to ask ourselves *where it is that we get our ideas of right and wrong, good and evil? Justice and injustice?* If there is no God, only power ultimately has authority. Logic makes this very clear.

Nietzsche understood this very well. As D’Souza writes, he claimed that when humanity finally realized (as he did) that God is dead, the result would be universal madness. Not only has he been proven correct, (he can claim as his own disciples Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin) but in an almost poetic way, he fulfilled his own prophecy, spending the last 11 years of his life in an asylum for mental illness.

When people ‘blame’ God for evil, for suffering, for *wrongs*, and injustices, they are probably implying one of two things: 1. God does not exist. [In which case, they have cut off the philosophical ‘limb’ on which they are sitting, there is no more meaningful discussion possible. Because there is then, no standard for determining ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.]

The second possibility is that they have a wrong understanding of God. As I’ve been doing throughout this series of messages... I’d like to try to explain to you today why I believe that the Biblical teachings regarding suffering make sense of the world that we live in better than any other religious or nonreligious system; and why I think it is that Christian people can endure so much hurt and suffering and still remain people of hope. I would contend that it is entirely possible to believe in a good God (and an all powerful God), even in a world in which there is terrible evil and suffering – something that we recognize as such *because* of the standard of holiness and goodness that comes from God himself. They are not mutually exclusive.

I remember a short conversation that I had in the Moorestown WaWa with one of our local physicians. It was a Sunday morning, and I was picking up my 16 oz. coffee, which is entirely necessary to make it through three of my sermons in one day. (I’m just talking about *hearing* three

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sermons, let alone *preaching* them!) It was about 2 months after 9-11, and out of curiosity I asked him if he had noticed an increase in stress related illnesses after this horrible event. He answered me, and then asked me the same question.

I told him that I, too, had talked with more people than usual who were fearful and anxious. We pondered that for a while as we waited to pay for our coffee. Then he turned to me and said, “I just don’t understand why God would let such a thing happen.”

Well, I was pretty sure that we were in a theological discussion – meaning that he wasn’t dealing with a personal loss in this attack, which I would have responded to differently. More ‘pastorally’. “I don’t understand why God would let such a thing happen.”

So I asked him, “*Which portion of your free will are you willing to give up?*”

He said, “*What do you mean?*”

I said, “*Well, what you’re saying is that God should have intervened and stopped these people from carrying out their plans... so their free will would be limited. How much of your ability to make decisions –right or wrong – are you willing to give up?*”

He said, “*I never thought of it like that before.*”

Well, that is one of the key points to the Bible’s theology of suffering. The whole thing can be described very succinctly. There are a few main considerations:

1. **We** – the world itself – **were not created to be like this**. Again, going back to the foundational truths of Genesis 1 – 2, we find a truth that is affirmed consistently throughout the Bible: we were originally intended to live in absolute harmony with God, with other people, and with the world (creation). The Garden of Eden – whether we see it as a literal place or a metaphor, teaches us that God’s original plan was that we would be whole in every way imaginable.

2. **Things changed from that original plan**. And they changed, because humans rebelled against God. That was only possible because humans were blessed *from the beginning* with a free will. We can make decisions, choices. I mentioned earlier that anger with God over suffering is often

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due to a misunderstanding of God's nature (and God's purpose for us). This is one of the main misunderstandings people have about God. God wants us to be happy, but we are mistaken if we believe that this is God's *priority* for us.

There are some Christian sects that, to me, do much damage to people by making human comfort the "point" of life. God exists, we're told, simply to heal us when we're sick, to bail us out when we're in trouble, to bless us financially and materially when we decide we want or need more than we have now. I believe that God *does* heal, forgive, and bless – but for a higher purpose, and certainly not simply at our demand.

God's plan for the first humans, according to the Garden stories, was that we would be in communion with him. We see this throughout the rest of the Scriptures, as God so patiently works to restore what was lost through the introduction of sin into the world. God's purpose in the creation of human beings was for us to respond to him. **God wants us to love him. That is the highest purpose of God's will.** And love can never be forced, or it isn't love. We need to *choose* it – and in order to choose it, we have to have the ability to make *real choices*.

