

BY HIS FAITH

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That there is misery in the world, no one doubts. Why there should be misery in the world all cannot agree. When innocent people suffer, it is difficult to account for their suffering. The people of God are not excepted. Many Christians suffer, and suffer innocently. What can be made of the fact of suffering in the world? For the atheist, there is no accounting for it. He cannot ask why is there suffering in the world, because his question implies that suffering is not good, but evil. For the atheist, however, there is no good and no evil. So, on the atheist view of things, the question, Why is there suffering in the world, makes no sense. Atheist Richard Dawkins has well stated the atheist perspective:

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference." (Richard Dawkins, *River Out Of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, page 132)

There is in Dawkin's statement a clue to a problem for the atheist. Dawkins states that there is no justice in the universe. It is unclear what he means. Does he mean that in the universe there is no such thing as justice, as he states that there is no evil, and no good? Or, does he mean that such a thing as justice does exist, but no one ever receives it?

The consistent atheist holds that there is no good and no evil and no justice. He can hold that some people are unhappy, even miserable, for this is obvious to all, but he cannot hold that some men are good, and some evil. Neither can he hold that sometimes good men do not receive justice, or that sometimes evil men escape justice. He cannot hold these views because he does not believe there are such things as good, evil, and justice. Nevertheless, many atheists are not consistent, and they complain about the world having both evil and injustice. Moreover, the simple-minded atheist denies the existence of God, he says, because the fact of evil in the world is not consistent with the notion of God who is omnipotent and benevolent. This Problem of Evil, as it is commonly known, is no problem at all for the atheist, because, in his view, there is no evil. He ought to shut up about evil and suffering.

The atheist may, however, ask the Christian how he reconciles the fact of suffering with his belief in God. That is to say, he may ask the Christian how he can rationally believe both that a benevolent God exists, and that that benevolent God allows suffering in the world. Put another way, he can ask the Christian to explain how a good God can allow evil in the world. This, however, is not a problem unknown to the Christian. It is a problem stated in the Scriptures in various ways. The book of Job is the classic example. If God is righteous, and if Job is righteous, then why does God allow Satan to torment Job? Another example is the book of Habakkuk.

A few generations after the dispersion at Babylon, God called Abraham and made a covenant with him, promising to make of him a great nation. (Genesis 12:1-3) He also told him that his descendants would be in bondage in Egypt, but He would deliver them. (Genesis 15:13, 14) God did deliver them, and He did so in

spectacular fashion, sending plagues upon the Egyptians, and then drowning Pharaoh and his army in Red Sea after parting it so that His people might safely pass through. He drowned violent Pharaoh just as He drowned the violent people in days of Noah. God then led His people to Mount Sinai where He made a covenant with them. He told Moses to tell the people, “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5, 6) When Moses told the people what God said, the people replied, “All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.” (Exodus 19:8) Then the Lord manifested Himself on the mountain, speaking to the people out of thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, and earthquake. The people were so frightened that they asked Moses for permission to withdraw from the mountain, and they asked Him to speak to God on their behalf. Moses reassured them, telling them that God meant them no harm, but that He desired for them to take heed that they obey Him as they had promised. (Exodus 20:18-21) Moses met with God on the mountain, and God said to him:

I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken. O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever! Deuteronomy 5:28, 29)

God gave to Moses the law, and, afterward, Moses descended to the people, and told them the law. The people again replied, “All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient,” and so Moses with blood sealed to them the covenant. (Exodus 24:7, 8)

The people were rebellious, however, and immediately betrayed God by worshipping an idol, a golden calf, saying, “These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 32:4) The history of Israel would be one of rebellion and betrayal.

Some generations later, after the death of King David, the kingdom of Israel was divided into the kingdom of Israel in the North, and the kingdom of Judah in the south. The northern kingdom was so wicked that God sent the Assyrian army to invade it, and to carry the people away into captivity. The southern kingdom was also wicked, and God through His prophets warned that He would send the army of the Babylonians to invade their kingdom, and to carry them away into captivity. One of those prophets was Habakkuk.

Unlike other prophetic books, the book of Habakkuk does not record the prophet’s denouncing God’s people for their great sins, and enjoining them act righteously. Rather, it records his imploring God to act righteously concerning the sins of the people. He said to God:

O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth. (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

The people of God were wicked. They destroyed and killed. They caused strife and conflict. The people neglected God’s law, so there was never any justice for the injured. The unrighteous predominated over the righteous so that justice was perverted. Habakkuk was a righteous prophet of God, and he was deeply troubled

by this state of affairs. He resented, not only that the people so greatly sinned, but that they did so with impunity. He was indignant that the ways of the people were evil, and distressed that God ignored them. He was vexed, and cried out to God for justice. He hated to see so much injustice, and could not understand why God would allow it. It seemed to Habakkuk that God had no interest in the sins of His people.

God heard Habakkuk's complaint, and He answered it. He told the prophet that He was raising up the army of the Babylonians to invade the kingdom, and punish the people for their many sins. God would put a stop to the injustice in the kingdom, and the wicked people of the kingdom would get what they deserved.

