

David Brown: Where are you Lord? (2/2/19)

A Beef with God:

"Life is outrageous. Hardly anyone will deny that conclusion outright. Tragedy, pain, injustice, premature death - all of these and more waste us away. No explanation seems quite able to still our anger, hostility, and sadness." John K Roth

Is it ok to have a beef with God? Do you think it is a reasonable part of the Christian framework to ask God why?

Illustration:

In case you have lived in a bubble, let me help you out a little.

Imagine you are a Jew. You are living in the 1930's in the middle of the holocaust. You are being hunted! All around you people who believe in God are suffering! You are witnessing horrendous things. Atrocities that you cannot even wrap language around. Life sucks!

Would you tell your Jewish brother that he lacks faith if he asks God 'why?' I sure hope not!

The reality is that all around us there is suffering. Evil abounds! Just disappears like a mirage in the desert. The devil appears to triumph! Where is God in all of this?

"Anything you want to say about God you better make sure you can say in front of a pit of burning babies." Elie Wiesel, Night

Should we be questioning - 'why?' I believe we should be! In fact, I would suggest that it is more than ok to ask the question! I would go so far as to say that if you do not ask the questions: 'why suffering?' 'Why atrocity?' 'Why this vast calamity and evil in your world?' that you are denying your nature as a true son of the living God.

All this suffering and injustice goes against your nature! You were not made to see suffering and violence. You were not made to experience pain, sorrow, and crying. It is in your very nature to question God in relation to human suffering!

"The state of this world raises major questions about God's justice and hiddenness in the face of evil and suffering." Theodicy of Love, John C. Peckham

(Jeremiah 12:1; Psalm 10:5,13; 94:3-7; Malachi 2:17; Jeremiah 5:19; Jeremiah 13:22; 16:10; Ezekiel 18:2; Jeremiah 9:12; Malachi 2:17; Psalm 94:3-7; Habakkuk 1:13; Job 12:6; 21:7,9; Psalm 10:1,11; 30:7; Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34; Psalm 13:1; 79:5,7-10; 94:3).

"In light of the horrendous evil in this world, where are the providence, goodness, and love of God?" Theodicy of Love, John C. Peckham

The Epicurean Question:

Epicurus: an ancient Greek philosopher who founded a highly influential school of philosophy now called Epicureanism was born on the Greek island of Samos to Athenian parents. He lived from February 341 BC - 270 BC.

One of the things that Epicurus is most known for is his questioning of God in the midst of an evil world. He said: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

The Problem of Evil:

The problem of evil is the question of how to reconcile the existence of evil - on the one hand, with an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient God - on the other hand. Philosophers and scholars have been debating this question for years, and, after all of their ruminating have decided that there are two main angles to the argument.

1. The Logical Problem of Evil
2. The Evidential Problem of Evil

The Logical Problem of Evil:

The first, the logical problem of evil, originated with our friend Epicurus.

The logical argument from evil is as follows:

1. If an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient god exists, then evil does not.
2. There is evil in the world.
3. Therefore, an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient god does not exist.

The long form of this reasoning is as follows:

1. God exists.
2. God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient.
3. An omnipotent being has the power to prevent that evil from coming into existence.
4. An omnibenevolent being would want to prevent all evils.
5. An omniscient being knows every way in which evils can come into existence, and knows every way in which those evils could be prevented.
6. A being who knows every way in which an evil can come into existence, who is able to prevent that evil from coming into existence, and who wants to do so, would prevent the existence of that evil.
7. If there exists an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient God, then no evil exists.
8. Evil exists (logical contradiction).

So, at its most basic level, the logical problem of evil posits that a good God *could not* allow the existence of evil at all.

The Free Will Defence:

In defence of the existence of God, scholars have carefully thought through the issue and most have agreed that what they call *the free will defence* adequately answers the Epicurean question. Let's take a look at what some of them have to say.

"A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so." Alvin Plantinga

"Once given, this kind of free will "is beyond God's direct control." William Rowe

"Obviously in making human beings free, God ran the risk that they would go wrong. The possibility of freely doing evil is the inevitable companion of the possibility of freely doing good." Stephen T. Davis

"God's creatures would not be free to say yes to God unless they were free to say no."
Richard Rice

"God is responsible for the possibility of evil, but not for the actuality of evil." Richard Rice

The Evidential Problem of Evil:

Although most philosophers now view the free will defence as successful relative to *the logical problem of evil*, many philosophers think it improbable that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would permit the kind and amount of evil, particularly *horrendous* evil, in this world.

They believe the free will defence is insufficient relative to the evidential problem of evil, which claims that the kind and amount of evil in this world counts as evidence against the existence of an all-powerful and entirely good God.

