

If God loves me, why do I hurt?

Psalm 90:1-17
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Wesley J. Gabel

If you live long, you see two things. You notice that some evildoers prosper and some righteous suffer. The richest radio personality on the planet is Howard Stern, the Porn King of broadcasting. Yet, many sincere believers suffer wasting diseases or agonize at the hands of oppressors. These observations test the faith of believers, punctuate discussions in the Bible, and underpin most unbelief. Most atheists I know have been disillusioned by these observations and a wrenching personal experience with evil. Consequently, they assert that God is either incapable of stopping evil or He is guilty of allowing it. Either way, they consider God neither worthy of worship nor faith. They render judgment on God. They operate as umpires whose vision and wisdom are drawn from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Until Adam and Eve ate fruit from that tree, they were consumed with God's will: "What does God want and say?" After their garden lunch, they saw themselves and life in terms of good and evil, right and wrong. They now judged their behavior and that of others, including God.

We see this tendency in the book of Job. In it Job is terribly afflicted, losing his children, his servants, his possessions and his health. His friends hear Job blame God. They defend God by blaming Job. Their whole focus is on right and wrong, good and evil. They speak as umpires, judging God to be good and Job to be evil because God must be righteous in his

treatment of Job. In the end, Job repents for judging God; and Job's friends are rebuked too. They must offer sacrifices for their sin of wrongful judgment and seek Job's forgiveness. When Job prays for them, they are blessed and Job's own fortunes are restored. God rebukes human judgments and acts to reconcile and restore these men with one another and God.

In contrast, we continue to make judgments. When evil befalls us or the world about us, we judge that no moral God can be involved. We see things through the wisdom that Adam and Eve gained from the forbidden tree. Yet, the Bible and especially Jesus focus on a completely different reality. They proclaim the Tree of Life. They proclaim the redemption of humanity from death and the reconciliation of humanity with God.

The Bible never pries God away from our experience of evil. To do so, suggests that we need to fear more than God. Secularists fear nature and wonder how to appease it. Animists or "Spiritists" fear some angry spirit. Some Christians fear the devil as much as they fear God. Although the Bible affirms the love and goodness of God, it calls us to fear only God. Jesus never showed fear of the devil, even though at his arrest he said:

Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour-when darkness reigns. (Luke 22:53, NIV)

Jesus was talking to a large group who carried clubs and swords and were ready to use them. Indeed, a skirmish ensued that shed blood. When darkness reigns, people get hurt. Jesus got hurt. Darkness reigned. Only minutes before this incident, Jesus warned his disciples:

I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me, but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me. (John 14:30-31, NIV)

It was the prince of this world, the devil, who reigned at Jesus' arrest; but Jesus knew that it was just for a short time. "This is your hour – when darkness reigns," he said. That hour included a sleepless night, trials, beatings and flogging, three dark hours on a cross and time in a

tomb. The hour may have seemed interminable; but truthfully, God does not long endure it. Even when darkness ruled and Jesus hung on the cross, he understood that God, his father, was in control. He kept speaking to God: most of the time in faith, but one time in despair – “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me.”

Jesus’ experience of evil was not sugarcoated. The Bible teaches that he experienced our judgment. Peter writes it this way:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit... (1 Peter 3:18, NIV)

God asked Jesus to do a very generous thing. God asked him to lay down his life for you and me and experience the reign of death that dominates the human family. Jesus didn’t have to. He was sinless. He entered the human race through a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit and resisted temptation. No evil could justly fall on Jesus. In obedience and faith, Jesus submitted to this reign of death on our behalf.

We, on the other hand, don’t have a choice. We are part of a single human family that is dying in God’s judgment. Moses writes:

You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men." You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning — though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered. We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. (Psalm 90:3, 5-9, NIV)

God did not create us to die. He created us to live. We suffer judgment because of the original sin of our parents, Adam and Eve, and the many family sins that have followed. We may want to distance ourselves from Howard Stern or the Moslems rioting over cartoons. We may not care to be associated with one political party or another; but we are one family. There is

only one family of men according to the Bible, and it is this one family that we belong to that is fighting with each other, whether its guns and bombs, obscenities or political smears.

Despite all of this sin and pain, God has not abandoned us. God still loves us. Moses prayed:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. (Psalm 90:1, NIV)

We live because of God's love and presence. As Paul later told people in Athens. In God, we live, move and have our being. It is God and only God who is every where we go. Daily we walk in his love and mercy. Daily we taste his care. Daily his love preserves us. Daily he woos us. Daily his hand stays the approach of the ravenous lion who seeks our destruction. Daily he blesses generously... often in response to the faith and prayers of ancestors and others.

Do you remember the story of Joseph? He was given a coat by his father that stirred jealousy in his brothers. He was given a dream by God, and it brought the rebuke of his family. He suffered the bitterness of two mothers vying for his father's affection. He suffered betrayal by his own brothers. He suffered the indignity of being sold as property and living as another man's slave. He suffered the fury of a woman's scorn and a lie that is believed. He suffered the shame and discomfort of a dungeon. He suffered abandonment by people he befriended and helped. All this he suffered because he belongs to a human family that is in rebellion to God. It is our judgment. We suffer from the sins of others and they suffer from ours. Nevertheless, God loved Joseph. God stayed the hand of death that pursued him. Finally, God, responding to Joseph's faith (and undoubtedly his father's prayers), elevated him in honor and used him to mercifully preserve the lives of those whose sins caused him such suffering.

We may want to render judgment in such situations, but God wants to redeem our family. We are one family. We are one blood. To love our neighbors as ourselves is to love our own. It

is to care for our family. To be inhospitable is to abandon our family. We desire to render judgment, which inevitably is tainted and self-serving; but guess what? God already has rendered judgment. We're living in it, and God is now working to redeem that which is lost in judgment.

The work of Jesus was not to render judgment; it was to redeem people from judgment. Jesus focused on his father's word and will, not on what is good and evil. The work of Jesus' disciples is not to render judgment, but to embrace and minister redemption. We are to enjoy our Father's love and focus on our Father's will to redeem our human family.

Jesus began to suffer our judgment, not at the cross, but when he was conceived with a mortal body. From that moment on, he tasted fully what we suffer. His heart knew our sadness. His eyes gushed with tears. In his death, he finished the payment for our sins. As we put our faith in him and receive the gift of eternal life, we no longer suffer for our sins. Their penalty has been paid in full. Now in love, we work with our father for the redemption of our family.

Once our sins are paid for there is only one reason we continue to live with a people and planet under judgment. It isn't for a holy life; that is easier in heaven. It isn't for a fuller life; that is easier in heaven. In heaven we will know truth and love without shadows of doubt and hurt. We stay in painful circumstances to help remove the judgment. We're here like Joseph to bring salvation to our human family. We are here as apprentices of Jesus to continue the work of salvation from judgment. It isn't just helping people escape the final judgment. It is also helping our family escape the present judgment, the rule of darkness.

Do you know the love and forgiveness of God? Does the name of Jesus sing in your heart? Are you working with Jesus in saving our family? We're called to carry a cross for our brothers and sisters. It is the way of love, and it is the way of Jesus.