

## **God's Problem**

**A Message by James R. Newby**

**Text: The Journal of George Fox**

*I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of Light and Love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness.*

**Suffering and evil are issues that have both challenged one's faith, and/or made one's faith stronger. They also raise difficult questions: "How do we reconcile a loving God with the problem of evil and suffering?" It is a question that has plagued all persons who want to believe in a God of love who is all-powerful. A child is hit by a car and killed; a tornado rips through a town causing mass destruction and death; a gunman opens fire in a crowded church or store. And we ask, "Where is God?" "Why did God allow this to happen?" These are ancient questions, and the responses to them can make or break a person's faith.**

**Bart Ehrman, the Chair of the Department of Religion at the University of North Carolina, wrote a book about suffering, calling it, "God's Problem." He openly shares his inability to reconcile a loving God with the problem of suffering. Over dinner one evening a**

few years ago in Minneapolis, he shared with me how he had become an agnostic because of this problem. And this is certainly understandable. The argument against a loving God in the face of the world's suffering can be made. Humans have experienced pain and sorrow since time began. No philosopher has ever given an adequate answer to the problem of evil and suffering in the world. No rational theory is able to explain the anguish of the human soul. Sometimes horrible things happen for no apparent reason. Sometimes it does feel that God has given us more than we can handle.

I remember Anthony Hopkins as C.S. Lewis in the movie, *Shadowlands*. When his wife, Joy, dies of cancer, one of his Oxford colleagues talks to him after the memorial service and says, "Jack, you must accept the fact that this is God's Will." To this Lewis responds: "This is not God's Will. This is a mess!"

Suffering can be caused by two types of evil: First there is human evil that causes suffering through the free-will actions of persons.

**Throughout history there are endless examples of this type of evil. The holocaust is the most vivid example in the twentieth century, and the crashing of airliners into the Twin Towers in New York City has brought this issue to the forefront of twenty-first century Americans.**

**How do we define such evil? Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University has sought to give us such a definition. He says, "For me the best I've been able to do is to recognize and come to terms with the reality that there are human beings who can convince themselves that there is some higher good, some higher ideal to which their lives should be dedicated, that the pain and suffering of others does not matter. It is the absence of the imaginative sympathy for other human beings...The inability to see your victims as humans...To think of them as instruments or cogs, or elements or statistics, but not as human beings." Unfortunately we see this in the current mass deportation practices of ICE..."The inability to see your victims as humans."**

**A second type of evil can be called "Natural Evil." Tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and some diseases are all examples of what I would label, "Natural Evil" If you want to connect with and feel the horrors of natural evil, read *The Plague* by Albert Camus. Camus had a gift of making us feel as though we were living with the inhabitants of a town engulfed with the plague. One passage concerning All Soul's Day is especially moving: "All-Soul's Day that year was very different from what it had been in former years...In the plague year people no longer wished to be reminded of their dead. Because, indeed, they were thinking all too much about them as it was...each day was for us a Day of the Dead."**

**So Friends, how do we resolve or reconcile the problem of evil and suffering with the belief about a good and loving God? Why would God allow suffering to happen? The tendency is to say, either God does not care, or God is not able to make a difference. Either God is lacking in concern, or God is lacking in power.**

**I am grateful to Elton Trueblood for many things. His friendship and care for me and my family, for sure, but I am most grateful for the many conversations we had about issues surrounding the areas of philosophy and theology. One of the many issues that we discussed was the problem of evil and suffering. Although no philosopher or philosophy has ever dealt with this issue in a fully satisfactory way, Elton tried. Here is what he concluded:**

**First, Christ, in revealing God to us does not promise us easy lives. He does not say that all of our burdens, pains, illnesses and suffering will be taken away. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed, "O God, if it be your will, take this cross from me." And he was crucified and he died. Now, this is not the end of the story, but it is important to understand that the Christian faith is not dependent upon an easy success story, but upon the cross.**

**Second, the pain and suffering that comes from evil can be redemptive. There are numerous instances throughout history where a person has suffered or a whole community has suffered,**

**and that person or community has been able to lift other people and communities by the quality of life shown in response to pain. It is important to acknowledge that the most effective lives, lives that have touched us most profoundly, are not those in which everything is free of pain. Pain, bad as it is, can, under certain circumstances, be redemptive.**

**Third, we must contend with our own ignorance. As Paul said, "We see through a glass darkly." This is the answer that came to Job. His conclusion is that we see too little in order to be able to make a total judgment.**

**Fourth, evil is the necessary price of freedom. God could have made us so that we could not commit evil, but then we wouldn't be persons. We have free choice, and some of those choices can be evil. We can ask ourselves which kind of world we would rather have, a world in which all is determined, or a world of freedom, which includes pain, injustice and sin.**

**Finally, if God is like Christ, then God is wounded by our pain and sorrow and suffering. Since justice is not done in this life, and we believe in a good and loving and just God, there must be another life in which justice is done. If not, God is defeated. If this life is all, God's redemptive purpose is defeated.**

**Thus concludes Elton Trueblood's attempt to tackle this very difficult issue.**

**As a Quaker, I have been taught throughout my life to recognize that there is and always will be pain and suffering in the world, and that one of my main purposes in this life is to alleviate this pain and suffering as much as I can. I have also been taught that pain and suffering are not the end of the story. I was a young boy when I read about a vision that George Fox experienced. It was a vision that has helped me to try and keep my faith perspective focused on the positive, and centered in the Light. This vision does not deny the problem of suffering and evil, but it points us to the Light where, I believe, our emphasis in this life should be. Fox wrote: "I saw also**

**that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness." It is in this "ocean of light and love" that I place my faith and hope.**