A version of the evidential problem of evil by William L. Rowe is set out below:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. (Therefore) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

You might never be called upon to debate those philosophical concepts with a scholar, or the student of a scholar; but, I think there will come a time when each one of us here today will have to answer these questions on an experiential level - either for ourselves (in the midst of some great personal suffering), or for someone we know (in the midst of their own great personal suffering).

The Battle we didn't choose:

On January 28, 1951, my dad was performing with a trio at a dinner club in Akron, OH. That night, while surveying the dance floor from his spot on the bandstand my dad saw my mom for the first time. Within 5 minutes time he set down his accordion and asked her to dance. That evening when my dad arrived at home he sang to his four younger sisters, "I found her." Two weeks later they were engaged; six months later they were married. Sixty-two years later, and after raising 11 kids, my parents, both cancer survivors, still flirt like a young couple. This is why I believe in love at first sight. On August 29, 2005, I was applying for a job as a bartender when I met Jennifer. Just like my dad knew over 50 years earlier when he first saw my mom, I knew I found her. Jen, on the other hand, didn't really feel the earth move the same way I did...In all honesty Jen didn't feel the earth move at all. About one month later Jen took a job in Manhattan and she left Cleveland. After Jen moved I couldn't stop thinking about her. Not only was Jennifer the most beautiful woman I had ever met, but she was full of life and had a way of making you feel like you were the only person who mattered. The following winter, while visiting Jen in New York, I was determined to share my feelings. Working up all of my courage, I turned into a 3rd grader and told Jen I had a crush on her. As I questioned whether or not I had just said this Jen's eyes lit up and, in the sweetest, most beautiful voice, which I'll always remember, she said, "I feel the same way." We started dating long distance and would talk on the phone for hours - it was carefree and exciting. We never ran out of things to talk about. When we were together it didn't matter what we were doing, it was always fun. I was so crazy about Jen. After 6 months the distance became too much so I moved to New York. On the night I arrived in town Jen and I celebrated by having dinner at one of our favourite Italian restaurants, Frank. After dinner I got down on one knee and proposed to Jennifer. Ever the poet, Jen yelled, "Shut up!!" So, there I was on one knee, after selling almost everything I owned, except for a few cameras, some clothes, and of course, my cats, and I was thinking, "Ok, shut up can mean a lot of things?" Then Jen grabbed the ring and I could breathe again. The following fall Jen and I were married in Central Park. When I saw Jen walking down the path I couldn't hold back my tears. I had never been so happy in my life and I couldn't believe that this beautiful, kind, and strong woman loved me the same way that I loved her. That night we shared our first dance together as husband and wife, serenaded by my dad on his accordion to "I'm in The Mood for Love." I married the girl of my dreams. Life was perfect. I'll never forget the sound of Jennifer's voice coming through the phone, just 5 months later, as she told me she had breast cancer. I was numb immediately. I'm still numb. Suddenly and without warning we were thrown head first into the world of cancer. We were adapting to changes, often daily, that offered no road map, played by no rules, and had no sympathy. As our life became more complicated our focus became simple - Survive. Everything that wasn't necessary had to go. Just after our one year anniversary our oncologist told us Jennifer was cancer free and we attempted to put our life back together. This was a challenge. We felt so different from most everyone else in our life and everything we thought we knew or believed in had been turned upside down. But we had each other and with every challenge our love grew stronger. The little things that used to upset us no longer carried any weight. Making each other smile, picking each other up when we fell, letting the people in our life know how much we loved them...these things mattered. In April of 2010 our biggest fear became our reality. A scan revealed that Jen's cancer had metastasized to her liver and bone. Jen started receiving treatment immediately. After a few months we noticed that many people didn't understand how serious Jen's illness had become and we felt our support group fading away. Our life was a maze filled with Dr's appointments, medical procedures, medications, and side-effects. The thought that I might be

a widower before I was forty felt like someone was kicking me in my gut. Over and over and over. We didn't expect anyone to have the answers; we just needed our family and friends to be there. Something as simple as sending a text message saying "I love you," or dropping off dinner after we had spent all day in the hospital, these things were incredibly helpful. Our words were failing as we struggled to make known that we needed help so I turned to the only other form of communication I know - my camera. I began to photograph our day to day life. Our hope was that if our family and friends saw what we were facing every day then maybe they would have a better understanding of the challenges in our life. There were no thoughts of making a book or having exhibitions, these photographs were born and made out of necessity. A close friend suggested that I post our story on the Internet and with Jen's permission I shared some of our photographs. The response was incredible. We began to receive emails from all over the world. Some of these emails came from women who had breast cancer. They were inspired by Jennifer's grace and courage. One woman shared that, because of Jen, she confronted her fears and scheduled a mammogram. That's when we knew our story could help others. The most important thing that happened was that our family and friends rallied together to be by our side. On December 22nd, 2011, at 8:30PM, just 16 days after her 40th birthday and less than five years after our wedding, my sweet Jennifer passed. Our star didn't shine long, but man did it shine bright. By sharing our story, our love story, something beautiful has begun to grow out of something so horrible and unfair. If we don't share our experiences how can we learn, grow and survive? Before going to sleep Jen and I used to ask each other what the best and worst part of the day was. Usually the best part was something like, "When you walked by me and ran your fingers through my hair," or, "When we were at the hospital and you held my hand." The day after we found out Jen's liver was failing we came home with Hospice Care and spent the evening with family and friends. That night, as we lay next to each other for possibly the last time, I asked Jen what she loved the most about that day. Jen thought for a minute then turned and, looking deeper into my eyes than ever before, Jen said, "I Loved it all." "Love every morsel of the people in your life." – Jennifer Merendino

