

ISSUE

20.48

BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

December 2,
2018

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Walker McAnear
Ryan Matney
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Justin Smiley
Kevin Wise
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



Is God Cruel?—The Problem of Suffering

By Kyle Pope

In a popular video that circulated some years ago on the internet, atheist Stephen Fry, was asked what he would say to God on Judgment Day if it turned out that there actually is a God. He answered that he would say, “How dare you!” He then went on to cite examples of injustice, pain, and suffering in this world that led him to conclude there could not be a God if such things are allowed within His creation. Every person I have ever known who accepted agnosticism or atheism expressed similar factors that led to their conclusion. That is interesting, because these same people generally consider their decisions to be governed by reason and rational choices free of emotional considerations, yet isn’t that an emotional reaction to circumstances we perceive to be cruel?

Many of us may understand this struggle. There are certainly things that God has done and requires that are puzzling. That was the focus of the entire book of Habakkuk. He asked, **“O LORD, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear?”** (Hab. 1:2a, NKJV). Yet, a significant point we all must realize is that our own bewilderment over what God is or does really has nothing to do with whether He does or does not exist. Children don’t understand why their parents require certain things of them, or say and do certain things, but it does not change the fact that they remain the parents. If God exists, my emotional reaction to what He says and does will not change whether or not He exists. My challenge is to accept Him for what He is, not imagine that I can dictate what He should be.

The Transcendence of God

Much of this struggle hinges upon our concept of God. Unlike the gods of many religions and pagan myths the God of the Bible is transcendent—that is, He above, beyond, and outside of His creation. That doesn't mean He is indifferent to us, but simply that He is so vastly superior to us that we must not think of Him in limited human terms (cf. Psa. 50:21). **“God is not a man”** (Num. 23:19; cf. 1 Sam. 15:29; Job. 9:32). The Hebrew writer declared, **“By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible”** (Heb. 11:3). Paul wrote of Jesus, **“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him”** (Col. 1:16). That is a profound assertion! God is the one thing that has no beginning. He has always been. He is the first cause of all things. He is the *Unmoved Mover*. He God

of the Bible is revealed to be the One who made everything from the smallest subatomic particle to the largest galaxy in the universe—and He did this by His word alone! **“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth”** (Psa. 33:6). Think about that—what kind of power rests with a being who can *speak* a universe into existence? It is beyond comprehension. He knows so much above what we can even imagine.

How could such a being have a personal relationship with any element of His creation? God told Moses, **“You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live”** (Exod. 33:20). Compare this to material forces—how can we interact with *nuclear power, electromagnetic force, or even gravity*? Only if we follow certain safeguards and follow rules that dictate how these things interact with us. Now God is not an impersonal force, but His power is infinitely higher than such forces. If He exists doesn't it only make sense that He would communicate things to us about the necessary safeguards and rules that dictate how we can interact with Him?

Humans Share the “Image” of God

So let's suppose that such a being exists—He could create scores of things that function in accordance with laws that He creates—no choice, no decisions, just laws of nature, instinctual behavior, and no options. But, what if He created a being *in His image*? What does that mean? Jesus said, **“God is spirit”** (John 4:24). In our creation, **“the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”** (Gen. 2:7). The Hebrew writer calls God, **“the Father of spirits”** (Heb. 12:9). The sense in which we bear God's *image* is in the fact that we have a *spirit* that is like His Spirit. Solomon said, **“He has put eternity in”** our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). We are eternal beings—not in the sense that God is eternal (past, present, and future), but we are eternal going into the future. What a privilege that is!

So, what is God to do with those creatures whom He has made like Him, with an eternal nature, who reject and refuse to follow rules of interaction with Him and safeguards regarding Divine power? In His foreknowledge He knew that not all men would obey Him.

So what provision could He offer to train and motivate eternal beings to obey His safeguards? In many respects all of biblical history is the demonstration of God's efforts to teach, motivate, warn, correct, and guide man into an understanding of how interaction with Him is attainable.

