



*Why does God allow suffering in the world? Where did evil come from?*

Last week we explored the human capacity to argue with and at times change the mind of God. Much of the Biblical questions surrounding this human tendency deals with the suffering that is endemic to life, the sin that we visit upon ourselves and others, and the existence of evil in the world.

The conundrum is this: If God is all good and all powerful then how can evil and suffering exist in the world? For if God is all good, surely evil would be stamped out or at least stripped of its power to create such tragedy and horror. Why did God not tweak COVID virus to make it less transmissible? Why did God not prevent the 13-year-old Texas boy from driving the car that killed nine people? Why did God not keep my sister in the womb for a few more weeks so that she would not die from a premature birth?

Perhaps all of us at one time or another have struggled with these questions.

The reality of evil and anguish has led many over the ages to conclude that in fact God does not exist. It has been said that though he respected religion, in the end Charles Darwin became an atheist because he could never recover from the death of his favorite daughter, Anne; not because of his scientific pursuits. He wrote, "We have lost the joy of the household,

and the solace of our old age.... Oh that she could now know how deeply, how tenderly we do still and shall ever love her dear joyous face."

While we can certainly sympathize with Darwin's dilemma, the answer to this aged old question is found in his anguish, not in spite of it, in the love he had and the hope with which he ached.

Let me explain.

Gottfried Leibniz, the 17<sup>th</sup> century German co-inventor of the calculus, was also a distinguished philosopher who coined the term "theodicy" which is the discipline that seeks to explain why God allows evil, despite being just and powerful. He argued that God being all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful would create the best of all possible worlds and therefore, the world in which we find ourselves must in fact be the best world. This means in some way the reality of evil and suffering add to our world, rather than diminish it. Not that God is the author of evil. Far from it.

While this sounds like philosophical nonsense, when we explore the implications we find a richness of ideas that require a courageous faith and lead us to a greater love.

Imagine a musical prodigy on the piano emerges. Not only is she technically perfect, she has an uncanny ability to interpret the music so that even an average composition sounds

sublime. She is heralded as the greatest talent ever. In fact, this new superstar is so talented, she has never had to practice a single day in her life. She has never misplayed a note. Her playing requires no more effort than breathing does for us.

On the one hand, we can say that she is extremely gifted but on the other hand, she would feel like a side-show spectacle. The perfection would bring her no true joy, for there was no accomplishment, any more than we would feel fulfilled by our ability to breathe. At each venue, she would receive endless plaudits and awards but to her they would feel empty and out of place.

Now imagine a world in which everyone had this same talent. Musical accomplishment would cease to be meaningful.

This world we find ourselves in...is the best world God could have created in which imperfection is not only possible, it is the reality for all of us. Even the most gifted piano player in the history of the world could never achieve perfection so that each step further towards excellence engenders another level of wonder, of joy, and awe. The world can only know what excellence on the piano is by hearing me trying to sit down and play! Because then they would know how bad things can actually get.

There was a brief time in my life I was taking voice lessons. Though I knew there was no hope, I wanted to attempt to sing *Turandot's Nessun Dorma*. I had listened to a recording of Pavarotti sing it in 1994, in Los Angeles. To me, the last 14 seconds are the most amazing thing I have ever heard. My voice instructor described the holy terror that comes across his face as he

is getting ready to sing that stratospheric note, then his face is perfect relaxation and power as he hits the note. For me, the crescendo of the piece is not in the music but his facial expression afterwards. First you see a profound, almost surprised look, for he knows he has done something remarkable, and then he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, which to me is an expression of profound thanksgiving. All such excellence in the world we live in requires drive, sacrifice, failure, fortitude, and a hunger for excellence. All such excellence requires a great deal of suffering.

Thus, we can clearly see that a world without suffering would be a world without hardship, would be a world hollow and empty in which breathing were equivalent to musical excellence.

So Paul in Romans tells us, “...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character.” Paul boasted in his sufferings, for it was through enduring them that he discovered the character within. It is not the height you achieve but how far you’ve climbed to get there that counts.

Despite the persuasiveness of this argument, it feels as if it falls short to explain the reality of evil. It is one thing to strive through hard work to achievement. It is another to face evil which seeks to devour, destroy and demean and yet the rationale is the same.

For as wonderful as the fruits of excellence in the world are, there is something even greater. Love. The greatest world that could possibly be is not only the one in which musical imperfection is possible but also moral

failure is possible, for without it there is no moral triumph, and in the end no true love. For if only perfect love were possible then it would offer nothing more than the hollow accomplishment of the piano player who cannot miss a note. And the greater the possibility of love means also the greater the possibility of evil. And sadly, that too is the world in which we find ourselves.

But in the failures of this world, we are able to find the greatness of God.

It was only in trying to sing Nessun Dorma myself and failing spectacularly, and even failing joyfully, that I could truly know the full extent of Pavarotti's accomplishment. I reveled in my weakness for in it. I knew Pavarotti's strength. And this is why Paul rejoices in his suffering, weaknesses, and afflictions; for in them he comes to know the strength, glory and wonder of God. Paul struggles with his inability to be morally perfect in chapter 7, *"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."*

In verse 5: 7-8 Paul shows his amazement at the extent to which God goes to love us in spite of our sin, *"Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."*

Thus, paradoxically it is only in our capacity for moral failure that we come to know the extent of God's powerful love for us. Thus, this is the greatest world because it is the world in which we have the greatest possibility to not only know the love of God but for that love to

authentically grow with us and become part of us.

This is the power of faith. Even in the midst of difficult questions like the nature of evil, trust in God's tremendous power to help us not avoid grief but to make it through. So, though we grieve in this life, at times profoundly, we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

Which takes us back Darwin's words about his daughter's death, *"We have lost the joy of the household, and the solace of our old age.... Oh that she could now know how deeply, how tenderly we do still and shall ever love her dear joyous face."*

Darwin ached from loss and tragedy precisely because he lived in a world in which love could be so great. Sadly, Darwin had no solace. But evil and loss do not have the last word for those who trust in God.

Notice his wording, *"how tenderly we do still and shall ever love her."*

The loss only remains painful because evil cannot erase love. For love never ends and since the love does not die in loss, in it springs forth hope; a yearning to see our loved ones again.

And so, Paul continues in Romans, *"and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts."*

Even in sorrow this hope can be incredibly powerful. Last week I asked the Revelation Bible Study group where they have experienced worship as triumphant, joyful, and eternal as we come to hear in the Hallelujah

chorus. Ironically one person remarked, *“At funerals...that’s where it all comes together. That is where we hear the promise, ‘in my father’s house there are many mansions,’ and it is the place we will be reunited.”*

The greatest world is the one in which the greatest amount of love can be found, which unfortunately requires the possibility of its opposite. But even so, the greatest world is also the one in which evil and death are defeated. That is what Christ accomplished on the cross.

And so, the powerful love of God poured into our hearts gives us a confident hope that someday we will be reunited with those we have lost. Amen.