Habakkuk:

"O Lord, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save." Habakkuk 1:2

There are many, many times where this question is asked in scripture. Perhaps, if you have been an Adventist for some time, the one that you are most familiar with is the one in Revelation 6. But you will find the phrase all through the Psalms, the prophetic literature, and several times in the book of Habakkuk.

Take a look with me at the basic structure of the first part of the book of Habakkuk and let's see if we can learn how God expects us to cope with the horrendous realities in the world all around us.

The Prophets Question:

"O Lord, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save." Habakkuk 1:2

- How long!?
 - Torah is Neglected!
 - Violence & Injustice!

- Corrupt Leadership!
- "For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs." Habakkuk 1:6

The prophet Habakkuk is a little different to the other Old Testament prophets in that He is not carrying a message to the people, but the cry of the people to God! Here we see Him wrestling with the same reality that we have been speaking of today. Where is God amidst the suffering and injustice of our world?

The Lord's Answer:

"For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs." Habakkuk 1:6

- "I am sending the Babylonians..."
 - Fierce & Cruel Nation
 - Conquering & Possessing
 - Terrible & Fearsome
- "They will bring about the justice you ask for."

I guarantee you that this was not what Habakkuk was expecting to hear from God!! It was the exact opposite of what he expected to hear! and the exact opposite of what he wanted! But how true is that of us when we ask God to do something and it doesn't pan out the way we wanted?

The Prophet's Complaint:

"Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die." Habakkuk 1:12

- "WHAT!? Babylon is even worse!"
 - They Defy their Power!
 - They Treat Humans like Animals!
 - They Devour Other Nations!
- "You can't be serious!"

Have you ever done exactly what the prophet Habakkuk just did? You were sure that God was making a mistake. You were sure that this could not be the best way. So you just entered into denial mode?

"I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected." Habakkuk 2:1

The Lord's Answer:

- "I will bring down the Babylonians!"
 - All nations are accountable to God's justice!
 - The vision is for an appointed time
 - It may take time, but it WILL come to pass!
- "Live with faith in the promise!"

Finally God promises to take down the enemy! Yay!!! But wait... did you say that this might not even happen during my lifetime!?

That's right. Deliverance is sure; but not necessarily in your timeframe. There is something bigger going on than just your personal problems. God is dealing with sin at a universal level. Sometimes that means you cannot have what you want, and I would even go as far as to say that He can't even have what He wants all the time.

This is the paradox. This is the challenge. Trusting God's plan, even when He cannot give you what you want or need in the immediate sense.

"Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith."
Habakkuk 2:4

Notice the challenge God leaves Habakkuk with? Trust me. Nothing more, nothing less. Just trust God's plan.

That was the answer to Habakkuk's question and to his complaint. That is also the answer to all of our questions and even our complaints. Trust God's plan!

That plan may not always cater for your immediate deliverance. You may have to suffer. But that does NOT mean that God has abandoned you, or that there is no longer a plan.

Conclusion:

"I argue that God's love (properly understood) is at the centre of a cosmic dispute and that God's commitment to love provides a morally sufficient reason for God's allowance of evil, with significant ramifications for understanding divine providence as operating within what I call covenantal rules of engagement." John Peckham, Theodicy of Love

If you are a Seventh-day Adventist you are blessed with an understanding of what we call *the great controversy*. This gives us a framework to understand the problem of evil that few others are blessed with. If you are not a Seventh-day Adventist and you would like to know more about this theme in scripture please reach out to us.

The conflict that rages between good and evil must play out for the universe to again be secure. Satan and all those who have gone along with his claims pose a serious threat to the universe. Not just to God (in some kind of jealous ruler context), but to all who inhabit the universe, because sin is by nature destructive. God is trying to cleanse the universe of that destructive curse. But in order for that to be accomplished, we NEED to trust His long range plan - for it is the ONLY way!

"God could employ only such means as were consistent with truth and righteousness." Ellen White, Patriarchs & Prophets

Do you want to learn to trust God's plan more fully? Do you, like the prophet Habakkuk have about why certain things have to happen? Great! Then ask God! Obviously He is ok with that. After all, He answered Habakkuk. But please be willing to concede that the answers may not always be exactly what you hoped for - or expected.