

WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN - Part six - Teaching #1228

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WHY I BELIEVE IN A GOOD GOD IN A WORLD FULL OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

The title of this whole series of teachings is *"Why I Am A Christian."* But a lot of people **aren't** Christians. Not **everyone** believes. There are many people who **disbelieve** the Christian message about God and His love for this world. They reject it flat out. Just as people state their reasons for faith, unbelief too has its roots. This message is about one of the reasons many people **don't** believe. Probe deeply into the doubting heart and, nine times out of ten, there is unbelief rooted in the **problem of evil** in this world.

We remember the account from years ago when **Susan Smith**, the mother from South Carolina, made the news by pushing her Mazda into a lake with her two sons strapped in the car by their seat belts. We can't imagine such twisted thinking if God were anywhere near in control. Sometimes the same evil comes, not by the hand of wicked intent, but from the sheer weakness of the human condition. Do you remember the story in 1995 when a professor in Kentucky dropped his wife off at work, then parked his car at the office, forgetting his two children sleeping in the back seat? In the heat of the hot summer sun the kids never woke up. He returned to his car to find them suffocated in the intense heat.

Sometimes the numbers of victims can almost numb the mind to the realities we've witnessed in recent history. Six million lives snuffed out in the Holocaust - thirty million in the slave trade - forty million under Stalin's purges - a third of Europe's entire population wiped out during the time of the plague - **where is God when these things happen?**

Perhaps it might be possible to admit the existence of some kind of lesser supreme being - one who was distant or confused or simply unable to do anything about these atrocities. But for many, the problem of evil is amplified because of the **kind** of God we Christians claim to worship. Our God is **all-powerful** (meaning there is nothing He wills to do, but can't) and **all-loving** (meaning He is moved and concerned and benevolent toward His creatures).

How can **that** God be believed in when all the evidence is taken into account? For many people, either God does **not** exist, or, the God who **does** exist is not all-powerful, or He's not all loving, or He's neither. By the process of elimination, those seem to be the only options when one honestly considers the evidence of pain and suffering in our world.

I'm sure I can't answer all the questions people have about the problem of evil and suffering in this world. I'm sure there are some questions we simply won't be able to fully unravel until God's wisdom and greatness is fully revealed in the ages to come. But let me try to give some help - some encouragement to those who wrestle with reconciling faith in a good God with the presence of so much evil and suffering in this present world.

Here are some of the truths I try to keep in mind:

1) **IF THE WORLD IS EVEN HALF AS EVIL AND VOID OF GOD AS PEOPLE SAY IT IS, WE SHOULD NEVER HAVE DISCOVERED IT TO BE SO**

Let me try to illustrate what I mean. Imagine a man who has been blind from birth. Imagine a man who has never once seen the light of the sun, or the moon, or a lightbulb, or a candle - not ever - not even once - not for one second. Imagine this man standing by the window and saying, **"Man, is it ever dark out!"**

There is something very wrong with that picture. The world would **not** suddenly seem dark to this man who had never once seen light. The world would not seem unusual to him at all. That's because he would never have known any other world than the totally dark world he had **always** awakened to. He would have nothing with which to **compare** the world he lived in to make it **seem** unusually dark to him.

Now, imagine another man. This man (let's say he's forty years old) just lost his sight in a tragic accident with some chemicals at work. He is just beginning to cope with a completely sightless existence. We can understand **this** man getting up in the morning, walking to where he knows his bedroom window is, perhaps **feeling** the summer sunlight warm against his pajamas, then suddenly bursting into tears as he says, **"I can't believe it's so incredibly dark! How can I ever live in such a dark world!"**

We can understand this because this man **knew** a world full of light and brightness. Then it was taken away. When he gets up and says **"I can't believe it's so incredibly dark,"** the words have angst and meaning because he's **comparing** them to a time of so much light and brightness.

If this world is **Godless** and **evil** and **meaningless**, and **always has been so**, then we would never notice it. Something is **evil** because we compare it with what is **good**. Just as something is **dark** because we can compare it with something **light**.

In fact, that second illustration of the man who **lost** his sight and now notices the darkness of the world around him, is very much alike to the Biblical description of what has happened in this world. We call it the Fall. Everyone, even people who don't profess faith, notices the world is now **out of joint**. We all sense something wrong. But we would never notice the evil and the suffering and the emptiness were it not for the **presence of a good Creator**.

However fallen, however dark, and however Godless, we all carry around the **memory**, we are almost **haunted** with the **inner awareness** of the image of this good God in our beings. We hunger and look for goodness. This is why we **know** this world to be, in so many ways, broken, fallen, dark and evil.

So I think it's important to start our search off on the right foot. Yes, it's absolutely true that this world is out of sorts. We all **feel** in our hearts that this world isn't **normal**. Bad things - **very** bad things - happen to seemingly innocent people. Only **sin** can explain it. This is not an explanation **against** the existence of a good God. Quite the contrary, if we hadn't been created in His holy image - if we hadn't (in the language of our illustration) had a history of brighter days - we would never be so shocked and horrified by the dark.