Love of God is shown by obedience to God, but there is no obedience if there is no real ability for disobedience. The opportunity to make choices – for those first humans – brought about the introduction of sin into the world, and again, (it took many years, generations, for this to sink in) but, the presence of sin (as Adam Hamilton puts it so beautifully) causes us to 'lose paradise'. There are always consequences to sin.

The Bible tells us that with the introduction of sin, the days of Garden bliss were over. The earth was cursed – *broken*, if you will. As we read in Romans 8, this brokenness (called 'the Fall' in Christian theology) affects *everything*. It affects the physical Earth itself – meaning that now there would be things like diseases, natural disasters, birth defects... random expressions of brokenness. (There is still beauty, but it is tainted.) Everywhere and for everyone. It's not the original plan, that inter-connectedness of everything is gone.

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This Fall affects the *human* inhabitants of this earth even more obviously. Our relationships are now strained, they are hard to keep going. It takes work. There is jealousy, cheating, murder. We make more and more decisions based on selfishness and self-centeredness, and the result is that people get hurt. Constantly. Yet we retain enough of the Image of God that we can recognize that things aren't quite 'right'.

And the ultimate suffering was also introduced – death. The days of men and women were limited, and for some, it's much too short. In this fallen world the bad decisions of some will effect many others – through crimes, wars, stealing, cheating... on and on – a litany with which we are all painfully aware from first hand experience.

So... #1. Things were not intended to be this way; we were created to love God. But given free will, there existed the potential to love God or to hate God. #2. Rejection of God brought about cosmic changes – the earth is fallen and broken, and as part of this earth, so are we. In every way.

But here's the most important thing:

#3. This story is not over. The Scripture makes two categories of promises with regard to suffering that are very important, and both are very Good News:

a. A day is coming when the world's brokenness will be fixed. Christ's coming was about salvation – a word that has carries a deep context, which we've talked about before. It means much more than just having sins forgiven. It means to be 'made whole'. All those years of preparation, of teaching, of prophecies – when the time was right, God sent his Son for the salvation of the *world*. God sent Christ to fix the world, to once again, make it 'whole'. The work of Jesus – the Word made flesh – was to redeem, not just 'souls', but *lives*, and the entire creation. Listen to this promise from Romans 8:

¹⁸ *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* ¹⁹ *The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.* ²⁰ *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope* ²¹ *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and*

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brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* ²³ *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*

Paul says here that the whole creation – including Christians – is waiting for the day of its ‘liberation from its bondage to decay’. There will be an end to this world as a place of brokenness.

b. The Second category of promises are those that remind us that while we may not be exempt from suffering the consequences of this broken world – the entire range of suffering (including acts of ‘nature’, self-inflicted suffering, suffering resulting from the sins and decisions of others, and whatever else) still, we do not have to face them alone.

God came to earth to show us in Jesus what he was like. And in Jesus we have a breathtaking picture of a good God, a compassionate God. A God quick to forgive, and to heal. A God who weeps at the pain of his children just as a human parent would. A God who understands what it is to be a human being in this broken world, with temptations and evil, with all its injustices and brokenness.

And through the presence of the Holy Spirit – God with *us* – and through the presence of the Body of Christ, which is the Church, we are never alone, even when it hurts the most. And as we minister to one another, as we read and trust the promises of God for ultimate justice, for final healing, we wait for that day to come that we read about in Revelation 21:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

As we lean into this promise, as Christians we can perhaps understand suffering as a consequence of being in a world in which we can truly and wholly love God. And also, as part of the Body of Christ, as his hands and feet, we have the opportunity to respond to suffering in others as Christ would: showing the love of God to a hurting world. Demonstrating God’s compassion until the

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day when he personally will bring all suffering to an end.