Suffering Compared to Eternity

In Paul's letter to the saints in Rome he offered some profound words on suffering. This apostle who faced such extreme hardship himself (cf. 2 Cor. 11:24-29), wrote, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us"** (Rom. 8:18). We note here that Paul contrasts present **"suffering"** with future **"glory."** He continues, **"For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope"** (Rom. 8:19-20). We sometimes ask, "why did God allow us to sin, knowing that we would sin?" Paul says He did so **"in hope"** for the ultimate liberation from futility and bondage to corruption that the saved will attain in eternity. He continues, **"because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now"** (Rom. 8:21-22). Why do we **"groan"** over the conditions of life? Why do we feel as if something is wrong with this world? Animals don't ponder the cruelty of life and the agony of suffering—they just live and die! Paul says our perception of life's suffering is like **"birth pangs"** endured in this life awaiting deliverance from it. Sin's entrance into the world subjected the creation unto **"bondage to corruption"** and subjugation to **"futility."**

Much of the suffering of this world came as a result of sin's entrance into the world. Does God allow it? Yes, but if suffering is a type of **"birth pangs"** what does that tell us about God that He allows it? The Hebrew writer told the

Hebrews that God allowing persecution was a type of **"chastening of the Lord,"** even saying **"whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives"** (Heb. 12:4-11). Does that mean that God caused the persecution? No, but He allowed it. Was that allowance a demonstration of God's disdain or neglect? No, there were ways in which it could help them spiritually.

Here is where perspective becomes important. Think about childhood. As children if our parents spanked us, or grounded us, put us in "time out," made us do our homework, or clean our room we thought they were cruel. We may have even said, "If you loved me you wouldn't do this!" As we grew up, we realized that by keeping us from eating candy all the time they were looking out for us. They knew what we did not.

God Knows What We Can Not Yet Understand

So, if there is a God, who knows what we do not about the rules and conditions of life with Him, would it not make sense that He would know

some principles of behavior, disposition, attitude, and forces of good and evil that we do not? Would it not be expected that we (like little children) not understanding such things might think that the things we endure now are cruel—not recognizing how important they may be for life in the age to come? If this is true would it not mean that even the most difficult suffering here would seem like nothing in a life delivered from **“bondage to corruption”**? Is that why Paul says these sufferings are **“not worthy to be compared”** to the glory that is to come?

So what kind of principles is God trying to teach us? In the old movie *The Karate Kid*, the old man had the young boy start by waxing something. Little did he know that the waxing motion was training him to have the skills he needed in martial arts. I don't know why, but in this life the Creator is trying to lead us to recognize

that we must follow His word. We must trust Him even when it is hard for us to understand why. We must be willing to be different from the world around us, and we must love Him and others (even when it is hard). Why are these skills needed for life in the age to come? I don't know, but like the *Karate Kid*, I must develop the skills my Master is training me to have if I hope to live with Him.

Cruelty or Consequence?

So, is God cruel? Well, not as related to what goes on in this life. It is temporary and limited. The worst suffering is only temporary and human beings are limited in the cruelty they can carry out against others. Is God cruel in assigning an eternal punishment to those who sin against Him during a finite lifetime? Well think about it this way—when man utilizes nuclear power to supply energy—although that is a force that is beneficial when used properly, what must be done with the radioactive waste to keep it from harming anyone? It must be completely removed from contact with anyone else to prevent it from doing any damage to others.

One of the most striking aspects of the descriptions of eternal punishment is the pronouncement made to the lost—**“depart from Me”** (Matt. 7:23; 25:41; Luke 13:27). James taught that God is the source of every good thing that you and I have ever experienced (Jas. 1:17). What would it be like to live completely removed from the presence of the One who gave us **“every good and perfect gift”**? It would be horrible! God revealed to Ezekiel, **“I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies”** (Ezek. 18:33). God does not want to remove us from His presence—He has done all that He can to allow us to have eternal life with Him. But, when we reject all that He offers to escape this punishment, we deserve it if we receive it.