2) **MUCH OF THE EVIL AND SUFFERING IN THIS WORLD STEMS DIRECTLY FROM THE KIND OF MORAL BEINGS GOD DECIDED TO CREATE**

We all know that many people decide to do wicked things. People kill, steal, rape, lie, and in millions of different ways each day, cause grief and misery for those around them. Some people actually think this is still God's fault. If God is omnipotent (all-powerful) then He can do absolutely anything. Why doesn't God just stop people from wronging others?

All of these questions cut to the heart of the matter. They all beg the **real** question: **Exactly what kind of world did God choose to create?** Obviously, being God, He could make any kind of world He wanted. He could have made a world where people could only choose to do morally good things. He could have made a world in which people like you and me didn't respond to the world around them with the kind of freedom we have. But that's not the kind of world God wanted to make. He **wanted** to create, and **did** create, a world populated by truly free, responsible, moral beings. He chose to create agents who could truly **act**. He wanted to create a world in which people could **lovingly choose to worship and obey Him**. This, of course, includes creating the risk that many people, perhaps even **all** the people, would choose **not** to love and obey and serve their Creator.

But there's one kind of world even God couldn't create. Some things are impossible even for an omnipotent God. God can't create a square circle. He can't both exist and not exist at the same time. God can't create a world with **no** creatures and **many** creatures at the same time. In other words, even omnipotence doesn't include the ability to actualize **contradictions**.

God can't make a world in which people are **truly free** and, at the same time, **only allow them to make good choices**. That's not possible. Those are **contradictory** conditions. They can't **both** exist. If God is going to make people truly free to love and enter into relationship with Him, He must also run the risk that they will not choose to do so.

Hence, we live in a world where much wickedness, pain and suffering are the direct result of people choosing to do bad things. These deeds effect millions of lives every day.

The Apostle Paul traces our world's tragic history back to this core moral issue: **Romans 1:28-32** - **"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. [29] They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of**

envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

So does the Apostle James: **James 1:13-16** - "Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. [14] But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. [15] Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. [16] Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers."

3) HOW DO WE RECONCILE A GOOD GOD WITH SUFFERING THAT IS NOT DIRECTLY THE RESULT OF SINFUL MORAL CHOICES?

This is the area that obviously cuts closest to our hearts. We have no trouble with the wicked man reaping the pain of his actions. We can even understand how the wicked actions of one person can have tragic consequences for others. But what are we to say about babies born with congestive heart disease? What about tornadoes and earthquakes and diseases that kill so many? If God is *in control*, and if He is *all powerful* and if He is *good*, why do these kinds of things happen?

As we try to answer this question, please remember what we've already said about the *kind* of world God chose to create. He chose to create a world in which people could freely choose to accept and love Him or not. We know from the Scriptures that, because of the Fall, the *deepest inclinations of mankind have become thoroughly turned away from loving and turning to God*.

Now, what is God to do about this? He loves us greatly, so the Scriptures teach. Because God is all-powerful, He could have miraculously and immediately instantly regenerated our hearts by an act of sheer sovereign might. Not one of us could have resisted such an overpowering of creative might if God so chose to act.

But remember the *kind* of world God chose to create. He wanted a world in which our love for Him would be genuine and freely chosen. He didn't want devotion that was forced on us by His sheer power. Random, compulsory election tells us nothing whatsoever about the *desirability* of God. Coerced love is always just a sham. You can't *force* this kind of relationship if you want it to have meaning.

The problem God faces then (if I can use that term) is *how to cause us to turn to Him, while leaving us totally free in our choice*. And that will only happen if you and I, and everyone else, comes to *see* the wretchedness of our condition in this world without Him. The only way mankind will *freely* turn to God and His salvation in Jesus Christ is for them to become totally *dissatisfied* with the wretchedness of their true condition.

And here's the important point - perhaps the *most* important point. In order for this to happen God must, if He truly loves us, *leave as little chance as possible for us to live under the delusion that we are going to be fine without Him*. He must leave us in the kind of world where it will be almost impossible for us to think we can order life in this world decently without Him.

Of course, this is exactly the kind of world we have. It is a world that even the most careless person would have a hard time mistaking for heaven. We know it's a broken place. We know it's an unfair place. We know there is no safety for anyone in this kind of world apart from the eternal hope we are offered in Christ Jesus, God the Son.

4) REMEMBER THIS WORLD IS NOT GOD'S FINAL WORD

Here's a life principle. It is always wrong to judge God by *isolated events*. God works with the whole package of His will engaged. He's always thinking about the *big picture*. Never just our momentary pleasure or comfort. Also, it is always a mistake to *pre-judge* God by our present reaction to circumstances. He isn't finished with this world, and He isn't finished with us. No one will question God's goodness in heaven:

Revelation 21:1-5, 22:1-5 - "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2] And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming

down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. [4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." [5] And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.".... 22:1-5.... Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb [2] through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. [3] No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. [4] They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. [5] And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."