God would put a stop to the sins of the people, and would give the people their due. This answer afforded Habakkuk some solace. Yet, His answer raised another problem for the prophet: How could God punish a bad nation with a worse one. Israel, for all their sins, were the covenant people of God, but the Babylonians were not; moreover, the Babylonians were far more wicked than the children of Israel. The Babylonians had made an idol of their great power, and they took pleasure in conquering nations and subjugating the people. The Babylonians were a cruel nation who treated people as animals. So Habakkuk put forward another complaint: How could a righteous God punish wicked Israel by a nation even more wicked than itself? To punish a wicked nation by a righteous nation is one thing; to punish a wicked nation by a more wicked nation is something else altogether. How, the prophet wished to know, could God do this? He said he would hear the Lord's answer, and then give his own answer when reproved.

God heard Habakkuk's complaint, and He answered him, saying:

Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:2-4)

God acknowledged the prophet's concern, and He would give him an answer. He told him to record the answer in plain language that everyone could understand, and to record the answer on the tablets that were hung in public for all to see. His answer is that He rights all wrongs, and that Babylon's invasion of the kingdom of Judah would be no exception. He would not soon put matters right, but He would definitely do so, according to His Word.

The soul of the Babylonian was puffed up with pride. He trusted in his military might, and had made it his god. His soul was not righteous, and He did not trust in the Lord; so, he would die. The righteous man, however, trusts in God, and so he lives. He trusts not in himself, not in his own might, but rather he trusts in God for all things. The Psalms say:

There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength. An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy; To deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waiteth for the LORD: he is our help and our shield. For our heart shall rejoice in him, because we have trusted in his holy name. Let thy mercy, O LORD, be upon us, according as we hope in thee. (Psalm 33:17-22)

In another Psalm, it says, “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God.” (Psalm 146, 4, 5) The Babylonians were a wicked people. They were full of pride, especially pride in their military might. They were restless, and covetous, and desired no end of conquering people and adding to their conquests. They were, as John Calvin wrote, “like the insane Alexander of Macedon, who, upon hearing that there were other worlds, wept that he had not yet conquered one, although soon after the funeral urn sufficed him.” (John Calvin on Psalm 146:3, 4)

God spoke to Habakkuk five woes against the Babylonians. Woe to them, because their desire for conquest was insatiable. They lived to conquer nations. So God would do them, as they did to other nations: He would raise up a wicked nation to conquer theirs. Woe to them because of their covetousness. Their desire for other people’s possessions could not be satisfied. Woe to them for enslaving their captives and compelling them to build the walls of their cities. They took pride in their great cities, but they were doomed to destruction. In the end, everyone would know, not the greatness of Babylon, but of the Lord. Woe to them for not only conquering other nations, but for also humiliating them in their defeat. As they humiliated the conquered nations, so God would humiliate theirs. Woe to them for their idolatry, for making idols out of wood, and stone, and silver and gold, and then asking them to speak and to teach them. For all these iniquities, God would destroy them, and destroy them in their own manner. So, the Scriptures, say, let the whole world keep silence before the living God who speaks His judgement.

Habakkuk heard God’s answer to him, and he responded in a humble prayer of trust in God’s providence. He was reminded of the Exodus, the meeting at Sinai, the crossing of the Jordan river, and the conquest of the promised land. (Deuteronomy 33:2; Judges 5:4) In the Exodus, God showed His by sending plagues on wicked Egypt. He destroyed Pharaoh and his army by drowning them in the Red Sea. In great glory He appeared to His people at Mount Sinai. He faithfully led His people from Sinai across the Jordan River. He mightily led Israel to conquer the pagan nations, and drive them out of the promised land. God’s overthrow of Egypt and His exaltation of Israel of Israel is the archetype of His dealings with nations, and the archetype of His final defeat of evil in the world. Just as He overthrew wicked Egypt, and established Israel, so He would overthrow wicked Babylon and restore His people, and so He will overthrow every wicked nation until His kingdom on earth is complete, “for,” God said to Habakkuk, “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” (Habakkuk 2:14)

The prophet Habakkuk, who had doubted God in His dealings with men, at the end showed that he was a righteous man of faith. He dreaded the judgment about to come upon the kingdom, but he trusted in God always to do right. He said:

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

Although God’s judgment upon Judah would be severe, and the kingdom would be devastated, Habakkuk trusted God to preserve him.

There is misery in the world, and the recognition of that fact can lead one to despair. The Christian cries out to God, asking why He allows it. God's answer to him is the same answer He gave to Habakkuk, which answer is recorded in the Scriptures. God does not tolerate evil. He, in His own time, puts a stop to it, and punishes those who commit it. God is sovereign over all things, and nothing is out of His control. He is omnipotent and benevolent, and He has a good reason for allowing evil, although He does not in every case reveal to the Christian what that reason is. Yet, God never leaves evil alone. He always brings a reckoning, if not in this life, then in the next. "But the just shall live by his faith."

Let us recognize that in the world there is good and there is evil. Let us remember that God is perfectly good, and so has a good reason for all that He does, including allowing evil. Let us live by faith, always trusting in the benevolent and almighty God to do right.

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. *Amen.*