

When Overwhelm'd With Grief (Psalm 61)

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

When overwhelm'd with grief,
My heart within me dies,
Helpless and far from all relief,
To heav'n I lift mine eyes.

O lead me to the rock
That's high above my head,
And make the covert of thy wings
My shelter and my shade.

Within thy presence, Lord,
For ever I'll abide;
Thou art the tow'r of my defence,
The refuge where I hide.

Thou givest me the lot
Of those that fear thy name;
If endless life be their reward,
I shall possess the same.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Tried with Fire: The Suffering of the Righteous

Kevin T. Bauder

Discussions about the problem of evil quickly become abstract and theoretical. Skeptics raise questions about how a God who is supposed to be all-wise, all-powerful, and all-loving could permit evil to exist. Religious thinkers offer certain stock responses. Perhaps God permits evil in order to achieve greater good. Perhaps He permits evil as a necessary consequence of creating beings with free wills. Perhaps He must permit evil so as to allow for and maintain a natural order.

Few of us find these answers completely satisfying, partly because evil affects us so personally. For real people, the problem of evil is no mere philosophical construct. At some level, almost all of us live with pain. We get sick. We are subjected to disfigurement and disease. We lose our jobs, our money, and our homes. We suffer empathetically with our loved ones, and when they die we feel the loss of bereavement. We endure rejections and betrayals. We encounter oppression. Evil people commit crimes against us and we find that the pain of loss is compounded by the helpless indignity of victimization.

These evils are of different kinds. Some are natural evils or calamities like fires, floods, and epidemics. Others are moral evils, inhumane acts like robberies, rapes, and murders. Whether natural or moral, however, evil always hurts when it crushes down upon us.

Among moralistic people a common response is that evil is the direct result of sin. The underlying principle seems sound enough: virtue merits reward while vice deserves punishment. Consequently, the moralist concludes that those who are enduring affliction must be paying for moral failure, while those who enjoy ease and prosperity must be reaping the rewards of righteousness. This moralistic principle gives people a ready explanation for evil in the world, and it is the kind of explanation that makes for sensational preaching and writing. At various times people have announced the following events as divine judgments:

- The economic crash of October, 1987
- The Indian Ocean tsunami (2004)
- Hurricane Katrina (2005)



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- The financial crisis of 2007-2008
- The Orlando nightclub shooting (June 11, 2016)
- The Las Vegas shooting (October 1, 2017)

The moralistic principle says that we can draw a direct line from calamity to sin, so that all calamities become demonstrations of God's judgment. The simplicity of this principle is at least part of the reason for its popularity. The other part is the fact that it allows the righteous (or self-righteous) to claim a position of moral superiority, blaming the wicked for every misfortune and disaster. In spite of this principle's simplicity, however, the Bible confronts it with two insurmountable objections.

The first is that reality often contradicts the moralistic principle. Many times the wicked actually prosper while the righteous endure hardships, poverty, and injustice. The poet Asaph wrote about the prosperity of the wicked in Psalm 73. He observed that they live comfortable lives and die easy deaths. They become self-indulgent and snobbish, as if their wealth made them better than other people. They prey upon the poor and weak and nobody challenges them. This prosperity of the wicked threatened Asaph's entire worldview; for a while he even wondered whether virtue was useless.

The prophet Habakkuk wrote of a similar situation. He observed the wicked in Judah abusing the righteous to the point that the perversion of justice seemed normal (Hab. 1:4). When Habakkuk complained, God responded that he would send the Chaldeans to judge Judah (Hab. 1:5-11). The only problem was that the Chaldeans were even worse than the Jews whom they were sent to judge. This disparity establishes the tension that undergirds the book of Habakkuk: when the wicked prosper, how are things better if they are displaced by the more wicked?

Even our experience tells us that the arrogant, greedy, and rapacious often prosper while the innocent—even babies and small children—suffer. This experience was shared by the biblical writers. It is a common human experience, and it is the first reason that the moralistic principle is very difficult to defend.

The second reason is that the Bible explicitly denies the moralistic principle, both by example and by direct statement. The most obvious example is that of Job, whose three counselors added to his afflictions by bludgeoning him with the moralistic principle. They reasoned that his troubles—the loss of his wealth, the deaths of his children, and the loathsome disease that tortured him—must be judgments upon his sins. Because we readers are given insight into the councils of heaven, however, we know that Job's pain was the result of his righteousness, not of his sin. Had he not been so upright, he would not have been singled out as a test case.

Jesus also refuted the moralistic principle on at least two occasions. The first occurred when He was told a bit of gossip about certain Galileans whom

Pilate had killed, apparently while they were offering sacrifices. Jesus asked whether His listeners thought that these victims were killed because they were greater sinners than other Galileans. Then He answered His own question with a pointed denial—"By no means!" (Luk 13:3). To emphasize the point, Jesus pointed out another disaster: a tower in Siloam had collapsed, killing eighteen. Raising the same question, Jesus asked whether these eighteen were worse culprits than others. Again He answered His own question—"By no means!" (Luk 13:5). The point that Jesus intended to make was that all of His hearers needed to repent, for each stood in danger of judgment. This point only works if it is impossible to reason backwards from calamity to guilt.

The other occasion when Jesus dealt with the moralistic principle was when He and His disciples came upon a man who was blind from birth. The mere existence of such a person was already a challenge to the moralistic principle: if the man was *born* blind, how could the blindness be the result of his sin? So Jesus' disciples attempted to expand the principle by reasoning that perhaps the man's parents had committed the sin (John 9:1-2). Jesus' denial was quick and precise. Neither the man nor his parents had sinned so as to produce this blindness. Interestingly, Jesus did not deny that the blindness had a reason and a purpose. He simply insisted that it was not possible to conclude that the man's blindness constituted judgment upon a particular sin.

Granted, sometimes God has displayed His wrath against sin by judging it in space and time. The Genesis flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are examples of God inflicting His wrath upon the world. At the present moment, however, God is withholding His wrath and is not judging sin, but instead giving people time to repent (2 Cor 5:18-19; 2 Pet 3:7-9).

Yet evil is still in the world. People still suffer, and not only the most obviously deserving people. God's children also suffer; indeed, they sometimes bear greater pain than the unregenerate people around them. Why should God allow this ongoing affliction of those whom He has redeemed? In the discussion to come I hope to point out at least a few answers to that question.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
